

Brain Health & Mindfulness

Is Mindfulness your Missing Link? BY DAYNA STODDART



“Mindfulness is the psychological process of bringing one’s attention to experiences occurring in the present moment.” Large population-based research studies have indicated that the practice of mindfulness is strongly correlated with greater well-being and perceived health.

This year’s Active Aging Week previewed many topics to empower, engage and provide strategies, techniques and tools to help you flourish and thrive. These tools and techniques will not only “add life to your years, but also years to your life.”

Here are some key messages that were delivered by the many experts throughout the seminars during Active Aging Week.

✓ REMAIN SOCIAL

More than any other tool in the world of positive psychology, it is connection that contributes most to living a flourishing life. Face-to-face connections via Facebook, daily interactions and close relationships are key. Relationships strengthen brain connections. Social isolation reduces the number of neurons and dendrites in the brain.

✓ PHYSICAL EXERCISE

Are you getting your 150 minutes? Moderate to vigorous aerobic activity 30 minutes per day, five days a week is recommended as is strength training two to three times per week. Both forms of exercise increase your heart rate, which in turn aids in increased circulation and oxygen to the brain as well as producing BDNF. BDNF stands for “brain-derived neurotrophic factor.” It is actually a protein, dubbed a master molecule and referred to as “Miracle-Gro for the brain” by Harvard psychiatrist, John J. Ratey, MD, author of *Spark, The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*. According to Ratey, BDNF is “a crucial biological link between thought, emotions, and movement.”

Daily aerobic exercise is best, but including intervals of sprints is even better. It seems even a small amount of high-intensity exertion can have a profound effect on your brain!

BDNF binds to receptors in the synapses between neurons, increasing voltage (yes your brain is electric!), and improving signal strength. Inside the cells, it activates genes that increase production of more BDNF and other important proteins, as well as serotonin, the neurotransmitter vital for learning

and self-esteem. Low levels of BDNF have been associated with depression and even suicide.

Being mindful during exercise/physical activity is the foundation to movement. It is about creating an awareness of how your body feels and where your body is in space.

✓ HEALTHY DIET

Avoid processed foods, don’t smoke, and limit sugar and alcohol intake (one drink per day for women, two drinks per day for men).

The Mediterranean diet is the best guideline to fuelling your body for health and longevity. Consume omega-3 fatty acids which are an integral part of cell membranes throughout the body. Health benefits include: lowered risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke, decreased blood pressure, prevention and treatment of peripheral vascular disease, postponement of cognitive decline, prevention of insulin resistance, as well as an aid in treating depression.

Adequate hydration is important for the body and brain to function efficiently. Our bodies contain about 50 to 65% water, and our brains contain approximately 75% water. Mild dehydration can increase anxiety and impair mood, memory and overall brain performance.

✓ SLEEP

Better brain and physical health in older people are related to getting an average of seven to eight hours of sleep every 24 hours.

Too few health care providers consider sleep a serious health issue, despite the fact that chronic inadequate sleep puts people at higher risk for dementia, depression, heart disease, obesity, diabetes, fall-related injuries and cancer.

While sleep disorders become more common with age, they often can be treated. Experts emphasize that people at any age can change their behaviour to improve their sleep.

✓ CHALLENGE YOURSELF

The brain is plastic so we can learn new things at any age. Challenging the brain with new information and activities is strength training for the brain.

NEW! Brain Fitness Class “Staying Sharp” will be offered during the winter 2018 session on Wednesdays from 11 a.m. to noon.

The program focuses on all five areas of cognition: language and music, visual/spatial orientation, memory, critical thinking and computation.

✓ REDUCE STRESS

Toxic stress releases chemicals that destroy neurons and dendrites in our brains. Neurons and dendrites are important because they hold our thoughts and memories. Worry sends many bad chemicals around the body and brain. Stress alone doesn't kill people—how they think about it does. What is your stress mindset? Choosing positive emotions is good for your brain and body. Gratitude makes a difference. Sit, stand and walk with good posture to send a message of confidence to your brain. Research has shown that better posture changes our physiology and improves our self-esteem and confidence. It also improves your balance.

✓ MEDITATION

Meditation can have a powerful effect on your brain/body connection. Its benefits include reducing stress, calming the body and brain, improving physical health, boosting the immune system, improving cognitive function, enhancing your sense of compassion, helping you to focus, nurturing a positive attitude, and decreasing anxiety and depression.

NEW! Learning to Meditate classes will be offered in winter 2018 on Monday evenings from 8:00 to 9:00 p.m. and Saturdays from 3:30 to 4:30 p.m.



CHOOSING WISELY

BY JAN RICHARDS

Did you know that there is a national campaign called **Choosing Wisely** which discourages “unnecessary” diagnostic medical tests and treatments? Some procedures that are not supported by scientific evidence may expose patients to harm, lead to more testing to investigate false positives, and contribute to patient stress. Unnecessary testing can put increased strain on the limited resources of the health-care system.

Choosing Wisely Canada is a campaign to help physicians and patients engage in healthy discussions about making smart and effective choices to ensure high-quality health care. The Canadian Medical Association, in partnership with over 30 national medical specialty societies, is presently engaged in this campaign. All Canadian provinces and territories have endorsed this cost saving strategy.

