



“Train Your Brain!”
(Fitness for the Mind)

We’ve all heard it before: “Use it, or lose it!” This statement is normally associated with physical activity. We all know we need to exercise to keep our muscles in shape, right? But...do we think to associate this statement with our minds as well? Not as often, but it is true! Visualize your brain as if it were a muscle, getting stronger with activity and weaker without.

Research has proven brain function does NOT automatically deteriorate with age (National Institutes of Health, 2004). Longitudinal studies have shown that as we age our ability to learn new things can actually improve! When disease is not a factor, older brains do not deteriorate with regard to metabolism, blood flow or oxygen utilization. People who are experiencing decreased brain function are most likely also experiencing disease or disuse, or a combination of the two...not simply the process of aging. There is not a lot we can do if there is a disease present, such as Alzheimer’s, but we can work to reverse functional loss due to disuse. Stimulation of the brain leads to the release of noradrenalin, which has been shown to stimulate extension of the nerve branches/dendrites, which results in a higher level of functioning.

“How Can I Train my Brain?”

Step 1: Practice good health habits!

- Exercise is order to increase and maintain optimal blood flow. Exercise increases oxygen to the brain, which is essential for the brain’s function.
- Get plenty of rest!
- Eat a balance and nutrient-dense diet!
 - Brain tissue needs to be healthy in order to be able to “encode, store and retrieve” information! These are the three steps involved in memory and learning.

Step 2: Make it your mission to learn!

- Integrate your senses (sight, touch and sound). You will learn faster and retain the information better when you do so.
- “Repetition is the master of skill!” Repeat...repeat...repeat!
Retaining any skill takes practice. Learning, whether it is playing an instrument or riding a bike, takes practice...and practice makes perfect.
- Give it time. While your ability to learn does not decrease with age, it may take you longer to process and retrieve the information due to changes in your senses (vision and/or hearing). Don't try to rush the process, or be too hard on yourself.
- Concentrate and focus on the task at hand. Repeat the info out loud, and in many different ways. Read several books and/or articles on a given topic.
- Put information together with what you already know. Make up catchy phrases to help you remember (the same way we remembered songs in our childhood).

Step 3:

- Read often! Try to sit down and read something every day, no matter how short it is. Join a book club...read labels...whatever you come to see as a challenge.
- Set attainable goals for yourself, and have a reward system in place.
- Organize your thoughts vs. memorizing information. Make lists and have a place for everything, keeping things where they belong. Make being organized a priority.
- Challenge your thought processes. Play games such as bridge and scrabble, do puzzles, practice your math skills, and memorize lines.
- Explore new challenges. Take an adult college class, do volunteer work, take an adventure or teach someone else something you know.
- Use your non-dominant hand. If you normally write with your right hand, try your left occasionally. Brush your teeth, sew or do other tasks the same.
- Take the time to relax. We are often so busy we forget the importance of relaxation, which is very good for our mind. (Note: relaxing is not the same as sleeping!) Sit in a dark room and close your eyes. Focus on one pleasant thought for 10-20 minutes and challenge yourself not to let your mind wander. If you catch your mind wandering, simply bring it back to center. Breathe slowly and deeply, utilizing your full-lung capacity. Do not allow stress to enter the picture. Focus on your breath and melt stress away.
- Focus your attention on others. Taking the focus away from ourselves, and focusing on what we can do to help others, is a great way to relieve stress and to avoid depression. Depression, in and of itself, can lead to thought disturbances and forgetfulness.

It has been said many times...“wisdom comes with age.”