

How to KEEP YOUR BRAIN SHARP

An unmissable series to reduce your dementia risk



by Dr Sanjay Gupta

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As I have been traveling the world researching my new book, I realized something extraordinary. Nearly everyone understands the vital importance of brain health, but few people have any idea how to make their brains healthier or that achieving such a goal is even possible.

Most people seem to believe this mysterious organ encased in bone is a black box of sorts, untouchable and incapable of being improved.

Not true!

The brain can be continuously and consistently enriched throughout your life no matter your age or access to resources.

Our everyday experiences, including what we eat, how much we exercise, with whom we socialize, what challenges we face, how well we sleep, and what we do to reduce stress and learn, factor much more into our brain health and overall wellness than we can imagine.

Prevention is the most powerful antidote to illness, and this is especially true of degenerative maladies like those in the brain and nervous system. We know risk of dementia rises exponentially after the age of 65 and by 85 a third of people will have the disease. But the studies show the rot starts to set in silently much earlier. If you are diagnosed at 65 there's every chance your brain started to degenerate in your 30s. Symptoms which appear in your 80s will have been brewing since your 50s.

Few of us think about dementia when we're entering our prime, but perhaps we should, because knowing that damage could be starting in your brain provides a remarkable opportunity to jump in and do something about it.

Because once your brain is running cleanly and smoothly, everything else follows. You will make better decisions, have improved resilience and a more optimistic attitude, and the physical part of your body will improve too.

There are studies to show your

pain tolerance will increase, your need for medications will decrease, and your ability to heal will be accelerated.

When you put your brain first, everything else health-wise will fall into place. Your heart might tick, but it's your brain that ultimately makes it tick and determines your quality of your life. Without a healthy brain, you cannot make healthy decisions. And

with a healthy brain comes not only a healthy body, weight and heart but also a stronger sense of confidence, a more solid financial future thanks to smart decisions, better relationships, more love and happiness in your life.

YOUR BRAIN NEEDS FRIENDS

SOME of the most influential

and modifiable factors related to cognitive decline are linked to lifestyle: physical inactivity, unhealthy diet, smoking, social isolation, poor sleep, lack of mentally stimulating activities, and misuse of alcohol.

In the days when I was able to travel the world, I was struck by the fact that the liveliest and most joyful people I met, the people who seemed to be having

a great time despite their advanced age, were always the ones who maintain high-quality friendships, have loving families, and an expansive, dynamic social network.

It is a well-known fact that social connections are really good for us, and that loneliness kills. People who are more socially connected to family, friends and community are happier, they're physically healthier, and they live longer than people who are less well connected.

There's plenty of science to back up the fact we need social connection to thrive, especially when it comes to brain health. Enjoying close ties to friends and family, as well as participating in meaningful social activities helps keep your mind sharp and your memories strong.

Caring for a cat, dog, or bird can be a catalyst to social interaction. Dogs are particularly

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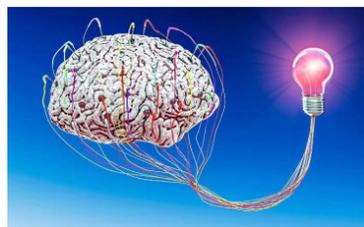
Brilliant four-page pullout

Why a dog (or cat) is your

BRAIN'S best friend



SHOPPING LIST CHALLENGE



MOST of us can hold only about seven items of information in short-term memory at any given time, such as a list of seven grocery items or a seven-digit phone number. You may be able to increase this capacity a little through various memory tricks or

strategies. For example, a ten-digit telephone number such as 6224751288 may be too long to remember all at once. But broken up into orderly blocks, as in a hyphenated telephone number, 622-475-1288, you'll find it easier to remember and recall.

KEEP YOUR BRAIN SHARP

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good social icebreakers by serving as a conversation trigger between strangers or casual acquaintances.

Taking care of pets also gives a sense of purpose and structure that have their own benefits for your brain health. Studies show contact with a pet can reduce depression, anxiety, and social isolation, lower blood pressure, reduced risk of heart attacks, and increased physical activity.

It is difficult to say precisely why maintaining social connections play such a powerful role in keeping the brain young. One reason could be that it provides a buffer against the harmful effects of stress on the body and the brain.

Certainly, people with fewer social connections are more likely to report problems such as disrupted sleep patterns, weakened immune systems, elevated inflammation, and higher levels of stress hormones.

Research by Rush University Memory and Aging Project has shown that people with larger social networks are better protected against the cognitive declines related to Alzheimer's disease than those with a smaller group of friends.

SILVER SURFERS UNITE

THE great news for all those stuck at home during lockdown is that social media really can present new opportunities for older adults to engage socially because email, instant messaging software, social networking sites, online communities, and blogs have been shown to be effective ways to maintain our relationships with family and friends and expand our social world.

Studies of 'silver surfer' online communities show that community members report numerous benefits, including intellectual stimulation, playful experiences, and emotional support. It might not be the same as a hug from your grandchildren, but it is good to know that virtual connections can compensate for lost relationships and offer relief and distraction from stressful circumstances.

The Internet affords us many opportunities to learn and connect with others. There's even evidence that digital engagement can match the positive effects on cognitive abilities in later life that face-to-face interaction engenders.

An Australian study of 5,000 older men found that those using computers have a lower risk of receiving a dementia diagnosis by up to eight and a half years, and an experimental study conducted in the United States revealed that older adults performed about 25 per cent better on memory tasks after learning to use Facebook.

In addition, thanks to the anonymity, invisibility, and opportunity for reading and responding to communication as schedules permit, digital engagement enables people to more easily communicate with others and get across their feelings, opinions, and skills.

Experts believe this has the effect of instilling more confidence and a sense of control — all of which are good for your health.

ALL this week I have been teaching you strategies that will keep your mind sharp. To help you put these into daily practice, I have come up with a plan for you to follow which will boost your brain power for good. It is important to remember that the brain is exceptionally plastic. It can rewire and reshape itself through your experiences and habits, and a lot of this remoulding can be achieved in 12 weeks. It's like building any other muscle in the body. Change is a challenge, and changing long-established habits takes effort. But you can do this. Take the plunge and experience the initial effects. Within a couple of weeks, I

predict you'll have fewer anxious thoughts, better sleep, and improved energy. You'll feel clearer-minded, less moody, and more resilient to your daily stressors. Over time, you are likely to experience weight loss and vast improvements in many areas of your biochemistry — from what's going on in your brain to how your metabolism and immune system are functioning. It may take you a little longer to fully establish and maintain these healthy behaviours for life, but following this for three months will get you started. It's your launch pad. You needn't do anything to prepare; you can start today.

BRAIN BOOSTER

Take a walk with a friend or neighbour (as long as lockdown restrictions in your area permit it) and have a conversation about something that is bothering you. The combination of the exercise, in-person interaction, and talking through your anxieties is a wonder drug for the

My 12-week plan to boost your brain power

WEEK ONE AND TWO

TIME to get moving! If you've been totally sedentary, start with a five to ten minute burst of exercise split into intervals of 30 seconds of maximum effort (walking fast for instance) and 90 seconds of recovery (slower walking) and work up to 20 minutes at least three times per week.

Mix up your exercise and try something different to surprise your body and use new muscles. If you're a jogger, try cycling or an online class. Aim to increase your workouts to a minimum of 30 minutes a day, at least five days a week.

If you have a day with no

time to devote to formal exercise, think about ways to move more. Conduct a Zoom while walking outside or do a set of yoga poses in front of the news. Aim to limit the minutes you spend sitting down. The more you move during the day, the more your body and brain benefit.

If you've got the green light from your doctor to try intermittent fasting once or twice a week, why not kick things off by stopping eating between 6pm and 8am the next morning? That's a 14-hour fast, much of which you'll spend sleeping.

WEEK THREE AND FOUR

ADD more to your routine by choosing at least TWO of the following options each day:

- GO for a 20-minute power walk after lunch most days of the week.
- MAKE contact with a neighbour and suggest a walk together.
- MAKE at least two of your meals each week include salmon or trout.
- DOWNLOAD a meditation app if you haven't done so already, and start to use it daily.
- TRY to eliminate soft drinks from your life and switch to water (still or carbonated). In the morning, coffee and tea are fine.



WEEK FIVE AND SIX

CHOOSE at least THREE of the following options to add to your routine:

- IF you haven't tried to keep a gratitude journal yet, start now. Each morning, spend five minutes making a list of at least five people or situations you are grateful for.

If weather permits, do this outside in the fresh air and morning sunlight. It is okay to repeat items from the previous day's list, but aim to think of anything that happened the day before that could be added.

Your jottings could be as small as being grateful that

you felt pretty good and reached your goals for the day.

- ADD 15 more minutes to your exercise routine.
- TRY a yoga or Pilates class or go on a walk with a friend.
- AVOID all processed foods FOR HOW LONG.

■ ADD a relaxing activity to your bedtime routine such as taking a warm bath or engaging in some mindfulness meditation during which you simply sit in a comfortable, quiet place and take notice of your thoughts and feelings. That's it! No judging, no problem solving, no list making — just a few quiet moments of stillness and focusing on your breath.



WEEK SEVEN AND EIGHT

OPTIONS for socialising and getting out and about are more limited at the moment so you need to be creative

last 12 months. Ask about your current medication and speak candidly about your risk factors for cognitive decline.

- LOOK for opportunities to volunteer in your community. Find the time. It will be worth it.
- BUY fresh foods whenever you can and eat a rainbow of colours.
- SCHEDULE a check-up with your GP if you haven't had one in the



- WRITE a handwritten letter to a younger loved one in the family, describing something you've learned in your life that you can pass down as an important lesson.
- READ a book in a genre or subject area that interests you but that you're not familiar with.

Week 11

DURING this week, think about how you'd want your family members to deal with a diagnosis of dementia, including Alzheimer's disease.

This is a sensitive subject and not something any of us wants to consider. But it's important to have these conversations in advance so we're prepared. A disease like Alzheimer's is an emotional, financial, and physical journey. Talk to your children. Write down your wishes and be as explicit as possible about the what-ifs.

If your sleep is still troubling you, ask your doctor about carrying out a sleep

study and be sure any medications you take are not interfering. If chronic stress or depression are an issue, seek a qualified psychiatrist or therapist, or both.

Take a good look at your home conditions. Your environment plays an influential role in your ability to form and sustain healthy habits. We can save our brain from disease by focusing on prevention and the elements we can control to foster superior brain health. Take a look around you and where you spend the most time. Is it conducive to living a healthy



WEEK NINE AND TEN

ASK yourself the following questions and adjust your lifestyle accordingly based on your answers:

- AM I getting at least 30 minutes of exercise at least five days a week and including strength or resistance training at least two days a week?
- AM I learning something

new that challenges my mind and demands developing different skills?

- AM I getting more restful sleep on a regular basis and managing stress better?
- AM I following the S.H.A.R.P. dietary protocol?
- AM I connecting with friends and family members regularly?



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LOOK AFTER YOUR TEETH

FLOSSING — and brushing — your teeth twice daily removes food debris and bacteria build-up that can lead to gum disease. If gum disease is allowed to flourish, the barrier between the tooth and gum will erode and bacteria can enter the bloodstream. This can trigger inflammation which is bad for brain health. The bacteria can also increase plaque build-up in the arteries.

BASELINE TESTING

IT'S A good idea to check with your doctor before starting this program, especially if you have any health issues such as diabetes or you are on medication. It might also be useful to get some baseline testing done with your doctor to see where you can reduce your risk from a metabolic standpoint because blood pressure, cholesterol levels, blood sugar, and inflammation all factor into risk for cognitive decline. This plan can help you can fight those numbers and bring them into a healthy range and I encourage you to re-check your numbers after you've gone through the program. My guess is you'll see improvements.

FEMALE MENTAL DECLINE

IT IS particularly important for you to take heed of my advice and to start setting brain-healthy changes in motion if you are female. Although scientists aren't clear exactly why, Alzheimer's strikes a disproportionate number of women compared to men.

One theory is that physiology plays a part, with women who don't have children being at greater risk than those who do. Research now indicates that pregnancy could be a protective factor. Pregnancy entails many biological events, from hormonal changes to immune function shifts, that could ultimately lead to protection against developing dementia later in life. We don't have the answers yet, although hormone therapy continues to be discussed as a potential treatment tool.

One possibly contributing factor to the gender anomaly is that women tend to have better verbal abilities than men, which means they could be more adept at hiding early symptoms of dementia. Studies show women score better on standard tests used to diagnose the early stages of dementia, even when brain scans suggest they are at the same stage of the disease as men. Problems could occur because these women are not diagnosed early enough.

Such a gender-based difference may be the reason that women seem to decline more rapidly after being diagnosed — they are further along the disease's trajectory than the earlier test indicated.

Adapted by LOUISE ATKINSON from *Keep Sharp* by Dr Sanjay Gupta.

■ KEEP Sharp: Build a Better Brain at Any Age, by Dr Sanjay Gupta, is published by Headline, £14.99.



WEEK 12

CONGRATULATIONS. You have made it to the final week. Make a list of all the things you've done differently and ask yourself: what worked? What didn't work? Where can I improve? Then use this week to plan ahead.

- TAKE a brisk walk with a friend and discuss anything that might be bothering you.
- CREATE non-negotiables that you will commit to regularly, such as engaging in physical exercise every day, being in bed at the same time every night, and eating according to the S.H.A.R.P. plan.
- CONSIDER apps that help you track how many steps you take a day and how well you sleep.
- FIND goals that can be huge motivators and write them down. Perhaps you want to walk or run your town's 10K, or you'd like to plan an eco-tour trip with your family. People who decide to focus on their health often do so for specific reasons, such as: 'I want to be more productive and have more energy', 'I want to live longer without illness', and 'I don't want to die in the way my mother did'. Always remember: progress is better than perfection.



KEEP YOUR BRAIN SHARP

relationships under strain in

Lockdown When people spend time in close proximity, feelings get mixed. The great thing is a man can't tell if you're angry or if you're working with someone on a creative project, because the emotions involved are positive.

During lockdown though, anxiety levels have become understandably high. And with our movement restricted, it's become difficult to get much space from partners, children, or any relatives who might have joined your bubble.

And so, it's those anxious feelings that become amplified.

I'll bet there have been more arguments over who did or didn't put this or that in the dishwasher the wrong way up over the last year than in living memory.

Petty grievances over whose turn it is to clean the bathroom; deep irritation at fractious children; feeling upset by some innocuous comment from your partner — the mild annoyances you'd normally brush off can all feel too much right now.

This is all to be expected. It's just our worries about this situation coming out sideways. And, thankfully, it is possible to turn things around.

Take, as an example, this scenario. A husband and wife fall out, quite spectacularly, after she suggests when the pandemic ends they go on holiday.

He replies: 'Well, I don't want to go abroad.' To which she says: 'Why do you always have to be so negative?' His next retort is: 'Why do you have to be so difficult?'

Various other insults then get thrown, past misdemeanours are brought up, and they end up not speaking for days.

So, what went wrong?

First the wife made a suggestion, which her husband immediately modified so she felt rejected. Then they went to and fro' with unhelpful 'why are you so' questions before dragging up the past.

See how they ended up trapped in a self-reinforcing loop; an argumentative merry-go-round that became ever harder to jump off. I expect you can think of your own



Paul McKenna's MIND TRICKS TO BEAT STRESS

examples where something similar has happened within one of your relationships during lockdown.

It's important now, more than ever, that we try to break those argumentative loops as early as possible.

A great way to do that is to ask a question which has, at its heart, the desire to know what fear or unmet need the other person is

expressing, albeit in a roundabout way, by their words or actions.

For example, I try hard to remember whenever I get into an argument with my wife, to ask as early as possible: 'What is it that I am doing or not doing that you want me to change?'

Or I'll wonder, in my head or aloud, is there some worry or fear our conversation might have

brought to the surface, for me or for her, when feelings of upset or frustration suddenly surface as if from nowhere.

Let's return to that warring couple. Let's say his mother is elderly and frail. Exploring the idea that fear could be playing a part in his initial response might reveal that the pandemic has brought home his mother's mortality.

Seeing people trapped abroad last year could make him worry that, should his mum be taken ill, he might not get back to her in time if he travels overseas before this health crisis is over.

Talking through such fears, exploring alternatives to a foreign trip, could mean that what started as an argument ended up

FRIENDSHIP AUDIT

THE PANDEMIC has meant that we no longer have to avoid those who drag us down, and has highlighted the friends who lift us up. You can put that insight to work with a friendship audit. For each of your friends, ask yourself these questions:

- Does this person increase or decrease my energy?
- After I have seen them, do I feel better or worse?
- Do both of us feel enriched by our friendship?

Afterwards, try these helpful techniques.

STAY AWAY

IF SOMEONE often brings you down, stay away from them. If at all possible, cut them out entirely.

I'LL GET BACK TO YOU

FRIENDSHIP difficulties often arise because one person drags the other into doing something they don't want to do. Practice saying: 'I can't decide right now, I'll get back to you.', 'Where does that leave you?' and 'What's the best solution here for everyone?'

SHIELD OF WHITE LIGHT

IMAGINE a protective shield of white light around you. This creates an emotional boundary, while telling others that you feel safe.

an opportunity to explore some difficult feelings, problem solve together, and become closer.

You can apply the same principles to situations with fractious children. Next time tensions rise, try asking a question that will allow the person you're with to express how they are feeling. And if the first one that springs to mind starts 'why are you so', try and think of another one instead.

- FOR information on
- Paul's books, including
- Control Stress, I Can
- Make You Happy, Instant
- Confidence and I Can
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STARTS ON SATURDAY

JOE WICKS XXXXA

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FREE pullouts with xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx xx

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