Boost your brain power

Try your hand at these nine mental workouts to stay sharp

his New Year, when you think fit, think brain fitness. Vow to break from routine and focus on strengthening your body AND your mind. The idea of losing a step or two worries many of us, especially those who find themselves forgetting things more often than they like. In most cases, occasional lapses can be attributed to stress or multitasking, which can distract your brain, causing you to become unfocused and less productive.

The good news? While there's a lot we still don't know about the brain, research has shown that the brain is like a muscle and can benefit from activities to boost its strength, flexibility, resilience and endurance. Take a look at some simple and inexpensive ways to train your brain. Proactive measures may improve memory, creativity, attention span, problem solving and, perhaps best of all, support a long, happy and healthy retirement. W

Sources: Annals of Medicine, 2015; MacArthur Foundation Study on Successful Aging; Baltimore Experience Corps

Sleep deprivation impairs quality and accuracy of work (31%), clear thinking or judgment (31%) and memory of important details (30%).

Source: Better Sleep Council study



New territory

Clear more neural pathways by learning a new language, instrument, skill or hobby. The challenge of the unknown boosts brain resilience, as well as memory retention, coordination and high-level thinking.



Purposeful mindset

Build endurance and resilience by defining your life's purpose. A reason to wake up every morning helps you transition when life changes.



Healthy habits

Promote a healthy body and brain through diet and physical exercise, which increases blood flow to the brain, reduces stress, stimulates adaptive capabilities and helps you focus. Aerobic exercise just twice a week could lower your risk of Alzheimer's by 60%. Bonus: A healthier body means you could stave off use of medications that could dull cognition.



Social circles

A meaningful social life, including volunteering, improves executive function and memory. Social interaction means more engagement and lower risk of cognitive impairments.



Restorative sleep

Sleep restores the mind when overwhelmed, rebuilds and repairs neuron pathways, reduces stress, and helps create long-term memories. Learn good sleep habits as well as de-stressing techniques that work for you, such as deep breathing or spending time with family and friends.



Lifelong learning

While a higher education is the strongest predictor of greater mental capacity, memory and thinking skills in later years, a formal education may not be necessary. A lifelong habit of learning and engaging in mentally challenging activities benefits memory as well.



Complex thinking

Jobs that involve complex, detailed work carry a lower risk of memory loss than professions that are less intellectually demanding.



Positivity

Starting your day with a mental accounting of things to be grateful for contributes to brain health and performance. Reframing events with positive thinking increases adaptability and resilience as well.



Tranquility

Silence digital distractions in favor of a good book, meditation, journaling or some other relaxing activity to help focus your mind and improve concentration.

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Brainbuilding

Try one of these activities to help build neural connections, brain strength and flexibility.

- Try your hand at intricate adult coloring books and physical puzzles
- Complete brain teasers, logic puzzles, Sudoku, crosswords
- Learn new skills, hobbies or languages
- Challenge yourself with brain games (e.g., Luminosity, Improve Memory and Fit Brains)
- Practice visualization
- Journal by hand
- Learn an instrument

Develop your training program

- **Set goals:** Identify what skills you want to strengthen.
- Plan: Create a plan that builds on the functionalities you want to improve.
 Discomfort stimulates growth.
- Implement: Build resilience, endurance and flexibility through challenging activities.
- Repeat: Practice helps strengthen your brain and combats atrophy.

Source: Janus BrainWorks