- Brain

you can do it!
POWER UP YOUR BRAIN

HARNESS THE 5 Super Brain Traits

Researchers have pinpointed 5 core personality traits central to everything from brain health to long-term happiness. Here, we explore each of these qualities and easy ways to maximize their strengths

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THERE ARE SO MANY things about you that make you unique—perhaps you have a dry wit, or maybe you *love* '80s movies. But when it comes to fundamental traits we all share, psychologists have identified the "Big Five": openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion (vs. introversion), agreeableness and neuroticism. It's appropriate they're known by the acronym OCEAN because they have such a deep impact on our lives. Indeed, they can help predict everything from our risk of dementia to our overall success in life.

The great news is that the Big Five are not set in stone. We can accentuate those linked with a lower risk of Alzheimer's, like conscientiousness, while decreasing those that may be holding us back, like neuroticism. And we don't need to be a spring chicken to do it either.

"While it's thought that younger people can make changes more easily, midlife presents another chance for positive shifts," says neuroscience expert Dario Nardi, Ph.D. That's because everything from preparing for retirement to becoming an empty-nester sets the stage for healthy change. Keep reading for empowering ways to tap your OCEAN qualities, as well as simple tips proven to boost your brain and unleash your true potential.

1 FOSTER **OPENNESS** WITH A 'SOJOURN'

The first of the OCEAN traits means just what its name implies: the willingness to embrace new ideas. It sounds simple, but it's tied to greater perseverance and a lower risk of dementia, according to a study in the *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease.* That's largely because when we challenge ourselves to adapt to novel situations, our brain lights up like Times Square.

A fun way to foster this mindset is by tapping the "sojourner effect," says Olga Khazan, author of *Me, But Better: The Science and Promise of Personality Change,* who conducted a yearlong experiment to see if the Big Five are changeable. "This phenomenon describes how your brain is stimulated when you're exposed to a different culture," she explains. No need to pack your bags to reap its rewards: Sparking your curiosity by reading a book on a foreign subject or talking to someone whose opinions differ from yours, encourages your brain to see the world from a new vantage point, almost literally expanding your mind.



2 CUE **CONSCIENTIOUSNESS** WITH *THIS* IMAGE

"This is the trait everyone wants to increase because it's tied to all the 'goodies': better health, higher earnings...and the list goes on," says Khazan. And, yes, that list includes a more resilient brain, as conscientiousness, the ability to plan and organize, implies that you're engaging in daily habits to help you keep sharp, like learning new skills.

The strategy shown to cultivate it? "Episodic future thinking," which entails imagining in vivid detail the positive *and* negative outcomes of your decisions, says Khazan. For example, if you're procrastinating instead of working, picture yourself missing a deadline. At the same time, envision the flip side: You make a to-do list, get your work done by 5 PM, and enjoy a glass of wine in the evening. "This very clear image helps people prioritize 'eat your vegetable' decisions." Indeed, eating your veggies literally and figuratively boosts your brain in more ways than one.



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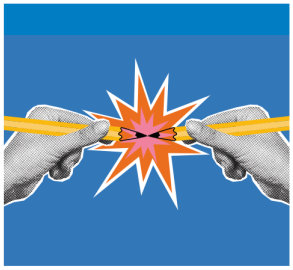
3 INCREASE EXTRA-VERSION WITH 'RISKS'

No surprise here: If you're energized after being around people, you're likely an extravert. But what may surprise you is that this quality is linked with lower levels of beta-amyloid plaque, a protein that builds up in the brains of Alzheimer's patients.

Let's be clear, introversion comes with its own perks. "More introverts, by far, are artists and scientists," says Nardi. If you're on the quiet side, work with your nature by looking for social activities that complement your values. Volunteer projects you're passionate about, for example, boost your energy by bringing your brain waves in sync with others, he reveals.

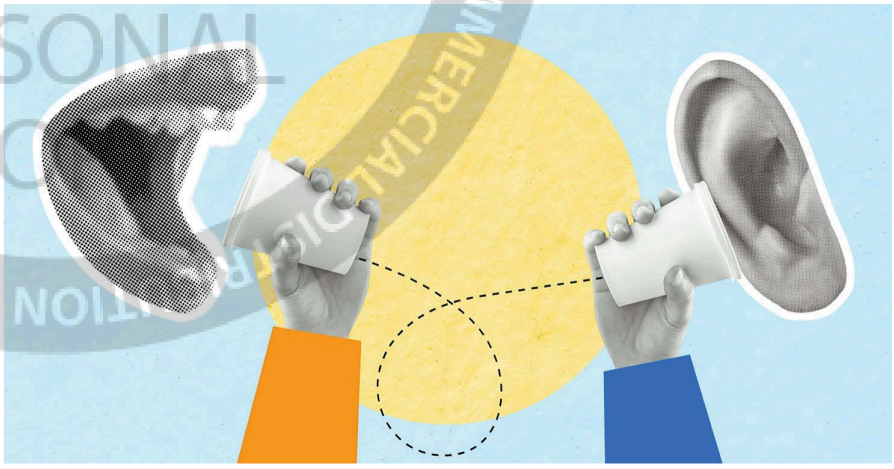
Taking a few social risks can also reveal hidden strengths. That's what happened to self-described introvert Khazan, who tried everything from improv to Meetup groups. "I discovered I don't need as much 'me time' as I thought," she says. You never know, there may be a little extrovert in every introvert.



4 AMP AGREEABLENESS WITH SIMPLE Qs

The key to flourishing in life comes down to one word: relationships. In fact, an 85-year Harvard study found that having strong bonds was the single best predictor of happiness, longevity and brain health. Enter agreeableness, the quality underpinning nurturing friendships. An easy way to foster your natural amiability is by asking deeper questions of the people in your life, says Khazan. If someone just returned from a trip, for example, you might ask, "What did this experience *mean* to you?" she suggests.

What about encouraging agreeableness in others? "Studies reveal simply asking people to show more empathy works most of the time," adds Nardi. He explains this request lights up the part of the brain that triggers empathy. "You could say, 'Imagine if you were listening to *you* right now. How would *you* feel?' Most people know what the right thing to do is, but those lower on agreeableness need a nudge to get there."



5 EASE NEUROTICISM WITH A REFRAME

Nardi sums up this penchant for worry best when he says, "It means living in the future instead of the present." That's because anxiety is anticipatory by nature, always looking around the corner for the next potential danger. And that's not altogether a bad thing: We need a dash of anxiety to help us plan and outsmart potentially negative outcomes. Neuroticism is also associated with a higher IQ and more self-awareness, he notes. The problem is that if anxiety keeps us cloistered, afraid to live life, our brain suffers. In fact, a high degree of neuroticism is linked to a greater risk of Alzheimer's disease.

Fortunately, we can ease anxiety by reframing it. "The trick is to think about it in a friendlier way so you begin to see it as something that can actually help you," adds Khazan. "If your blood starts pumping at the thought of giving a speech, for example, look at that feeling as helping you get amped or excited," says Khazan. "Research shows people who think about their anxiety in this way do perform better on a variety of tasks."

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