

Train your brain

FROM DOING PUZZLES TO TEACHING OTHERS, IT'S IMPORTANT TO KEEP YOUR MIND AS ACTIVE AS YOUR BODY

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As we get older, it's something we hear more and more: We must keep our brains sharp, training them like we train other parts of our bodies. But is that true? Can you keep old age from the door simply by doing a sudoku? We asked those in the know.



"Experts previously believed that your brain could no longer change or develop further after a given point in life, but now we know this isn't true," says Claire Aristides, clinical hypnotherapist and founder of the Mindology app.

"With time and patience, you can rewire your brain, which may help protect against cognitive decline."

In other words, our minds can grow – and stay sharp – for years to come.

"Neuroscience is showing that we can change our brains during our life," Aristides says.

"Our brain continues to re-form and rewire itself based on how much or how little neural pathways are used.

That means that we can learn new behaviours, and change our mindset by building new neural pathways.”

In fact, it's vital we keep learning as we age. “Attention and memory are most affected as you age, so practising different techniques and promoting lifelong learning helps with longevity and strengthening of your cognitive abilities,” says author and brain coach Jim Kwik, who created personal growth website Mindvalley's Superbrain program.

And there's more. If we want to keep our minds sharp and prevent that cognitive decline, we need to make sure our bodies are healthy, too.

“Our growing knowledge of neuroplasticity demonstrates that we should all engage in healthy lifestyles to protect our brains,” Aristides says.

Games, puzzles and quizzes like The Shark (published in this liftout) are a great way to keep your brain in good shape, for several reasons. “When you're doing a game or puzzle, you are often absorbed in it – so you give your busy ‘overthinking’ mind a rest – and being in that focused state on the puzzle you're engaged in a form of mindfulness which has well-documented health benefits,” Aristides says.

“You are also engaging in problemsolving and learning – all firing neural pathways. Neuroplasticity is largely driven by changes in the connections between existing neurons.”

Kwik says games are also great. “We have specific techniques and strategies that can help sharpen your brain, which can be looked at as games,” he says.

“An example of a game you can use to help your memory is called basic association.

“This is a tool that makes a logical association between two things to help you remember them. And one of the best ways of training yourself to learn is to teach someone the game or technique; that way you learn it twice.”

Claire Aristides says, regardless of your age group, “the key pillars for brain health are the same: exercise, sleep, diet, social interaction and learning”. Follow these brain-shaping suggestions to stay sharp ...

1. TRY SOMETHING NEW

“Even something simple, like a new hobby, a new cafe or listening to a new kind of music,” she says.

2. READ A GOOD BOOK

“Reading a novel can improve your brain function,” the clinical hypnotherapist says. According to an Emory University study, becoming engrossed in a story enhances connectivity in the brain and improves brain function. People who engage their minds in mentally stimulating reading activities also experience slower memory decline, according to a study on Neurology.org.

3. MIX THINGS UP

“Use your non-dominant hand to brush your teeth or write your to do list for the day,” Aristides says. “Move your keyboard mouse to the other side.”

4. A REASON TO REMEMBER

Brain coach Jim Kwik says it's easier to remember something if you're motivated to do it. “Start with asking ‘why’,” he says. “Why do you want to remember this? Reasons reap results.”

5. HAVE A CHANGE OF SCENE

“A change of scenery wakes your brain up and challenges it, and sparks creativity,” Aristides says.

6. GET A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

This is hugely important for memory. “Pulling all-nighters for work is one of the worst things you can do for yourself,” Kwik says.

7. BE SOCIAL

“Meet people and listen and engage with what they are saying,” Aristides says.

8. BE OBSERVANT

Notice what is going on around you. “Learning is more about paying attention than retention,” Kwik says.

9. TEACH OTHERS

“Read a story or article, then explain it to someone,” Aristides says. “This helps with engaging your brain functionality – working on memory, empathy and cognitive process.”

10. STRESS LESS

“Stress creates forgetfulness,” Kwik says. “Stress management can include massages, yoga, mindfulness training, etc, and helps to lower cortisol levels and adrenaline which can inhibit memory.”