

Brain Calisthenics

by

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Getting older brings with it many changes to our bodies, and our brains are no exception. We forget things- names, appointments, and keys to name a few common examples. What's worse is that this type of forgetfulness is considered an early sign of more serious memory problems. How can you know the difference? Can the old adage "use it or lose it" be applied to cognitive ability?

Cognitive scientists are advocating for "perceptual learning"- the process of learning improved skills of perception (an example would be pattern recognition). In a 2010 study, UCLA and Penn researchers used perception training to teach fractions to sixth graders in a Philadelphia public school. After the training, the students were given problems they hadn't seen before and got 73 percent correct. A group of seventh graders, who'd been traditionally taught how to solve these problems, only got 25 percent correct.

ACTIVE (Advanced Cognitive Training for Independent and Vital Elderly) was a large study by the National Institute on Aging. The Journal of the American Medical Association reported that this study found that training can help adults over 65 make improvements in both memory and problem-solving ability. Even five years later those who got training continued to show benefits. Other studies at UCLA and Stanford University showed similar findings.

Although this type of training doesn't reduce the risk of Alzheimer's, it may delay the onset or progression of the disease. Exercising your brain can enrich your life, eliminate boredom, prevent depression, and provide a sense of accomplishment. The following is a list of "Brain Exercises" from www.ervrs.org that is fun:

- ◇ Shower with your eyes closed. This will "wake up" your brain!
- ◇ Brush your teeth with your "other" hand. Alternatively, use just one hand to shave, button your shirt, or apply makeup. You can even try this one with your TV remote!
- ◇ Follow a different driving route when you go to one of your routine locations. Roll the windows down to let the smells in for an even more brain-stimulating ride.
- ◇ On the telephone, practice recognizing callers before they identify themselves. Then memorize callers' phone numbers. At the end of the day, write down the people you have spoken with that day, as well as their phone numbers. At the end of the week, try writing down as many of these as you can.
- ◇ Read aloud to a partner. Reading Shakespeare is especially good for the brain, as he uses words in very different ways from the norm.

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- ◇ When dining in a restaurant or at a friend's home, try to identify the ingredients in the dishes you are served. Concentrate on the subtle flavorings of herbs and spices. Ask the waiter or your host to verify what you identified.
- ◇ Turn pictures of your family, your calendar, or your desk clock upside down. This will shake up your brain and force it to make new connections.
- ◇ Collect small objects like coins, paper clips, screws, or nails in a cup and try to identify them by feel alone.
- ◇ Change the way you scan the shelves at the supermarket. Stop in any aisle and look at everything from top to bottom. If there's something you've never seen before, pick it up and read the ingredients and think about it.
- ◇ Listen to a piece of music and try to identify the different instruments that are playing. Also, pair a particular song with a strong smell, like lemon or pine. Smell the odor when you listen to the song, to force your brain to form a brand-new association.
- ◇ Take a sentence from a magazine or newspaper. Try to make another sentence using the same words.
- ◇ Don't use a list when shopping. Instead, invent a system to take the place of the list. Use memory aids, such as forming a complete word, or one that can be completed by adding a certain vowel or consonant from the first letters of the words for the things you need to buy. Or, you can classify foods into raw and cooked. Or, use any other system that works for you.

There are also several websites that provide brain training programs. Give yourself a gift and commit to making self-education a lifelong project.