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Mind, Mood & Memory™

Maintaining Mental Fitness From Middle Age and Beyond

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The Everyday Things You Do That May Short-Circuit Your Memory

Tweaking your diet, exercise routine, and sleep schedule just a little may reap big benefits for your brain health.



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You know that getting older can bring on changes in memory and other thinking skills. So to build up your defenses, you may work on crossword puzzles every day. You may read the news or challenging biographies and novels. Maybe you've even started taking piano lessons again for the first time since your teens.

But for all the positive steps you may be taking to sharpen your thinking skills and promote better brain health, you may be undercutting those efforts with lifestyle choices that can contribute to memory loss and other cognitive problems.

"Lifestyle can have a significant impact on brain health and dementia prevention, even in the setting of risk factors that we can't control," explains Massachusetts General Hospital neuropsychiatrist Amy Newhouse, MD. "It's thought that up to 40 percent of dementias can be delayed or prevented with lifestyle modification and risk factor reduction."

She notes, for example, that blood pressure control and smoking cessation are two high-yield ways to improve brain function over time and reduce the risk of brain diseases like stroke

and dementia. But there are plenty of everyday choices and behaviors that can counteract those positive steps.

Sleeping Too Little?

Despite a steady stream of published studies and the consistent advice of health experts regarding the importance of sleep, a sizable portion of the public is woefully sleep deprived. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that more than one-third of U.S. adults get insufficient sleep—less than seven hours a night—on a regular basis.

But getting enough quality sleep is a cornerstone of better brain function, as well as other health benefits. "Sleep is therapeutic," Dr. Newhouse says. "Good sleep is important not just for energy and mood the next day, but it also has cognitive benefits long term. The amount and quality of sleep matters."

She adds that people tend to sleep less as they age, so it's important to maximize sleep with good sleep hygiene and treating any sleep disorders, such as obstructive sleep apnea

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MEDICATION MAY HELP LOWER RISK OF DEMENTIA IN PEOPLE WITH DIABETES

Having type 2 diabetes can double your risk of developing dementia, but a new study suggests that the diabetes medication pioglitazone may help lower that risk. In a study published recently in *Neurology*, the medical journal of the American Academy of Neurology, researchers found that people with type 2 diabetes who took pioglitazone were less likely to later develop dementia, compared with those who did not take the drug. The reduced risk also increased the longer the drug was taken. Individuals who took the drug for

four years were 37 percent less likely to develop dementia (compared with those not taking pioglitazone), while people who took the drug for two years were 22 percent less likely to have dementia. The researchers noted that the diabetes drug is accompanied by some potentially serious side effects, such as bone loss and congestive heart failure. They suggested that more research is needed on the long-term risks of the drug, as well as on whether there is an optimal dose that provides cognitive protection and reduces blood glucose levels. **MMM**

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Sleep Irregularity May Raise Cardiovascular Disease Risk

Chronically disrupted sleep and highly variable sleep durations—a condition collectively known as sleep irregularity—may increase the risk for atherosclerosis, the narrowing of arteries and the main cause of cardiovascular disease. In a study involving researchers from Harvard Medical School, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Vanderbilt University Medical Center, and other institutions, older adults who were able to sleep close to the same amount of time each night and had limited numbers of sleep interruptions each night were less likely to develop atherosclerosis, compared with their peers who live with sleep irregularity. According to the study, published in the *Journal of the American Heart Association*, greater sleep irregularity was particularly associated with atherosclerosis in the coronary arteries (in the heart) and the peripheral arteries (smaller arteries in the limbs). The researchers noted that, just as the body's circadian rhythms help regulate a person's sleep-wake cycle, they also affect blood pressure and endothelial function, which is the way the thin layer of cells along a blood vessel's inner wall help the blood vessel open or constrict as needed. Changes in the circadian rhythms caused by sleep irregularity can therefore cause inflammation within the arteries and other changes that lead to atherosclerosis. Maintaining a regular sleep schedule—going to bed and waking up at the same times each night and day—could have a profound impact on your cardiovascular health. And if you wake up frequently during the night, tell your doctor so the two of you can review possible causes and solutions, such as medication adjustments or lifestyle changes.



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Study: Your Well-Being May Benefit by Living Near Green Space or Water Bodies

A home near a park or water source may provide much more than a pleasant view. A study to be presented at the American Academy of Neurology's annual meeting this spring suggests that older adults living closer to green spaces (such as public parks and community gardens) or blue spaces (such as lakes, rivers, and coastlines) have lower risks of experiencing psychological distress. Researchers found that those living within half a mile of green or blue spaces had a 17 percent lower risk of experiencing serious psychological distress, compared with their peers who lived more than half a mile from green or blue spaces. Psychological distress was measured based on questionnaires filled out by nearly 43,000 adults ages 65 and older in Washington state. The study didn't show a direct cause-and-effect relationship between living closer to nature and greater psychological well-being, but the findings did echo those of several studies in recent years that demonstrated the psychological and cognitive benefits of spending more time in or near green or blue spaces.

Exercise May Be More Effective Than Medicines to Manage Mental Health

A review of studies involving more than 128,000 people found that physical activity is not only beneficial for improving symptoms of depression and anxiety, but that regular exercise may be 1.5 times more effective than counseling or medications for many people. The study, published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, suggests that exercise interventions of 12 weeks or less were especially effective in reducing mental health symptoms, highlighting the speed at which physical activity can start to bring about positive changes. The researchers noted that exercises including aerobic activities (such as brisk walking), resistance training, Pilates, and yoga were especially beneficial. The researchers said they hoped that structured exercise interventions would be considered as a first-line treatment for certain individuals who may be more likely to stick with a new exercise routine. They also noted that medications, psychotherapy, and other treatments are still appropriate for many people struggling with depression and anxiety, and in these cases, regular physical activity could serve as a healthy complement to their prescribed treatment. **MMM**



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Cope with and Overcome Family Estrangement

Being cut off from an adult child can mean years of pain, guilt, regret, anger, and so much more. But reconciliation may be possible if you're willing to be proactive and patient.

The arrival of summer heralds for many a season of family reunions and vacations, or even backyard barbecue get-togethers between parents, their grown children, and maybe a grandchild or two. And yet many families are denied these simple pleasures because of estrangement, a dynamic that affects about one out of four people in the United States, with some estimates suggesting that as much as 40 percent of the population has experienced at least temporary family estrangement at some time in their lives.

“Estrangement is heart-wrenching, one of the most painful human experiences,” says psychologist Anne K. Fishel, PhD, director of the Family and Couples Therapy Program at Massachusetts General Hospital. “And it is usually experienced in isolation, because parents often feel ashamed that their children have cut them out of their lives. Seeking out others who are experiencing something similar or talking to a therapist can really help with that extra burden of feeling alone with this experience, which is really quite common.”

Origins of Estrangement

The reasons for estrangement are always highly personal and unique to each family. And yet, Dr. Fishel notes that there are many common threads that wind through family estrangement. “Some occur after a high-conflict divorce, when a child sides with one parent and over time may cut the other one out,” she says. “Another path to estrangement can be through a mental illness or

addiction, or a child who experiences the parent as dysregulating, hostile, or interacting in a way that elicits so much conflict that distancing from the parent seems like the only route.”



Overcoming family estrangement often requires a series of good-faith efforts to reconcile and confront past hurts.

Sometimes, Dr. Fishel adds, estrangement may be seen as a difficult, but at least temporarily healthy decision to prevent further emotional pain and distress emanating from a dysfunctional relationship. “Some estrangements occur because of a fundamental clash around values, political beliefs, sexual orientation, gender identity, or choice of a romantic partner, where a child feels that a parent’s disapproval is devastating to their sense of identity,” she says. “I’ve also seen a daughter- or son-in-law precipitate an estrangement, sometimes in an attempt to create a boundary around the new family when the family of origin has been particularly close knit.”

Hoping to Heal

For a parent wanting to reconnect with a child who has become estranged, the process should start with a willingness to understand the child’s motivations without defending,

blaming, or minimizing the factors that led to the estrangement.

Dr. Fishel suggests language such as, “There must be very good reasons why you’re doing this. I want to know why you have cut yourself off so that I can authentically and wholeheartedly apologize to you and learn what I would need to do for us to have some kind of relationship in the future.”

She adds that reconciliation can be a long process that requires patience and understanding. “If a child is unwilling to meet, I suggest reaching out in ways that don’t require any response, such as sending a weekly postcard,” Dr. Fishel says. “This reaching out is in the spirit of saying, ‘I am here and ready to take responsibility whenever you are ready to talk with me, but I’m still thinking about you.’ The waiting parent should restrain from conveying how hurt and upset they are to be cut off.”

Reframing Your Thoughts

Dealing with family estrangement often requires more than just managing your emotions. Adjusting the ways in which you think about the situation are often essential to maintaining your peace of mind.

“Try to understand why your child may feel angry or hurt without feeling that you deserve their estrangement,” Dr. Fishel says. “Time apart may not be forever, so you can think of the estrangement as something that your child needs right now, but perhaps you will check in again after six months or a year and they will be ready for some kind of contact. Even really good, loving parents have children who will choose to cut them off, and this doesn’t mean you can’t have other loving, meaningful relationships. When your child is choosing not to spend time with you, you can still decide how you want to spend your time. Look for relationships where you feel valued and loved.” **MMM**

Your Attention Please: Some Simple Fixes May Help You Improve Your Focus

Getting more sleep, adjusting your hearing aids, and conversing in a quiet environment are all strategies to help adjust to age-related changes in attention and focus.

You used to be able to hold hours-long conversations with friends and family, become engrossed in a good book, and get through work, chores, or other activities without distraction...or perhaps with a little distraction here and there. But in recent years, you may have noticed that your ability to focus on the task at hand and pay attention is getting a lot tougher, and that your distractibility is growing.

You're not alone. While memory loss is usually the brain function we worry about most as we get older, our ability to pay attention is just as vulnerable to the march of time. By the time most people are in their 50s or 60s, they can start to notice a change in their focus. But it's not just a matter of changes in the brain. Attention is a complex cognitive process, and not all aspects of attention—the ability to attend to a chosen subject or activity—are affected by age, explains neuropsychologist Janet Sherman, PhD, clinical director of the Psychology Assessment Center at Massachusetts General Hospital.

“Older adults are as good as younger adults at sustained attention,” Dr. Sherman says, referring to the ability to attend to one thing for a long period of time. It's one of several types of attention, such as “selective attention,” which is the ability to choose what to focus on and block out distractions. Another aspect of attention is known as “divided attention” (also referred to as “attention switching”), which is the ability to focus on more than one source of information or stimulus at the same time.



Sometimes simply having a conversation in a quiet setting, free of distractions, is enough to overcome any attention or focus challenges.

“While slower than younger adults, older adults are able to selectively attend to information and are not differentially impacted by distractions,” Dr. Sherman adds. “The aspect of attention that is most impacted by age is the ability to divide and switch attention. In these situations, where cognitive flexibility is required, there is a greater cost for older than younger adults in allocating attentional resources to the two tasks or stimuli. This greater cost has been attributed to a decline in processing resources associated with normal aging.”

As a person ages, there is a decrease in the connectedness between neurons (brain or nerve cells) and a reduced ability of the brain to adapt or reorganize as circumstances demand. Couple these changes with other age-related concerns and attention can suffer.

What Affects Attention

Two key sensory changes that can contribute to reduced attention include hearing loss and vision loss. When we can't see as well, it becomes harder to focus—literally and cognitively—on what's in front of us. Hearing loss is similarly problematic.

“With age, there are changes in our perceptual abilities, including hearing,” Dr. Sherman says. “A decline in auditory acuity starts at age 30, and by age 80, 70 percent of individuals have a measurable hearing loss. The ability to discriminate speech sounds and to localize sounds also decreases with increasing age. As successful attending requires the individual to register and process the information presented, hearing can impact attention.”

She explains that older adults often report that attending to information is most challenging in environments in which there are multiple auditory stimuli at the same time, such as being in a busy, talkative group setting or a noisy restaurant.

Getting older also often means poorer sleep duration and quality—both of which can affect the ability to concentrate and stay focused during the day. “Studies indicate that obstructive sleep apnea, particularly when severe and untreated, results not only in daytime sleepiness, but also in greater cognitive difficulties, including impaired attention,” Dr. Sherman says. With treatment, there is evidence not only for improvements in daytime sleepiness but also in attention, executive functioning, and other important brain functions.

Pain, a Troubling Distraction

Other health factors, such as chronic pain, can also interfere with attention. “When individuals are in chronic pain, there is, in a sense, a competing demand on attentional resources, creating the need for the individual to divide their attention between internal pain and external stimuli,” Dr. Sherman says. “Studies of community-dwelling older adults have found that chronic pain is associated with poorer selective and sustained attention as well as impaired memory.”

Researchers suggest that individuals in pain may ruminate on their discomfort, leading them to divert their attention from other sources. Unfortunately, certain pain medications also may act as attention robbers.

Dr. Sherman notes that doctors and their patients should thoroughly and honestly discuss the impacts of certain pain medications on attention and other aspects of cognition.

Concerns about medication side effects should also prompt investigations into other pain treatments that may be less problematic when it comes to attention and other thinking skills. “While medications can play an important role in treating pain, other therapies, including physical and occupational therapy, or mindfulness techniques, can also be helpful,” Dr. Sherman says.

Regaining Control

Understanding the reasons for the changes in your attention span is only part of the solution. It’s important to understand that you can counteract these changes by adjusting your circumstances.

“Given that the aging brain faces the greatest attentional challenges when there is a need to divide and/or switch attention, employing strategies such as reducing distractions in your environment when completing tasks, doing just one task at a time and seeing the task through to completion before starting another task, and taking steps to be mindful, such as slowing down and being ‘present’ when information is being presented, can all be helpful,” Dr. Sherman explains. “Given that older adults have particular difficulty when they need to divide their attention, and the fact that hearing is decreased in many older adults, it is helpful to have important conversations in quiet settings without background noises or other competing conversations. It’s okay to ask others to repeat what they said if you weren’t sure that you fully attended the first time, or you can repeat what was said to make sure that you properly attended to the information.”

You may find that your friends and family members are also struggling a bit with their ability to focus and will appreciate a quieter, less-distracting environment, too.

“Finally, making yourself as ‘sharp’ as possible in terms of being able to perceive stimuli is critical,” Dr. Sherman says. “If you are having trouble hearing, ask your physician about arranging an audiology exam, and if you have hearing aids, be sure to wear them regularly. Just as you wear your glasses to ensure that the world is as

clear as possible visually, it is important to wear your hearing aids to make sure that auditory stimuli are also clear.”

There are many more things today competing for your attention. Be willing to make some lifestyle adjustments to help make sure you don’t miss a thing. **MMM**

MEMORY MAXIMIZERS

HERE’S THE LATEST RESEARCH TO HELP YOU KEEP YOUR BRAIN SHARP.

Seven Simple Steps to Better Memory

Several years ago the American Heart Association (AHA) put forth a list of basic steps people could take to improve and maintain their cardiovascular health. The so-called Life’s Simple



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Your memory may get a boost from following Life’s Simple 7.

7 included: stop smoking; eat better; get active; lose weight (if needed); manage blood pressure; control cholesterol; and reduce blood sugar. To see whether those factors could also help maintain memory, researchers from Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston conducted a 20-year study involving more than 13,000 women (average age of 54 at the start of the study). The findings, released earlier this year prior to the American Academy of Neurology’s annual meeting, suggest that following Life’s Simple 7 habits may help significantly lower the risk of dementia later in life. The AHA actually

updated the list in 2022 and added “get healthy sleep,” making the list Life’s Essential 8. That sleep advice means aiming for seven to nine hours of sleep per night for most adults. And given the plethora of research supporting the importance of sleep for better memory and thinking skills, there’s no reason to think that protection against dementia wouldn’t be fortified by now following eight basic steps for better overall health.

Mental Snapshots Help Create a Memory Scrapbook

It’s one thing to tell yourself that you set your glasses down on the nightstand so you won’t spend a lot of time searching for them later. But memory experts suggest that a more effective reminder would be to take a mental snapshot of your glasses on the nightstand. Remembering starts with learning, and one of the most effective ways to learn something—in this case learning where you set your glasses down—is to create associations with the information. By creating a picture in your mind, you’re creating a stronger memory than simply saying, “My glasses are on the nightstand.” It’s the same concept as learning a person’s name. Visualize the name next to the person’s face. One way to further enhance this mental imagery approach is to create exaggerated mental snapshots. Picture a giant pair of glasses on the nightstand, for example. We tend to have greater recall of things that seem out of the ordinary, so as you assemble your memory scrapbook, go ahead and have some fun with those pictures. You may find yourself struggling a lot less to find your spectacles or remember your new neighbor’s name. **MMM**



© James Cottingham | Adobe Stock
Want to recall where you left your glasses? Take a mental snapshot of them first.

MGH Research Identifies 8 Social Factors That Affect Longevity

The study, along with others in recent years, highlights isolation as a critical factor in poor physical and cognitive health.

When you consider factors that affect longevity, you may first consider physical health issues, such as cardiovascular fitness, history of smoking, or even family medical history. And while those are all important considerations, certain social factors can also help forecast longevity. According to a study led by Massachusetts General Hospital researchers, there are eight social factors in particular that can help predict early mortality.

In the study, published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, researchers started with a list of 183 possible social predictors of longevity to ultimately arrive at eight that predicted death within four years.

“We often overemphasize the importance of medical conditions when thinking about longevity. This research demonstrates that our social lives are as important as medical conditions,” says lead author Sachin J. Shah, MD, MPH, a physician-scientist at MGH and Harvard Medical School.

The social factors identified by the researchers include:

- Poor neighborhood cleanliness
- Low perceived control over financial situation
- Meeting with children less frequently than yearly
- Not working for pay
- Not active with children
- Not volunteering
- Feeling isolated
- Being treated with less courtesy or respect

The researchers used a 10-question survey that included age, gender, and social characteristics to predict longevity. The survey was administered to 82,050 adults ages 65 and older. The survey also revealed



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Staying connected with family members is one of the most important social factors that positively influence longevity.

characteristics the respondents valued highly and were also associated with longer life, such as living independently.

Raising Awareness

The researchers said they were hopeful that their findings and those from similar studies will make policy makers, as well as health-care professionals and members of the general public, aware of the social needs of older adults.

By evaluating an older individual’s social vulnerabilities, family members and the person’s health-care providers may be able to better or more quickly determine whether interventions are necessary. For example, an older adult who has little contact with family members and is otherwise isolated is at risk for a number of health problems, including cognitive decline, mood disorders, and physical decline, due to less-frequent doctor visits and health screenings.

People who don’t have “another set of eyes” on them regularly can succumb to health problems that might otherwise be avoided.

A separate study, published earlier this year in the journal *PLOS One*,

WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you know someone who may be isolated or lonely:

- Visit that person or at least try to communicate via video chat so that you can see how they’re doing and assess their environment.
- Don’t hesitate to reach out to social service agencies, such as Meals on Wheels or other organizations that focus on seniors, to arrange for home visits if an isolated individual is amenable to that contact.
- If possible, try to get an isolated individual out of their home at least once a week for a change of scenery and the opportunity to interact with others in the community.
- Encourage that person to catch up with medical appointments and schedule health and/or cognitive screenings if appropriate.

determined a link between dementia risk and social isolation and other social factors. The researchers used the health records of more than 500,000 adults to explore how factors such as isolation, perceived loneliness, and social support might affect health and longevity.

The researchers noted that because social isolation can be modified more easily than a person’s genetic makeup or underlying health risk factors, boosting an individual’s interaction with others could be a promising target for preventive care and health policy interventions.

An American Heart Association (AHA) study published last year also looked at isolation’s role in health and longevity, and found that social isolation and loneliness are associated with an increased risk of death from heart attack or stroke. The AHA study also noted that a lack of social interaction was associated with a risk of premature death, especially among men.

The research highlighted another important mental health consideration, which is that while isolation can be a contributing factor to developing disorders such as depression, it’s also true that people with depression may become more isolated as they withdraw from friends, family, and activities they once enjoyed. **MMM**

EVERYDAY THINGS (cont. from page 1)

(OSA). “While more sleep is generally better, it’s a balance because it shouldn’t be forced with medications that are overly sedating, as these can have potential side effects,” Dr. Newhouse says.

If you’re not getting seven to nine hours of sleep each night, consider the following strategies:

- Avoid caffeine in the afternoon and evening.
- Don’t have alcohol late in the evening, because even though it can make you drowsy, it can interfere with your sleep later on.
- Avoid exposure to computer or cell phone screens before bedtime.

Talk with your doctor about adjusting the timing of your medications if they are causing insomnia or if they make you get up to use the bathroom during the night.

Eating the Right Foods?

You probably know that a balanced diet supports better overall health, including better brain function. But are you still allowing too much of the “bad” stuff into your eating plan? Diets rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean, healthy proteins (fish and poultry) support brain health, Dr. Newhouse says, while noting that processed foods high in sugar, salt, and saturated fat are not good for the brain.

But you can start to feed your brain a better diet with easy food swaps starting today. “Making small switches, such as replacing fruit granola bars with real fruit or replacing soda with seltzer are simple and easy ways to improve your diet,” Dr. Newhouse says. “Check out the MIND diet if you want to learn more about nutrition that is brain healthy.”

The MIND diet refers to the Mediterranean-DASH Diet Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay. It’s a common-sense approach to healthier eating. For more of Massachusetts General Hospital’s take on the MIND diet, visit <https://tinyurl.com/bdeaypy7>.

What About Alcohol?

There is mixed evidence about the impact, both positive and negative, of small amounts of alcohol intake over time. “Excessive alcohol consumption does increase the risk of cognitive impairment and dementia, however,” Dr. Newhouse says. “Generally speaking, we recommend little to no alcohol when thinking about cognitive performance and brain health.”

Are You Moving Enough?

An occasional walk or bike ride can be relaxing and also support good cardiovascular and muscular health, balance, and, yes, cognition. The same is true for an afternoon of tennis or pickleball, or a night out dancing.



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But the workouts necessary for a stronger brain need to be frequent and consistent. The general exercise guideline for adults is at least 150 minutes a week of moderate-intensity exercise (such as a brisk walk) or at least 75 minutes a week of vigorous-intensity exercise (such as a jog, run, or lap swimming). Ideally, you want to exercise or be physically active all or most days of the week, as opposed to getting your minutes of exercise in just on the weekends, for example.

And for even better brain-boosting activity, try to move throughout the day. Research suggests that long stretches of sedentary time are associated with cognitive decline, while getting up and moving all day long provides some protective benefits. The bottom line is: A little physical activity is better than none, but more is usually better.

“Any amount and any kind of exercise is beneficial,” Dr. Newhouse says. “It can be yoga or weight lifting or running. It can be for five minutes or 150 minutes. Exercise promotes neuroplasticity, meaning that it strengthens the neural circuits relevant for memory and mood. I’d say to start small with

something that is easy and fun. Then, you can build up from there.”

Are You Managing Your Stress Well?

Your emotional health is tied directly to your cognitive health. The more consistently you can keep from getting stressed, angry, impatient, or worried, the better for your thinking skills. Setting aside the problems related to stress-induced inflammation of the brain itself, allowing yourself to be distracted by worries or concerns beyond your control simply makes it harder to focus on other more important and hopefully more enjoyable things.

“Stress levels and stress management are very important in brain health,” Dr. Newhouse says. “Both depression and anxiety can increase one’s risk of cognitive impairment over time. Management of these symptoms can improve cognition. So, taking the time to practice mindfulness or meditation, or to just take a break, are truly important aspects of self-care both in the short and long term.”

Are You Connected?

It can be easy to dismiss socializing as a fun activity or, at times, a grudging obligation. But when it comes to your mood and cognition, interacting with friends and family on a regular basis is its own prescription for better health. Socialization stimulates all kinds of brain functions, such as memory, communication, processing, decision-making, and responding to social cues.

It also helps to be reminded that you are an important presence in the lives of your family and friends. Being there for them may give you a sense of purpose, just like working or volunteering. And having purpose is a critical aspect of healthy cognition and a brighter outlook.

“Positive social relationships and finding meaning in life make such a difference,” Dr. Newhouse says. “Both loneliness and feeling without a sense of purpose have been linked with dementia risk. So, make that phone call to a friend and cultivate what matters most to you.” **MMM**

ASK THE DOCTOR



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Maurizio Fava, MD, Psychiatrist-in-Chief, Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH), Associate Dean for Clinical and Translational Research and Slater Family Professor of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School

STICKING TO A ROUTINE...PANIC ATTACKS...OSTEOPOROSIS AND DEMENTIA

Q As I get older, I find that having a routine helps me remember things, concentrate better, and keep calm. But I also often feel like I'm in a rut and would like to mix things up a little. Is one approach better than another?

A Sticking to a routine can be especially beneficial for certain types of people. Someone with an anxiety disorder, for example, may have an easier time following a routine rather than living every day with a lot of uncertainty or with having to make a lot of decisions. Similarly, individuals with dementia tend to do better when there is a routine to follow. Surprises or plan changes can sometimes be quite upsetting. This can even be true among people with mild cognitive impairment, as knowing every day's schedule makes it easier to get things done without worry or stress.

However, as we learned in the first year or so of the COVID-19 pandemic, following the same routine day after day can present its own set of emotional or psychological stress. And many people in retirement quickly grow tired of days that seem to pass by without much change or variety. Indeed, a common recommendation for greater self-care is to, as you say, "mix things up a little." Simply taking a new way home from the store or doctor's office, or reaching out to someone you haven't spoken to in a long time can provide a helpful change. To climb further out of the rut, make it a point to do something new every week.

Q I thought I was having a heart attack not long ago, but after a trip to the emergency room and some tests, a doctor said it was likely a panic attack. There were a lot of family problems going on at the time. Does this mean I have panic disorder?

A A panic attack is a sudden episode of fear and the sense that you're losing control. It can be accompanied by heart attack-like symptoms, such as chest pain, a racing heart, sweating, and a feeling of impending doom. A

person can have a panic attack, or more than one, and not necessarily have a panic disorder.

Having panic disorder means that a person has occasional or frequent panic attacks, but they may have no obvious trigger. In your case, intense family issues may have triggered your response. Having panic disorder also means that you're likely to worry about when the next panic attack will occur, to the point where you might go out of your way to avoid situations or places that could be triggers. If you have further questions about what happened or whether you may have any kind of anxiety disorder, talk with your doctor or a therapist.

Q Is there a connection between osteoporosis and dementia?

A Several studies in recent years have demonstrated an association between the bone-thinning disease osteoporosis and a greater risk of dementia, but the reasons for the connection aren't entirely clear. For postmenopausal women, who represent the vast majority of osteoporosis cases in the United States, diminished levels of estrogen are associated with greater risks of osteoporosis and dementia. But there are other potential links. The APOE4 gene, the strongest risk factor gene for Alzheimer's disease, is also associated with osteoporosis. Lower levels of vitamin K and vitamin D also raise the risk of both conditions.

A further potential connection is a more indirect matter. Having osteoporosis raises the risks of falls and fractures, both of which can increase the likelihood of cognitive problems later in life. Though there is no guarantee that developing osteoporosis also means that dementia is in your future, it's still a good idea to work with your doctor to bolster your bone health with dietary changes, supplements (if appropriate), and weight-bearing exercises. Proper nutrition and getting more exercise are also known to help protect against cognitive decline. **MMM**

IN COMING ISSUES ...

Avoid Negative Thoughts When You Have Depression

Relax to Remember

Should You Take a Memory Test?

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