

Daily Union
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Brain Health = Brain Wealth

Keeping the mind sharp is a challenge for many of us. Whether from struggling with memory issues due to high levels of stress, poor health, recovering from a serious illness, or simply as part of the aging process, it's frustrating to admit mental shortcomings.

However, it's this frustration that may serve as your incentive for trying to make changes that will minimize memory loss. Your brain is what allows you to engage in conversations, analyze information, and respond to your situations and surroundings. Keeping the brain healthy is key to survival, growth, and daily successes. To keep it healthy, it needs proper care just like the rest of the body. What can you do to ensure your brain health? K-State Research and Extension Specialist, Dr. Erin Yelland, gives us some ideas in her publication titled "Keys to Embracing Aging: Brain Activity."

Socialization

Interacting with others gives you the opportunity to communicate, use critical thinking skills, display creativity, and self-expression. It enriches your quality of life by reducing the risk of depression and dementia.

There are many ways you can maintain or increase your social connection. One age-old tradition in my family was a "round robin" letter. I had a great Aunt that would send a letter to her next oldest sibling giving an update of what was happening in the family. That sibling would add to the original letter with news from their family and send it to the third sibling. By the time the letter went through all the siblings, the youngest would write the end of the letter and send it back to the oldest – my great Aunt. I still marvel at these letters from the WWII era in my family. I know letter-writing is "old school", but perhaps it's time for a revival in this nearly lost art! Other ways to socialize could include membership in civic or church groups that provide volunteer opportunities as one of their perks, or plug into the internet where you can reconnect with old classmates and friends.

Mental Stimulation

Just like the rest of our body, if we don't exercise our brain we lose our mental endurance. When you exercise your brain, you stimulate and enhance brain cell connections. Continuing brain stimulation throughout the lifespan can also delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease.

Playing games or doing puzzles are great ways to challenge your thinking and exercise your brain. This not only provides entertainment, but when practiced over time, the areas of your brain linked to memory, concentration, language skills, visual-spatial abilities, and logic and organization skills are strengthened.

Another way to stimulate your brain is through learning. There is a strong link between education and healthy behaviors. The more you know, the healthier you are likely to be. Being a life-long learner can also contribute to increase socialization.

Physical Activity

The importance of physical activity as it relates to mental health cannot be overstated. Physical activity is one of the biggest advantages you can give to the health of your brain. Exercise gets your heart beating which increases the blood flow to the brain – providing a richer level of oxygen and nutrients for the brain to use.

When you are physically active, you are able to think more clearly, improve decision-making, and reduce stress. When you become more physically active you are more likely to sleep well, reduce anxiety, and improve your heart health. The long list of benefits of physical activity to brain health is evidence of how important it is to our overall well-being.

Nutrition

Proper nutrition is just as important for adults as it is for children. Eating smart and healthy plays a significant role in brain development and functioning throughout the life cycle. There are 4 key steps you can take to help you attain proper nutrition:

- 1) Consume foods that are high in antioxidants such as blueberries, red delicious apples, cranberries, or red grapes.
- 2) Increase your consumption of foods that are high in Omega-3 such as salmon, tuna, walnuts, almonds, dark green leafy vegetables, and eggs.
- 3) Reduce your calorie intake to an appropriate doctor recommended level. Being overweight contributes to health issues such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol. Maintaining a healthy weight will support your brain health.
- 4) Resist foods with high sodium and cholesterol. Foods that are high in fat as well as food that are commonly salted should be consumed with moderation, at the very most.

Good Sleep

Good sleep is not limited to the amount of sleep you get each night. It is important to establish consistent bedtimes and waking times, as well. Disrupting your internal clock gets your body and mind out of balance. Even if you are on vacation, you should strive to maintain a similar sleep pattern to that which you have at home.

How you live your life each day has a significant impact on your brain health. Making sure your lifestyle includes a committed effort to making healthy choices will help your mind stay sharp along the way.

If you would like to read the entire “Keys to Aging: Brain Activity” publication, stop by the Geary County Extension office at 119 E. 9th Street to pick up a copy. Ask for publication MF3259. For more information about maintaining your health and wellbeing, contact me at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!