

Surprising ways to keep the brain healthy as you age

The Manila Times · 7 Apr 2021 · C4 · NIKA ROQUE

BALANCED diet, brain exercises, and proper rest — over the years, experts have been advocating for people to adopt these three components to maintain a healthy brain, especially as they age. However, in a talk organized by supplements company Herbalife Nutrition Philippines, The Manila



Times learned that beside these three, there are more activities and even food items that can help a person age healthily, some of which were previously frowned upon.

The discussion titled “Healthy Aging: Brain Fitness for Healthy Adults,” had keynote speaker Herbalife Nutrition Advisory Board Member Dr. Gary Small, the Chair of Psychiatry at Hackensack University Medical Center and Behavioral Health Physician in Chief for Hackensack Meridian Health.

Small is also a former Psychiatry Professor and Longevity Center Director at the University of California Los Angeles. He has studied and developed lifestyle and memory training programs for improving cognition and healthy aging, which are available throughout the US and abroad in senior centers, hospitals, and other community sites.

For his “Healthy Aging” talk, the expert centered on how people’s choices today will strongly impact the ability to think and act well as they age.

To start with, Small identified the common threats to health — living in stressful times, with financial uncertainty, natural threats, challenges of daily life such as traffic and information overload from technology. With the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, this list now also includes the anxiety and isolation.

“Stress is very acute, and it’s a problem because it affects our mind and body. It affects almost every aspect of our life, like [the health of our] skin, digestive, joints, bones, eyes, brain, heart and muscles,” the expert said.

The brain ages like the rest of the body, and its functions decline at about age 30. Small likened the brain to the muscle, which “performs better when it gets regular exercise.” According to Small, the key components of mind health include strong memory, steady mood and focused attention. Having an agreeable personality as well as the ability to think and to

reason are also included.

Fitness and diet

Although some health concerns are genetic, Small said balanced nutrition, physical and mental exercises would be a huge help.

Physical exercise is important because it increases blood flow to the brain, enlarges brain size and improves attention and other mental abilities. Heavy workouts are not necessary.

Meanwhile, mental exercises — which may be part of stress management — such as reading, playing memory games, and learning a new skill help the brain cells work better, as it helps with memory and improves moods. It also lowers the risk of dementia and Alzheimer's. Meditation and relaxation exercises can also improve mood, responsiveness, and life expectancy. Small said that these activities “improve memory recall and help you maintain higher cognitive performance for five or more years.” Maintaining a positive outlook also needs to be noted.

Aside from the exercises and healthy activities, proper nutrition and food intake makes up a big part of brain health.

Regarding food, those that are helpful are berries, dark green vegetables like kale, spinach, and broccoli, avocados, nuts and seeds, and pomegranates. It is important to avoid processed food and refined sugars. Having coffee, tea, dark chocolate, and oily fish are also recommended but in moderation.

The effect of technology, environment

Now, for the not-so-obvious activities that can help brains health.

Surprisingly, the expert noted that technology, when used in moderation, is good for the mind as it helps with visual attention, reaction time, and even memory. However, addiction and information overload should definitely be avoided.

Small also mentioned that socializing is a crucial part of stress management as it helps with memory and responsiveness, and that nurturing a strong and reliable community keeps the brain healthy. Talking to a friend also lowers stress, protects brain cells, and increases mental speed while having social support improves health, longevity, and life expectancy.

Another key component is how a good night's sleep protects brain health. Memories are secured during sleep and improves recall and response for the next day. Similar to exercises, strategies for a good sleep involve an active lifestyle, stress management, and relaxation techniques.

Likewise, creating a healthy environment by limiting the exposure to smoke, smog, mold, even clutter, and other toxins is good for brain health.

The doctor, however, reminded these tips alone do not prevent the onset of disease or reverse the effects of aging. Talking to a doctor about managing wellness and consultations about medicines is also necessary in keeping the brain healthy.