



Brain Power
at Work

10 Ways to Keep Your Brain Healthy

Every employer wants to hire the best brains. But good brains are not immune to the pressures of the workplace. Being smart doesn't guarantee protection against increasing workload, tightening deadlines, and changing technology. Without help, those good brains fall prey to burnout, reduced productivity, and absenteeism.

We'll help you protect your investment in smart people. Our programs help people build mental resilience to cope with workplace pressures. We help people train their brains to adopt a growth mindset, and enjoy striving to improve.

Dynamic Learning Inc.

1701 Hollis Street, Suite 800, Halifax, NS B3J 3M8 | dynamiclearning.ca

Contact us today
for a free consultation.
902-483-5700 or
info@dynamiclearning.ca

Ten Ways to Keep Your Brain Healthy

The most important information to understand about your brain is that it can continue to grow new neurons and dendrites throughout your life. I have arranged the information below in order of effectiveness to get and keep your brain as healthy and productive as possible.

1

Exercise vigorously and daily

The best thing you can do for your brain both for today and for the future is to exercise vigorously and daily. In spite of everything you can read about exercising your brain, exercising your body on a regular basis does more for your brain than anything else—even if it is just going for a brisk walk every day.

There is convincing evidence from large-scale, long-term human studies that aerobic conditioning protects the hippocampus, the memory center of the brain, from loss of neurons. The experimental subjects in one example study walked briskly for 30 minutes a day at least 3 times per week.¹

Small laboratory animals exposed to exercise—running on wheels and treadmills—show formation of more new blood vessels and nerve cell communication sites in their brains than the control animals. In another experiment, adult mice exercising regularly on a running wheel developed twice as many new brain cells in the hippocampus compared with mice in standard cages.

If you're already doing aerobic exercise for 30 minutes or more every day, you're being very effective in keeping your brain healthy. If not, then choose an enjoyable activity that will increase your heart rate for 30 minutes. Do it three times a week. Then work towards doing it every day. You will increase the growth rate and survival rate of brain cells in your hippocampus, improve blood flow and nutrition to your whole brain, and enhance your ability to learn and remember. It will also do wonders for your mood.²

2

Keep learning all your life

Learn something new that takes effort, concentration, and practice. Neuroplastician, Dr. Michael Merzenich, explains that practicing a new skill under the right conditions can change hundreds of millions and possibly billions of connections between the nerve cells in our brains.³

There are many ways this can be done:

- Become more efficient and focused by prioritizing tasks ahead of time.
- Improve your ability to concentrate on one important task at a time.
- Learn to resist distractions more often and more easily.
- Work towards peak performance by clarifying your goals, keeping track of your progress towards your goals, and matching your ability to the demands of the tasks.
- Find ways to work more autonomy, mastery, and purpose into your life.
- Adopt an approach where you get into action more often and procrastinate less often.
- Challenge your brain to read faster and remember longer what you read.
- Use Attention, Interest, Repetition and Organization to work more effectively with your memory.
- Use the [HELLO technique](#) to remember the names of the people you meet.

3

Get enough sleep

Most studies on how much sleep is needed by adults recommend an average of 7.5 to 8 hours per night and 9.5 hours for teenagers. Lack of sufficient sleep can cause fatigue, daytime sleepiness, poor memory and health problems.

One of the important aspects of getting enough sleep is getting enough time to dream (rapid eye movement or REM sleep). We usually dream at the end of several stages of sleep which take 70 to 90 minutes to complete, so if we don't have about 7.5 hours of uninterrupted sleep most nights, we probably are not getting enough REM sleep or dreaming time.

In *The Brain that Changes Itself*, Dr. Norman Doidge explains why we need REM sleep:

“Scores of studies show that sleep affects plastic change by allowing us to consolidate learning and memory. When we learn a skill during the day, we will be better at it the next day

if we have a good night's sleep.... REM sleep has also been shown to be particularly important for enhancing our ability to retain emotional memories and for allowing the hippocampus to turn short-term memories of the day before into long-term ones (i.e., it helps make memories more permanent, leading to structural changes in the brain)."⁴

As William Shakespeare says:

*Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast.*

Macbeth (2.2.46-51)

Don't miss out on sleep.

4

Eat well for your brain as well as your body

We have more than enough evidence that what we eat has immediate, short-term and long-term effects on our bodies and our brains. Changing to healthier eating habits is as difficult as changing any adult habit, but it does offer rewards of increased alertness and greater energy. As we get older, it also helps us to maintain a healthy body weight and keep a good balance between stronger muscles and less fat. Finally, eating plenty of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, good fats and lean protein helps us resist the brain-threatening conditions of diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease.

You could even combine two ways to keep your brain healthy by enhancing your cooking skills while learning to make delicious, healthy meals and nutritious snacks. The challenge of ongoing learning will give your brain focus and a good regular workout and the better nutrition will improve your overall health.

5

Reduce your stress

Try using the ABCs of Rational Thinking to talk more realistically to yourself. Live in and focus on the present more and worry less about the past and the future. Treat mistakes as feedback and an inevitable part of life, especially when you're learning or creating something new.

You control what you think, although if you've developed negative thinking habits, you will have to work deliberately and consciously to change them. When you do, you will be changing the structure of your brain.

Be alert to your tendency to imagine a "worst case scenario" when you face a difficult person or situation. Remind yourself that it is not a 10 (as in the 1-10 scale introduced in Chapter Six, where 10 is the most terrible thing that could happen to you). You will be able to handle it, just as you've handled other difficulties in your past.

Recognize that multitasking adds to your stress level and reduces your efficiency.

Turn off your work at home, have more relaxing evenings, weekends, and vacations.

6

Deliberately relax for a few minutes twice a day

Whether you practice yoga every day, meditate, or sing in the shower, any conscious effort you make to relax, both mentally and physically, will reduce stress. Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard University has described the process as the relaxation response. Just as our bodies evolved and developed an automatic stress response, we can teach ourselves, through conscious effort and repetition, to switch on a relaxation response—a state of deep mental and physical relaxation. Physiological activities slow down—heart and breathing rates decrease, blood pressure lowers and muscles relax. Just a few minutes each day doing some simple relaxation techniques can help you remain calm and perform at your optimal capacity.

7

Have Frequent Face-to-Face Contact with People

Dozens of studies have shown that people who have social support from family, friends, and their community are happier, have fewer health problems, and live longer.

Julianne Holt-Lunstad of Brigham Young University did a series of studies with tens of thousands of middle-aged people recording every aspect of their lifestyle – for example, diet, exercise, marital status, whether and how much they smoked and /or drank, control of blood pressure, their social lives, etc. Seven years later, she then checked on who had died. Her results showed that out of the ten aspects she measured, the two that reduced the chances of dying the most were social integration and close relationships.

Social integration measures how much you interact with others on a weekly basis. Having a close relationship means having someone you could call on for a loan or to come with you to consult a doctor.

Promise yourself you'll spend some time on your closest relationships first. Be proactive in suggesting some relaxed one-on-one time with your partner, your children, close family members and close friends. And put away your phone when you are with the people you care about the most.

You will also be happier when you nurture your relationships with the groups you belong to. Chatting with your work colleagues, spending extra social time with your religious group, with your group of volunteers, with your neighbors, with your study or exercise group are all easy, inexpensive ways to strengthen your social connections and your brain."

8

Protect your head to avoid hitting or bumping your brain

Everything you can do to protect yourself and those you love from a concussion or worse is the most important work you can do. Make your home as fall-proof as possible. Treat any blow to the head or sharp twisting of the neck as a potentially serious injury and get medical help immediately. Always wear seat belts and helmets whenever it is recommended.

Lack of oxygen caused by near drowning can cause a devastating brain injury, so insist that everyone in a boat with you is wearing a properly fastened lifejacket or personal flotation device. Just having a lifejacket in the boat is not enough, just as having a seat belt in a car is useless if you don't put it on. Every summer, strong young people and adults are brain injured by near drowning accidents. Don't let it happen to you or your loved ones.

9

Stop habits that are bad for your brain

Researchers from the University of California investigated studies that show a link between smoking and Alzheimer's disease. They concluded that smoking cigarettes was a high risk factor for Alzheimer's nearly doubling a person's chance of developing the disease. Nicotine decreases the capacity and accuracy of short-term memory and increases the chances of getting cancer.

Drinking a lot of alcohol increases your risk of memory problems and, if done on a regular basis, dementia. Most researchers recommend a limit of one drink per day for women and two drinks per day for men.

In addition, inadequate sleep, a poor diet and a lifestyle which exposes you to risk of brain injury are all habits that are bad for your brain.

10

Enjoy every day

For the next two weeks, several times a day make a note of what you're doing and how engaged, fulfilled and happy you're feeling. Once you're more aware of what allows you to be engaged, fulfilled and happy, increase those activities and reduce the activities that make you bored, lethargic or unhappy. Look to increase your opportunities to be in "flow" or "in the groove." Pay attention to the present moment and develop an attitude of gratitude and compassion. *"Yesterday is History, Tomorrow a Mystery, Today is a Gift, That's why it's called the Present."* (origin unknown)

Have a happy life and take good care of your precious brain.

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