

Simple strategies to improve memory and brain health

Written by meg sibal, m.d.

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WHILE there is no single way to train your brain, there is an important concept to keep in mind — “My motto is train but don’t strain your brain,” says Gary Small, M.D., director of the UCLA Longevity Center, in the March 2016 issue of the UCLA Health HEALTHY Years.

“If you play a game or do a puzzle and it’s too easy or repetitive, it’s probably not going to do much for your brain. But if you challenge yourself with the right kind of exercise, our studies have shown that you can improve memory in as little as two weeks,” adds Dr. Small.

Since variety is not only the spice of life but it’s also vital to brain health, and keeping your brain stimulated can lead to a longer and quite possibly happier life as well, the health letter offers five ways — from physical exercise to mental games — to stimulate your brain and possibly increase cognitive function:

1) Brain games — a) Sudoku, chess, and even video games can all be of benefit; b) Crossword puzzles in newspapers — an especially good choice since they tend to be easy in the beginning of the week and more difficult as the week progresses, allowing you to find which days challenge your current skill set and then move to more difficult puzzles when you feel ready; c) phone apps and computer games can also improve cognitive performance, multitasking ability and short-term working memory.

Dr. Small cautions, “But we have to be careful not to overuse technology, because if we

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constantly get distracted by it, our mental performance can worsen.”

2) Be social — a) Studies show that staying connected to others — family, friends and those with whom you share favorite activities — helps build those important bonds which can be good for brain health.

While it is not yet definitely known why being social is good for brain health, researchers at the University of Chicago have shown that loneliness undermines health and can be as detrimental as smoking; and b) Also, the company you keep can make a positive difference — for instance, individuals who socialize with others who have healthy habits are more likely to have and maintain better healthy habits themselves.

However, the reverse is also true.

3) Move your body — Since the brain is a highly vascular organ — which means that good blood circulation is needed to maintain a healthy brain — your brain’s circulation benefits from exercise, such as a brisk walk, dancing or swimming.

What matters is that you move vigorously, preferably on a daily basis — recent research from the University of Kansas published in the journal PLoS One that any exercise helped improve brain function, but the intensity of the exercise appeared to matter more than the duration. In other words, you need to exercise a bit out of your comfort zone, to positively affect the brain.

4) Reduce stress — Chronic stress shrinks the brain’s hippocampal memory centers, and stress hormones like cortisol temporarily impair learning and recall, says Dr. Small — purposeful relaxation techniques, such as meditation, focused breathing and prayer can help lower stress levels.

“We can’t eliminate all the stress many of us experience, but we can manage that stress better,” says Dr. Small.

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A place to start might be UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center (marc.ucla.edu), which offers free online meditations, as well as instructor-led classes throughout the Los Angeles area.

5) Mind your meds — Some seniors take multiple medications and some medications shouldn't be combined with certain foods, supplements, vitamins or other over-the-counter medications — the combinations can cause medications to become inactive, too quickly absorbed or make you overly drowsy.

Read labels carefully and follow instructions from your doctor or if you're unsure, or are experiencing side effects, talk to your doctor or pharmacist.

For additional strategies — Read Dr. Small's book, *2 Weeks To A Younger Brain*, which is filled with exercises that can yield quick and long-lasting benefits.

The UCLA Longevity Center also offers memory-training programs.

For information, go to www.semel.ucla.edu/longevity.