

How to Train Your Brain

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When we think of a healthy lifestyle, we think of exercising, eating a balanced diet, losing weight, controlling diabetes or lowering cholesterol levels. We often forget the importance of brain stimulation. After all, the brain is the most important and complex part of the body. It controls almost all body processes including heartbeat, breathing, digestion, muscle movement, speech and all five senses. We need our brain to be healthy because it is responsible for memory, emotion, behavior and reasoning. The health of our brain is vital to nearly everything we do.



Brain Basics

The brain is the control center of your body! All of this is accomplished by an organ that weighs a mere 3 pounds and is the size of a small head of cauliflower. But, how does the brain work? Your brain contains approximately 100 billion nerve cells called neurons. Neurons behave like wires in a computer, gathering and transmitting electrochemical signals.

Every time you practice an activity or access a memory, neurons fire and connect together to form electrochemical pathways. When this happens repeatedly, the connections and pathways are strengthened and expanded. If you stop practicing an activity, your brain will eventually “prune” the unused cells. The brain works on supply and demand. The more times a pathway is used, the stronger the connections will be. One saying regarding the brain is “the cells that fire together, wire together.” We are born with the majority of the neurons in our brain. Few can be renewed, so use them or lose them!

Why Train Your Brain

Brain stimulation is any activity that creates or strengthens neural pathways and connections. People who stimulate and challenge their

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mind throughout their life often maintain a high level of brain activity. We have all heard the old adage, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” That is not true when it comes to learning and the brain. The brain has an ability called *neuroplasticity*, which allows it to adapt and change, regardless of age. With the right stimulation, your brain can form new neural pathways, alter existing connections, and adapt and react in ever-changing ways.

The brain’s incredible ability to reshape itself holds true when it comes to learning and memory. You can harness the natural power of neuroplasticity to increase your cognitive abilities, enhance your ability to learn new information and improve your memory.

The brain is a wonderful muscle that is always changing and that gives us the opportunity to shape neural connections through our behavior and environment. However, we cannot forget there are other factors, like genetics, that are unchangeable. Neuroscientists are still researching the causes of neurological diseases like dementia and Alzheimer’s disease. We can incorporate brain-stimulating activities into our daily lives to keep our brains as strong as possible, while accepting that there are certain factors in life that we cannot change.

Benefits of Exercising Your Brain

Research shows that engaging in cognitively stimulating activities throughout your lifetime can lead to a slower decline in later life. Some memory loss is unavoidable with age. But, by engaging your brain, you can delay the decline and improve your cognitive state. The sooner you start challenging your mind, the better! Research has indicated that exercising your brain can lead to short-term gains in memory and reasoning, and long-term gains in processing times. Regular brain stimulation can be beneficial in many ways including:

- Faster thinking
- Quicker reactions
- Better memory
- Improved mood
- Sharper listening skills
- Improved multitasking skills

Redesign Your Mind

There are a number of activities that you can do for mental stimulation. It is important to engage your brain throughout the day. Try some of the following activities:

- **Try something new:** Learn a new language or learn to play an instrument!
- **Spend time with loved ones:** spend time playing cards, walking or meeting with friends.
- **Brain games:** Try word searches, sudoku, word cyphers or crossword puzzles.
- **Pick up a book:** Read a book that you find interesting or write in a journal.
- **Pay attention:** Be present in the moment and avoid auto-pilot!

Quick Tip: Amp Up the Exercise!

Another way to keep your brain sharp? Regular aerobic exercise! A recent study shows that regular aerobic exercise that raises your heart rate increases the function of your hippocampus, the part of your brain responsible for verbal memory and learning. Exercise improves the health of the brain by encouraging the release of chemicals that fuel neurons. It also reduces stress, increases concentration and promotes sleep which all have an impact on brain health.

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