

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

Bert Hayslip Jr., Ph.D.

Regents Professor of Psychology Emeritus
University of North Texas

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 prophecy** (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. Prevacid, 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, National Geographic- 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***- your mental “bank account”-the more you deposit, the less you lose when you lose/withdraw
- Jeon, Lee, & Charles (2022). J of Gerontology- greater overall variety of activity is associated with higher cognitive functioning over time (10 years)-especially so for physical and social activity-less variety is linked to lower levels of cognition and greater cognitive decline
- Perry et al. (2022)-J of Gerontology-among older persons at risk for AD, greater social network participation/those w/multiple social roles perform better cognitively and have better brain function in processing social-emotional relations-greater cognitive reserve helps lower one’s risk for AD-related decline

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-setting daily goals is important.