
Making Our Minds Last a Lifetime

Cognitive therapies, supplements and activities are the key ingredients in keeping the brain fit and fighting the aging process.

By: Katherine Greider, Jill Neimark

While it may not be possible to completely age-proof our brains, a brave new world of anti-aging research shows that our gray matter may be far more flexible than we thought. So no one, no matter how old, has to lose their mind.

The brain has often been called the three-pound universe. It's our most powerful and mysterious organ, the seat of the self, laced with as many billions of neurons as the galaxy has stars. No wonder the mere notion of an aging, failing brain—and the prospect of memory loss, confusion, and the unraveling of our personality—is so terrifying. About a third of all people age 60 and over have recall problems that are noticeable to them and measurable with testing. At least a quarter of people age 85 and up suffer from dementia—the loss of memory and cognitive function and an inability to understand words, carry out motor activities, and recognize or identify objects. As Mark Williams, M.D., author of *The American Geriatrics Society's Complete Guide to Aging and Health*, says, "The fear of dementia is stronger than the fear of death itself."

Yet the degeneration of the brain is far from inevitable. "Its design features are such that it should continue to function for a lifetime," says Zaven Khachaturian, Ph.D., director of the Alzheimer's Association's Ronald and Nancy Reagan Research Institute. "There's no reason to expect it to deteriorate with age, even though many of us are living longer lives." In fact, scientists' view of the brain's potential is rapidly changing, according to Stanford University neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky, Ph.D. "Thirty-five years ago we thought Alzheimer's disease was a dramatic version of normal aging. Now we realize it's a disease with a distinct pathology. In fact, some people simply don't experience any mental decline, so we've begun to study them." Antonio Damasio, M.D., Ph.D., head of the Department of Neurology at the University of Iowa and author of *Descartes' Error*, concurs. "Older people can continue to have extremely rich and healthy mental lives."

Successful Aging

So what's the secret to keeping our brains agile and fit? Activity seems to be in fact, mental and physical challenges are both strongly connected to cerebral fitness. This finding springs in large part from a decade of research sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation Network on Successful Aging. Fifteen scientists across the nation have been studying the genetic, psychological, social, and environmental factors that contribute to mental fitness. In one study, Marilyn Albert, Ph.D., of Harvard Medical School, and colleagues from Yale, Duke, and Brandeis Universities and the Mt. Sinai School of Medicine examined 1,192 healthy and mentally fit individuals between the ages of 70 and 80. Twenty-two different variables were measured. "We looked at them in great detail," Albert says, "measuring everything from their blood pressure and cholesterol levels to psychiatric symptoms and whether they smoked."

Psychology Today © Copyright 1991-2008 [Sussex Publishers, LLC](#)
115 East 23rd Street, 9th Floor, New York, NY 10010