Maintaining and Improving Your Mental Skills as You Age: Keeping Your Mind Sharp

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Why is keeping your mind sharp important?

• Being mentally active is a key dimension of **successful aging** (in addition to the spiritual, physical, social)

• Believing in declines with age predisposes you to further decline/decline becomes a **self-fulfilling prophesy** (Optimistic vs. pessimistic – vs. being realistic)

• Mental skills difficulties lead to **anxiety** about their loss, leading to **avoiding opportunities** for growth, further contributing to more anxiety, avoidance, and **possible further decline**
What Changes with Age?

- Declines in short term memory and ability to process information
- Long term memory change depends on how meaningful and datedness of material
- Declines in fluid ability (solving new problems), spatial ability, speed of response, attentional processes
- Increases or stability in crystallized ability (the use of experience to solve familiar problems)
- Wisdom, experience, judgement, creativity
- Postformal reasoning- “it depends” thinking
- Our skills are complex-one picture does not fit all!
- Influence of cohort/generation effects
Whether your skills decline is the question

- Dementia vs. normal aging—they are distinct
- Dementia is not inevitable if you live long enough
- Whether you believe they will decline is important—most older adults overestimate decline and underestimate potential for growth—resilience in the face of change is key, depression/anxiety result from stereotype threat
- Your personal qualities: openness to experience, self-confidence, depression, cardiovascular health, lifestyle
- Could you improve your skills if you wanted to?
- Learn new skills? Try AARP Staying Sharp program
- Change your everyday environment (lead an engaged lifestyle)? Avoid routines, boredom, stress variety
What you can do to keep your mind sharp

• Learn about what is and is not true about normal aging vs. dementia - Nun study
• Do not buy into stereotypes of aging that emphasize declines with aging - you CAN improve - track your progress
• Your brain is flexible/plasticity - you build new connections between brain cells every time you learn something new
• Set everyday goals to learn something new
• Focus on learning new things and changing your environment (what you read - magazines, newspapers, books, what you listen to - TV shows, radio, who you interact with)
• Seek out new experiences and new people (Dr. Gupta)
What you can do to keep your mind sharp

• Develop your curiosity quotient - your CQ – be proactive
• Do something creative-paint, garden, write a poem (divergent thinking-thinking outside the box)
• Do something with your opposite hand-write, brush your teeth, hold a knife/fork, comb/brush your hair
• Do something you are not good at/unfamiliar with (taxes, car repairs, household repairs, knit, crochet, cook)
• Eat a Mediterranean diet (fruits, vegetables, low fat, high protein)
• Antioxidants inhibit oxidation (free radicals-abberant proteins-damage neurons)- dark chocolate, berries, pecans, green beans, apples, spinach
What you can do to keep your mind sharp

• Plan a trip and take that trip by yourself
• Develop your memory skills-encoding is important
• Do crossword/jigsaw puzzles, Sudoku, anagrams, learn to play an instrument, listen to new music, watch Jeopardy/Wheel of Fortune/listen to talk radio (e.g. NPR)
• Tend to your feelings about life (depression, anxiety, isolation, loneliness, denial of sensory loss-especially hearing, boredom, routines)
• Continue to work, take up a new interest or profession, do volunteer work (Global Council on Brain Health)
• Do not over-rely on technology (e.g., GPS, cellphone) or drugs (e.g. Prevagen, Ginkgo-Biloba)
What Can You Do?

• Engage in collaborative cognition- solve problems (e.g. trivial pursuit) with others
• Go to a baseball game and actually do the scorekeeping
• Keep your own golf score
• Clean your own house, mow your own lawn, spread your own fertilizer, do your own cooking, work on your car, keep active with your crafts, read a new book
• Dance, play and/or listen to music
What Can You Do?

- **Listen** to NPR, talk radio, live music- attentional processing is key

- **Watch** the News, the History or Discovery channel- take notes, discuss what you’ve learned with a friend- be enthusiastic!

- Balance your checkbook, actually compute the tip at a restaurant, double check the bill, use the dictionary or thesaurus, write- no word processing/spellcheck/calculator!

- **Do not rely on others to explain things** (e.g. contracts, legal documents) to you/do things for you that you could do yourself

- Engage in abstract thought and thought that is effortful. **Think planfully and critically- why? Is a good question.**
What you can do to keep your mind sharp-other ideas

- **Monitor your health** - diabetes, blood pressure, medications, exercise, diet
- Engage in **mental aerobics** - exercise your brain - compare and contrast, draw conclusions, try different ways to solve an everyday problem, think both logically and outside the box - USE your skills –use it or lose it
- Maintain a **positive attitude** toward life and the future
- Be an **optimist** - have a sense of purpose in life
- Be open to **new experiences and people**
- **Never give up** on learning new things - You are NEVER too old to learn!
- Engagement and variety create a **cognitive reserve**
Strive to have a healthy vibrant mind

• Approach new problems and experiences with enthusiasm and an I CAN DO THIS mindset
• Be realistic about what you can and cannot do-use your wisdom and experience, but do not ignore novelty
• Your mind’s health is as important as your body’s
• Develop an engaged lifestyle-attitude and behavior
• Be an enthusiastic, self-confident, and spontaneous thinker- take intellectual risks
• Get regular exercise/monitor your blood pressure
• Be social-talk/interact, be around others whose opinions are different from yours
• Learn about you -we all age differently-age well for you!
Intellectual Health and Vitality

- Being able to maintain your intellect in the face of obstacles.
- Being open to new ideas and ways of thinking.
- Feeling that you can use your mind in an active way.
- Having self-confidence and enthusiasm about your skills.
- Being able to use your mind to cope with everyday life, solve problems, and foster productive relationships with others.
- Being creative and spontaneous in your thinking.
- Using your wisdom and life experience.
- Being optimistic about your mind’s future.
- Feeling intellectually alive and healthy.