

How to keep your brain sharp

To keep your brain sharp requires motivation and focus.

Motivation

Understanding more about your brain helps you accept that you can influence how it performs.

The human brain evolved to last about 40 years. Many people now live over twice as long, so it's not surprising their brains are a bit stretched!

It's not just coping with living longer – our brain has to cope with greater amounts of information pushing for space. It has to maintain its performance in many cases over longer time as well as deal with the stress of modern living.

Happily, research suggests that up to one third of people retain much of their mental acuity while another half experience gentle decline but remain capable of independent living.

It's not that we can guarantee outcomes, but if we want to keep our brain as sharp as possible there are many things worth doing. A first step is a growth mindset – to believe we are always capable of learning. We have a section on mindset in the **Longevity Plan**.

Experience and Capabilities

Our 'personal capital' can be said to be the sum of our capabilities and our experience, which together make us valuable and productive.

Our brain supports us in this with memories, reflexes and capacity for understanding and resolving the regular challenges of life.

Identifying our main capabilities and the key elements of our experience can help us decide what aspects we want to maintain and continue to use. We may choose to maintain this in our normal work or activities, or choose new ones which may be paid or unpaid.

What should we focus on?

The wellbeing of our brain is closely linked to the wellbeing of our whole body. This short article can only prompt a few ideas – more detail is available in the Knowledge library of the **Longevity Plan**.

Sleep – poor sleep (especially deep sleep, which is said to be the 'restorative' part of our sleep pattern) is not necessarily related to getting older. Factors to address include regular sleep routines, managing bed temperature more closely, eating (the right things for the last meal of the day, and its timing), screen use (phones, TV).

Exercise influences almost every aspect of the rest of our life - our longevity. Physical exercise improves our ability to manage a huge variety of conditions, including brain related problems such as depression and anxiety, and in maintaining memory.

Cognitive training is increasingly attracting support for brain health. A key factor is how it provides challenges arising from less familiar situations. Two online providers are www.lumosity.com and www.brainhq.com. Not everyone likes computer based programs, so activities that challenge you like dancing and languages may be more attractive.

Diet – a healthy balance of protein, fat, dietary fibre, carbohydrates and salt with restrictions on trans-fats, refined sugars and alcohol is good for the whole body, not just the brain. The Mediterranean diet remains the benchmark for striking the balance.

Friends are an important part of keeping our focus – share your goals and experiences with them. New friends can stimulate you with their different outlook and approach to life.

So there's plenty to do to keep your brain sharp and ready to deal with the future.