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BRAIN WAVE

CAMILLA FOSTER FINDS OUT ABOUT THE ACTIVITIES THAT HELP BOOST MENTAL SHARPNESS

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GAMES like Scrabble and chess are referred to as ‘mind sports’ as they help exercise our brain.



We have spoken to experts who have explained how these activities enhance brain function and why regularly engaging in them can help maintain mental sharpness in later life.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

“Engaging in mind sports offers substantial cognitive benefits, particularly for maintaining mental sharpness as we age,” says Dr Steve Allder, consultant neurologist at Re:Cognition Health. “They provide a diverse range of mental challenges that can improve control of attention (focus), working memory, planning, imagination and other aspects of executive cognitive function, making them invaluable tools for lifelong brain health.

“They are even more powerful if they involve social interaction.”

HOW OFTEN SHOULD WE BE DOING THEM?

“The more often you can do brainboosting exercises, the better,” recommends Suzanne Mumford, head of dementia and lifestyles at Care UK.

“Daily is ideal, but three to five times a week is advisable.”

“Common signs that we’re not looking after our brains the best we could is forgetting important things, finding it hard to pay attention or think clearly,” explains Natalie Mackenzie, brain expert and cognitive rehab therapist.

Here are six mind sports to try...

1. BACKGAMMON

“Backgammon combines strategic planning, probability and risk assessment, stimulating the prefrontal cortex and numerical reasoning areas of the brain,” explains Dr Allder. “The game encourages adaptability and cognitive flexibility while improving mathematical reasoning and spatial awareness.”

2. CARDS

“Card games challenge cognitive flexibility, logical reasoning and math skills, stimulating the brain’s frontal lobe and numerical reasoning areas,” says Dr Allder.

“These games also encourage social interaction, which enhances mood and mental health.

“Playing cards improves memory, decision-making and adaptability, keeping the brain engaged and sharp.”

3. CROSSWORDS

“Crosswords engage a number of cognitive domains (areas and processes) which help mental agility and sharpness,” explains Natalie. “They utilise memory processes for recalling words and knowledge, and therefore stimulate these neural pathways.

“Critical and strategic thinking to enable problem solving is at work here, while expanding vocabulary. This stimulates the memory processes of encoding and storage of these new learnings, more neural firing occurring.”

Several studies have associated crosswords with delayed onset of memory decline in those later diagnosed with dementia, adds Suzanne.

“Dementia is linked with loss of neural connection within the brain, while activities like crosswords can help create new ones – thus enabling older people living with the condition to mitigate the symptoms,” explains Natalie.

4. CHESS

“Chess requires strategic thinking, memory and pattern recognition, engaging the pre-frontal cortex and other critical areas of the brain,” says Dr Allder. “It helps develop foresight, patience and problem-solving skills while promoting neuroplasticity, which enhances cognitive flexibility. This makes chess particularly effective for maintaining sharpness later in life.”

5. JIGSAWS

“Jigsaws are all about problem-solving, which certain types of dementia can affect, such as vascular dementia,” says Suzanne. “Doing jigsaw puzzles is a great way to maintain those skills, and there’s an added physical benefit to this one – dexterity.”

6. SCRABBLE

“Scrabble is a powerful tool for stimulating vocabulary, language skills and strategic thinking,” says Dr Allder. “It activates the brain’s left hemisphere for language processing and the prefrontal cortex for planning and decision-making. Players benefit by improving their vocabulary, memory and focus while enjoying social interaction, which can reduce loneliness and stress.”

While the Panesars navigate life after New Year’s Eve’s events, at The Vic tensions rise, thanks to repercussions from Christmas. As conversations continue, a shocking discovery is made.

Jean offers Stacey advice regarding Martin and later he and Ruby give her an update on Roman’s condition.

Billy is shocked when Phil makes a hasty business decision. And at the salon, Jack and Denise share a warm moment as he comforts her over New Year’s dramas.