



BUILD COGNITIVE RESERVE TO PREVENT MEMORY LOSS

by Joanne Telser-Frere and Richard Goodman

Forgetting where the keys are, not remembering names and searching for words during conversations are all a normal part of growing older. In fact, we all start losing memory as young as age 30, and sometimes even sooner.

The good news is that recent research, most notably from the University of California's Dr. Michael Merzenich, has shown that the brain possesses lifelong plasticity, which is the ability to grow new brain cells and nerve pathways. That means it is possible to create new connections in the brain at any age.

Other research has shown that by challenging and stimulating the brain, adults of any age can build cognitive reserve, which has been shown to delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease. "Think of your brain as a forest," explains Dr. Paul Nussbaum, a clinical neuropsychologist at the University of Pittsburgh. "People with a lot of cognitive reserve have grown a dense jungle. When Alzheimer's disease comes in with a weed whacker it can't do as much damage."

Additional research from Rush University Medical Center in Chicago has demonstrated that mental exercise

can help to slow cognitive decline and also can forestall the symptoms of dementia. Many first-rate online and computerized programs can be used individually to exercise the memory. These exercises are becoming popular because of their efficiency.

It also appears that socializing is an excellent way to improve one's cognitive fitness. Dr. Elsa Baehr, clinical psychologist and founder of Neuroquest, Ltd., a mental health clinic in Skokie, believes in a holistic approach to staying mentally sharp. Her staff runs cognitive fitness programs for groups of adults at the clinic, continuing-care residential centers and businesses. "The brain actually benefits from social interaction," Baehr says. "Working with others on strengthening cognitive function such as memory, concentration and verbal fluency gives the brain an especially good workout. The social component makes a significant difference."

Overall cognitive functioning can also be improved by leading a healthy lifestyle. Nussbaum suggests giving the brain the rest it needs by getting a good night's sleep and meditating daily. Diet and nutrition also are important. Foods rich in antioxidants, such as blueberries and green tea, as well as omega-3 fatty acids found in walnuts, flaxseed and fish such as salmon have been shown to improve brain performance.

With the aging baby boomer population, along with growing concern over memory loss, staying mentally alert has become a widespread concern for adults. Although it is true that the brain does lose some of its strength with age, it also is an incredibly resilient organ. With a little effort, we can all sharpen our brains to improve cognitive fitness throughout our lives.

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