

- Jigsaw puzzles / Brain

The perks of PLAYING PUZZLES

Whether it's a jigsaw or crossword, brainteasers are really good for you

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What is made up of 1000 pieces, has been shown to reduce heart rate and blood pressure, and may help to slow cognitive decline? Here's a clue – Kylie Jenner, Kate Hudson and Oprah Winfrey are all fans, as was the late Queen Elizabeth II. Yes, it's the humble jigsaw puzzle!



Whether it's a baby playing with wooden blocks or an adult doing crosswords to pass time on the morning commute, puzzles have the power to appeal to all ages.

Most of us know they've been researched as a potential preventative measure against dementia. However, problem-solving games can benefit us during any stage of life.

"Puzzles are incredible for us," says psychologist Carly Dober. "They can be meditative and support us by accessing our more calm state, especially when we're doing them with people who are healthy to be around and the puzzle isn't impossible to complete.

"They also form new neural pathways through neuroplasticity and support, which increase the brain's capacity to perform a wide range of tasks, from organising to walking and very high-level thinking."

A puzzle is any kind of game, toy or activity that challenges our problem-solving skills and ingenuity. It might be a Rubik's Cube, or a word or number game. It could also be a mystery party game or visiting an escape room.

Carly says what matters is that you're activating your brain and staying challenged. She explains, "Puzzles typically combine two important areas of brain change – images and challenges. The deliberate effort required to perform the puzzle is also really important. No one type of puzzle is necessarily better than the other. It's more important to mix up the kind of puzzles you do."

"If you have a preference for sudoku, then keep that up, but also try different puzzles that are more visual and literacy-based to reap the full benefits. Engaging in any type of brain rewiring activity is good, though."

Of course, the main reason most people do puzzles is because they're a great way to pass the time. They're relatively affordable compared to most hobbies and there's nothing like the sense of accomplishment from a jigsaw or crossword done well.

"They can be very mindful as we are totally absorbed in the activity," Carly says. "We tend to use skills that we might not use in our everyday lives and they can also bring a sense of enjoyment." While we know they challenge and exercise your brain, there is some evidence puzzles strengthen the types of neural connections that may reduce the risk of future cognitive decline. These brain-bending exercises can also help to alleviate stress, which has been associated with an increased risk of dementia.

However, doctors caution that research is in its infancy. In the meantime, there are a range of measures we should take to keep our brains in shape, such as eating a healthy diet, regular exercise, avoiding stress, learning new things and social engagement.

If you're doing puzzles to exercise your brain, go for options that you find challenging and give you joy.

"You can essentially think of puzzles as a fun workout for your brain," Carly says.

While you can get plenty of benefits from doing puzzles on your own, there are added advantages when you enlist a buddy or a group of mates to help you.

"Engaging in puzzles with other people provides a great social experience," Carly explains. "Social connection is so integral to our physical and mental health. Not only that, but it helps to build memories and to support the bond that we have with one another."

A jumbo jigsaw can make for an ideal family school holiday activity.

Carly adds, "It can be a great way to get to practise communication skills and group problem-solving."