

Move!

What's in it for me? Learn how exercise boosts brain health.

Thousands of years ago, hunter-gatherers roamed miles in search of their next meal. Today, finding food is as simple as clicking a “Deliver Now” button. But, for all its convenience, technological innovation has had some harmful side effects on human health. As a species, we’ve simply stopped moving; we’re basically sloths compared to our Stone Age ancestors. We spend a staggering 70 percent of our lives sitting still. And our brains are suffering as a result. Filled with practical exercise advice, these blinks will help you break the cycle of sloth. In providing the momentum to move, they’ll guide you toward a healthier – and happier – life. In these blinks, you’ll learn

why sitting is the new smoking; how our brains evolved to think best on the move; and simple steps you can take to set both your body and mind in motion.

Humans have chosen the way of the sloth.

Have you ever wanted to trade places with a sloth? Notorious for doing almost nothing, these tree-dwelling mammals sleep for up to 20 hours a day and are relatively motionless when awake. Pretty wild, right? Well . . . turns out humans don’t need to envy the sloth life – we’re already living it. As a species, humans have reached new levels of laziness. Today, the average adult spends a staggering 70 percent of their life sitting or lying completely still. Think about that for a moment. If you lived to be 80 years old, only 24 of those years would have been spent moving. The other 56 years – more than 20,000 days – would have been spent on the couch or in bed. This is the key message: Humans have chosen the way of the sloth. The trend toward laziness doesn’t discriminate by age, either. Modern children spend up to half of their free time sitting around – and that’s before school time gets factored into the equation. On the other end of the spectrum, elderly people spend up to 80 percent of their waking days barely moving a muscle. These numbers are scary – and they’re only getting worse. In fact, modern humans move around 30 percent less than their counterparts did in the 1960s. At this point, you may be asking, What inspired this drastic shift in behavior? Look around, and the answer becomes self-evident. Did you spot a smartphone, television, or computer nearby? Those snazzy little devices are partly to blame for our overwhelmingly slothlike state. Hungry for dinner? Instead of hunting bison like our hunter-gatherer ancestors did, you can get a burger hand-delivered with the click of a button. Seeking entertainment? Turn on the TV instead of trekking to an ancient amphitheater. Craving social interaction? Chat with people from around the world without leaving your house – or moving more than a finger. There’s no denying that technology has transformed the world as we know it. But has the resulting shift in human behavior been for the better? Science suggests not, as we’ll explore in the next blink.

Humans are built to move.

Unlike sloths, humans aren't built to be motionless for hours on end – and staying still can pose a host of harmful health consequences. Beyond the increased risk of obesity, sedentary lifestyles are also linked to falling IQs, increased antisocial behavior, shortened attention spans, memory loss, decreased creative thinking, and even a global epidemic of mental illness – with a particular emphasis on anxiety and depression. Lack of exercise also accelerates aging, making us old before our time. Studies show that middle-aged people who spend more than two or three hours per day sitting down lose their mental sharpness much faster than their comparatively active counterparts – suggesting that when your body slows down, your brain does too. Here's the key message: Humans are built to move. If you're an active exerciser, you may be thinking you're already protected against these health consequences. And if you're an aspiring exerciser, you may be vowing to finally make good on that gym membership. But contrary to popular belief, hitting the gym isn't the solution – at least, not entirely. While a 30-minute workout is much better than vegging on the couch, exercise alone isn't enough. Movement guru Katy Bowman has noted that working out in short bursts is like taking vitamins to make up for your poor diet – while it may help, it will not make you truly healthy. To improve overall health, you have to reduce your total time spent sitting still. That means regularly moving throughout the day, not just in isolated, high-intensity intervals. In other words, eight hours in a cubicle can't be offset by a single hour of CrossFit. The first step toward breaking the sloth cycle? Putting one foot in front of the other . . . literally. This sounds incredibly simple, but one recent survey found that only 17 percent of people go walking for its own sake anymore – and that statistic includes dog walkers, who don't have much of a choice. Ready to learn the many benefits of walking? The next blink will put you in the shoes of one of history's sharpest thinkers to do exactly that. Lace up, and let's go!

Walking sets your mind in motion.

Charles Darwin needed to move – in more ways than one. Five years after returning from his now-famous Beagle voyages, the young biologist was struggling to transform his field notes into a fully realized theory of evolution. Thinking was much easier said than done amid the hustle and bustle of London life, so Darwin relocated to a quiet corner of the English countryside. There, he started taking daily walks through rolling meadows and dense woodland on an outdoor loop that he proudly called his “thinking path.” And, sure enough, that's precisely where the theory of evolution would soon emerge. The key message: Walking sets your mind in motion. Darwin isn't the only one who used walking to flex his mental muscles, either. From Friedrich Nietzsche and Virginia Woolf to Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, many great thinkers and innovators have done exactly the same thing. You may be wondering, What does walking have to do with thinking? To answer that question, let's take a closer look at Darwin's theory – as it applies to humans. Before the age of hunter-gatherers, our ancestors averaged a measly 3,000 to 5,000 steps per day – much like modern humans do now. But unlike modern humans, their brains didn't suffer when their bodies sat still because their physiology was primed for this low level of activity. Then, the climate began to change – and so did our physiology. Thrust into a cooler, scarcer environment, humans were forced to roam far and wide in search of food. While on their feet, these hunter-gatherers had to constantly invent new and creative ways to fight off predators and forage for nonpoisonous plants. Moving and thinking went hand in hand. To that point, biological anthropologist David Raichlen describes us as a species of “cognitively engaged endurance athletes.” Today, we've evolved past hunting and gathering to a world of fast-food and desk jobs. The bad news? Humans are still biologically programmed to think

and move at the same time. When we're sitting still, our bodies decide to conserve energy by cutting brain capacity - and it's only when we get moving that our minds are set in full motion again. So the next time you're in a mental rut, follow in the footsteps of Charles Darwin. Find your own thinking path and take multiple walks per day - your brain (and body) will thank you.

Exercise can help with life's emotional hurdles too.

Ever been told it's time to "move on?" It's no coincidence that the word move features so prominently in this phrase. In fact, exercise can serve as a major mood-booster - breaking you out of many a mental rut. Experiments suggest that physically moving forward can instill an emotional sense of progress while also promoting positive thinking. With each step, you're mentally transported away from the past and moving toward the future. This means exercise can be especially helpful for those prone to depressive rumination. In moving forward through physical space, they may find themselves mentally progressing past the problems occupying their minds. The key message here is this: Exercise can help with life's emotional hurdles too. The author's childhood classmate Marcus Scotney battled severe depression throughout his teenage years. Then, he discovered that "running for the hills, and then over them, and then back down the other side" could lift his spirits. Today, Marcus is a professional marathon runner who set a course record for one of Europe's most challenging races - and completely turned his mental health around in the process. Fortunately, you don't have to be a marathon runner like Marcus to realize the mood-boosting benefits of movement. After just 20 minutes of brisk walking, endorphins start working their magic in the brain - relieving stress and making you happier. Changing the way you walk can improve your mood, too. For people prone to slouching, straightening up and putting a pep in their step has been proven to help promote positive thinking. If cardio isn't your thing, not to worry! Depression can also be relieved through strength training exercises, like weight lifting or martial arts. On the whole, research confirms that people who do more physical activity feel heightened levels of control over their own lives - and are happier as a result. When stuck in an emotional rut, it can be tempting to curl up under a blanket and binge on Netflix. But Marcus's example suggests that you should be doing the opposite. Next time you're feeling down, get up and move - and don't look back.

For optimal results, exercise more often - not more intensely.

Many are intimidated by the prospect of everyday exercise. But improving your physical and mental health doesn't have to mean running up mountains or reverting to hunter-gatherer ways. For proof, let's take a quick trip to five global destinations: Sardinia, Italy; Ikaria, Greece; Okinawa, Japan; Nicoya, Costa Rica; and Loma Linda, California. Scattered across the map, these places may not seem to share much in common. But take a closer look at their populations, and you'll notice a remarkable trend. In each destination, ten times more people than average live to be 100 years old. What's more, residents of these longevity hotspots are less likely than average to suffer dementia and mental health issues. And yet, these populations rarely exercise - at least, not in the

traditional sense of the word. What do they do instead, you might ask? The answer is simple: they garden, forage, and walk. They spend time outdoors, as their genetics intended. In other words, they do the things the human body is built for. The key message here is: For optimal results, exercise more often – not more intensely. By moving throughout the day, these citizens reap serious rewards. Studies show that putting weight on your bones – whether through walking, running, or jumping for joy – stimulates the release of an important protein called osteocalcin, which improves memory and can “future-proof the brain for old age.” Similarly, regular exercise has been seen to reduce the lifetime risk of dementia by 28 percent. This means that cutting sitting time by 25 percent could prevent more than one million new Alzheimer’s diagnoses worldwide. Fortunately, you can fight the way of the sloth from anywhere in the world – not just one of these longevity hotspots. As a golden rule, aim to get up and exercise every 20 to 30 minutes throughout the day. If that sounds daunting, remember that “exercise” doesn’t have to mean running a marathon. Instead, it can be as simple as having a good stretching session, or using a standing desk throughout the workday. It can also mean you take walking meetings, or turn on the radio and dance to your favorite song. Making time for movement in your life is far from a luxury – and it’s not self-indulgent. It’s a necessity for a healthy, and happy, existence.

Encourage healthy habits early on.

Of course, one person alone can’t break a species-wide cycle of sloth. To improve human health on a global scale, we need to collectively act and adopt what the author calls a movement manifesto. The first step? Encouraging frequent movement from an early age. As the nineteenth-century American social reformer Frederick Douglass said, “It’s easier to build strong children than mend broken men.” Healthy habits should be instilled in childhood – laying the foundation for long, active lives. The key message: Encourage healthy habits early on. For starters, let’s look at the place where children spend the majority of their time: school. Across the world, many schools have stopped prioritizing exercise, shortening or even cutting physical education classes to make more time for academics. But this is completely counterintuitive. As we now know, movement is crucial for sharp creative thinking; our brains slow down when our bodies stop moving. Fortunately, some trailblazing educators have made the movement manifesto their mission. Take Scottish primary school teacher Elaine Wyllie, for instance. In 2012, she realized that sedentary lifestyles were negatively impacting her students’ physical and mental health – so she took action. Once a day, she had students step away from their desks and jog or run laps in the school playground for 15 minutes – an initiative she called “the Daily Mile.” Today, the Daily Mile has spread to 11,000 schools and more than two million children. In 2020, researchers studied 5,000 Daily Mile participants to measure the effect of movement throughout the school day. The results? Children who regularly did the Daily Mile scored better on tests of cognition and well-being than their less active counterparts. For another inspiring example, consider Finland: a country boasting some of the world’s highest academic achievement. Finnish schoolchildren are given a 15-minute break after every 45-minute lesson, during which they’re encouraged to be physically active – and their brains certainly thank them for it. Promoting exercise early on can have powerful impacts, including increasing global IQs, reducing stress, improving memory, and even slowing down the aging process. Maintaining healthy exercise habits is one of the most important lessons we can teach our children – so yes, it deserves a permanent place in the curriculum.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: Our bodies are made to be in motion. Even the most basic of exercises can boost brain health – flexing creative muscles, improving memory, and making us far happier human beings. Remember: in the world of workouts, intensity does not reign supreme. An isolated gym session might get your heart pumping, but regular movement throughout the day is what will keep you in top mental and physical shape. Actionable advice:

Grab an exercise partner. Humans are social creatures, and working out in sync with others – whether through dance, tai chi, or a group Pilates class – can do wonders for your mental health. Group fitness won't only keep you moving when motivation is low; it can also help fight feelings of loneliness while creating a strong sense of community. As an added bonus, signing up for a partner sport can help you meet new people – so grab an exercise buddy and get moving! Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with Move! as the subject line and share your thoughts!