

Keep your mind in shape as you age

By: Hollee Stamper, Special to Cherry Hill Courier Post, USA TODAY Network NJ – February 26, 2019



What are some steps you can take to keep your brain sharp? You can exercise that organ as well as the rest of you

“Brain games” have been a big buzz word for years — the thought being that puzzles and games that challenge your brain to work harder help keep your mind sharp and stave off the effects of aging and cognitive decline.

There’s no doubt these games are a fun leisure activity, but we don’t yet know whether there is a definitive link between these games and improved mental functioning or reduced cognitive decline during the aging process — but some research has suggested that it’s good for us to challenge our brains as often as possible.

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In the end, there is no escaping the fact that your brain will begin to slow with age — it’s an inevitable part of the process. But as a cognitive therapist who has specialized in brain injury rehabilitation for years, part of my job has been to help patients “exercise” their brains — and there are a few tried-and-true methods I often recommend.

Beyond the crossword puzzles and iPhone apps, try some of these approaches you might not have considered!

Continue your education: This doesn’t necessarily mean “learning” in the context of school or formal academics. It means developing a new skill, such as learning how to ride a bike, speak a new language or play a new instrument. Try a new type of cooking, travel somewhere new, or start a new hobby.

Exercise: If you feel like you hear this one often, it’s for good reason. Physical activity is an important component of brain health and cognitive stimulation. It facilitates neuroplasticity or the brain’s ability to reorganize itself and form new connections. Additionally, research has shown that physical activity may help delay the onset of dementia as we age. Whether you’re a runner, or want to try a new class (yoga is a good one because of its stress-relieving, mind-clearing benefits) — even something as simple as a 20-minute walk each day can be beneficial!

Manage stress: Stress and psychological factors such as depression and anxiety affect our well-being more than we realize, and the brain is ground zero for its effects. In addition to its physical symptoms, stress can make it hard to think. Stress management and treatment for mood dysregulation can potentially improve thinking skills associated with attention,

processing and memory. Try your hand (or maybe your whole body!) at yoga — which is good for both your mind and body. Even a few minutes of deep breathing can help to reduce stress.

Stay connected: Socialization is often overlooked when we talk about keeping our brains healthy — but connecting with others is vital to our emotional and cognitive well-being. Spending time with friends, joining a book club or volunteering can be great ways to build new relationships or strengthen old ones ... while also strengthening your brain!

The important thing to remember is that staying active later in life keeps us young at heart — and young in mind. Be creative and do whatever you find fun ... any level of activity that makes you think — whatever you choose — will be beneficial in the long-run.

Contributor: Hollee Stamper, LCSW, Cognitive Therapy Supervisor, Bancroft NeuroRehab "The Beautiful Mind" is brought to you by experts in neurological health, including autism, intellectual and developmental disabilities and neurological rehabilitation, at Bancroft and Bancroft NeuroRehab in Mount Laurel, Cherry Hill, Plainsboro and Brick and Marcroft, the affiliated medical practice of Bancroft.