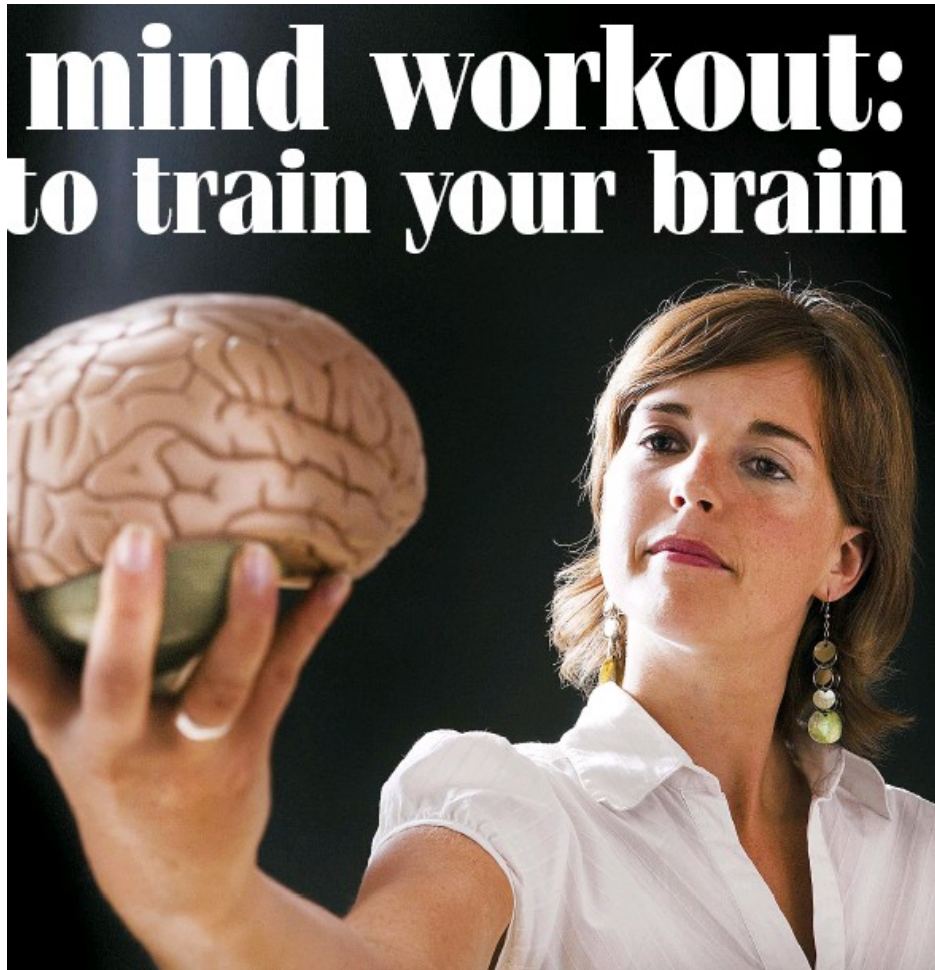


The How Mind workout: to train your brain

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Your state of mind is only as good as the brain that produces it. Despite this, the enormous importance of keeping your brain fit and healthy is generally overlooked.



To do this you need to maintain both its structure and the flow of electrical signals that make it work. Here's how to best achieve this in youth, maintain it through mid-life, and preserve and enhance it in later years.

KEEP LEARNING

Learning involves creating new networks. Like any other organ, the brain changes with time and some of the changes make it less efficient. Unlike most other organs, though, the brain is extraordinarily plastic – learning and activity can alter its physical structure in ways that make up for the negative changes.

Physical brain changes make cognitive tasks more difficult for older people, who naturally compensate by using more brainpower to achieve the same effect. This may mean that after a hard-thinking day, an older person will feel more tired.

Hard work is especially good for the brain. It builds white matter, strengthening and reinforcing the connections between neurons throughout the brain. Older people may have more to draw on when looking for a solution to a problem.

People who achieve hard-won expertise often reach their peak when they are older, and vocabulary and language skills go on improving through life.

We all know physical exercise is key to a healthy body, but often fail to keep our brains in good shape. This easy-to-follow plan will help your mind stay in peak condition, whatever your age

MAKE MEMORIES

Memories fade when the network of neurons that encode them disintegrates.

If we do not frequently reuse and strengthen a network in our long-term memory we may be unable to access that information, although it may still remain stored.

Some forgetting is normal, but forgetting becomes a problem if the brain's networks decay prematurely. It's normal for mental abilities to decline with age, but when does normal age-related cognitive decline become something to worry about?

What is normal for one person is not normal for another. Each individual varies in their mental ability, not just across time but also according to whether, for example, they are stressed or ill. Some symptoms such as failing to recognise close friends and family, being unable to say which of two numbers is greater or panicking when confronted with minor problems such as an over-boiling pan may be a sign of unhealthy changes in your brain.

If you are worried about your mental performance, you should speak to your doctor.

GOOD BRAIN HEALTH

Like every other part of your body, your brain needs to be in good shape physically to work well. Exercise, rest and good nutrition are the building blocks of a bright mind.

As well as being physically healthy, your brain needs to be mentally stimulated to function properly. Activities that make you excited or cheerful have a direct effect on brain tissue by triggering electrical activity in your brain cells. Unused cells wither and may even die, whereas active cells produce growth chemicals and help to protect existing neural ways and develop new. Generally the things that keep your heart in shape – a healthy diet, good quality sleep, regular exercise, ending time with rest and learning new things are also great for brain.

Regular exercise produces dramatic improvements in brain function. One study tracked physical activity levels and cognitive skills in a group of nearly 500 adults over 20 years.

Those who exercised most scored better on memory and thinking tests, and were significantly less likely to develop dementia. You don't need to run miles – exercising for an hour, three times a week, is enough to make a difference. Swimming is an all-body exercise that increases blood flow, helps heart health, and pumps oxygen and nutrients to the brain.

MENTAL WORKOUT

Reading and writing are among the best brain workouts you can do, because literacy exercises a wider range of brain areas than almost anything else. If you consider that in addition to these brain regions, areas are also activated by thinking about or engaging emotionally with the content of the literature, practically every part of the brain is exercised.

STAY SOCIAL

The human brain has evolved for social living and needs the stimulation of others. People who are deprived of company show greater cognitive decline in later years than those who are social. Having close friends and a healthy social network is good for the brain. It is also likely that when individuals keep an active interest in new things, it makes them more likely to seek out similar people to talk to and their company helps keep the individuals' brains alert, interested, and

stimulated. Most people enjoy an active social life when they are young and energetic, but find that their social network shrinks as they get older.

Millions of elderly people report that they regularly go for weeks without speaking to another person. Joining a club, creating a network of friends and neighbours or volunteering are all ways to keep yourself connected.

THINK YOUNG

To keep your brain young, you need to keep trying new things, whatever your age. From drawing to dancing, there are dozens of pleasurable and challenging ways of keeping your brain active.

The desire to learn something new and

the satisfaction of doing so are themselves important brain boosters because they generate dopamine and serotonin – neuro-transmitters that activate brain cells and make you feel good.

Mind-stretching activities can be physical or sensual – they don't have to be purely intellectual.

The main thing is to do it, enjoy it, and do it again.

Remember, though, that practising most things only gets you nearer to perfection at that particular thing.

To improve your all-round mental abilities, you need to keep taking on new challenges, giving your brain the equivalent of a workout at the gym.