

The Mental Workout

Check out these ways to boost your brain power

BY KENYA MCCULLUM

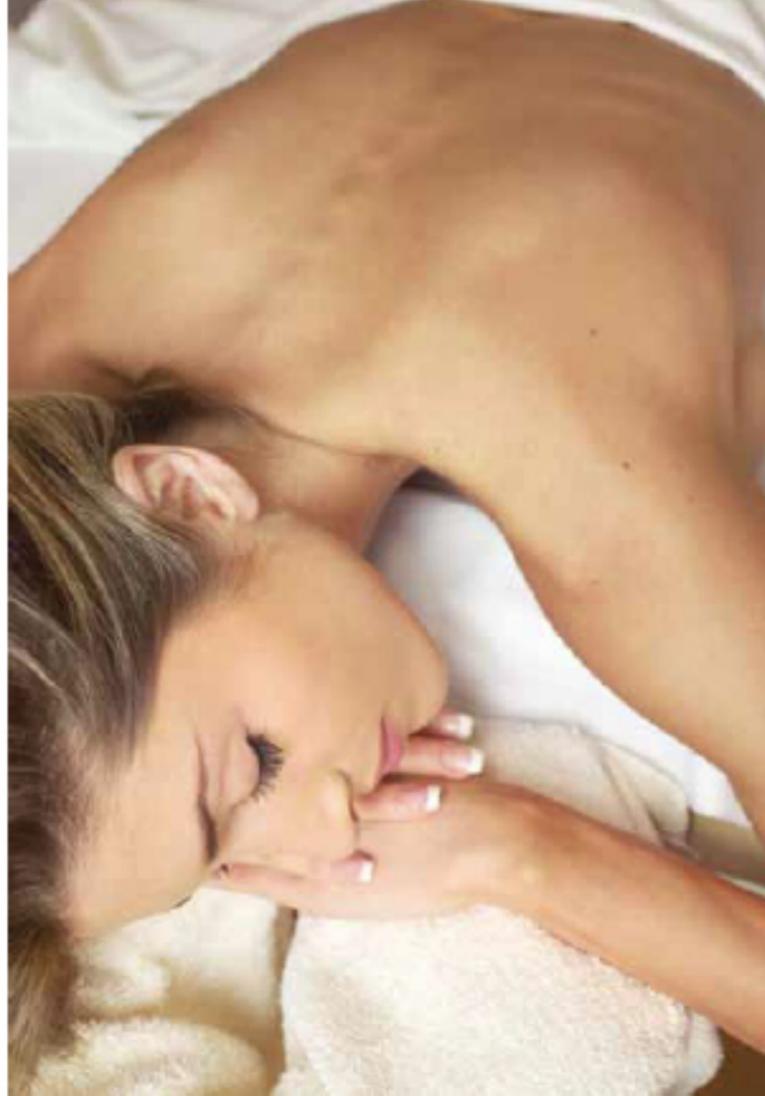
You know what you need to do to keep your body in tip top shape— exercise, eat right, take your vitamins every day. But what are you doing to tone up your brain?

Chances are, says Dr. Sandra Bond Chapman, founder and chief director at the Center for BrainHealth, you stopped worrying about your brain a long time ago.

“People don’t really focus that much on the brain after they graduate from college,” she said. “A lot of people only think of brain health when there has been an injury or disease that affects the brain. They think that they don’t need brain health yet because they think their brain is still in pretty good condition. But you wouldn’t say that about your heart — ‘I don’t need heart health yet.’”

But what the heck is brain power anyway?

Chapman says that, although we tend to equate brain power solely with memory, the ability to recall information is just the tip of the cognitive iceberg. Brain power is also linked to our ability to reason and make decisions — all of which keeps us mentally independent. In addition, brain power is associated with our ability to react to stimuli — a trait that we often need to keep us from getting hurt. The importance of this can be seen when we drive a car on a busy street or when we accidentally touch a hot stove when we’re cooking dinner.



One of the better ways to help your brain? Just relax.

HOW TO BOOST BRAIN POWER

Although the nature of the brain is complicated, keeping the brain healthy doesn’t have to be.

Make a “stop doing” list. For most of us, our days can feel like one huge, 24-hour “to do” list. But in order to keep our brains healthy, Chapman says that we need a “stop doing” list—meaning that we should choose the most important items that we need to accomplish on any given day and let the rest wait. For example, if you have a to-do list with 25 items on it, there may only be a handful of things that absolutely need to get done that day. By whittling that list down, we can save ourselves from mental exhaustion.

Relaxercise. Just as exercise can have numerous benefits for the body, the brain can be recharged through what Joanne Verkuilen, the founder of Circle + Bloom LLC, calls “relaxercise.”

“Relaxation should be part of our daily regimen,” said Verkuilen, whose company creates audio relaxation programs designed to help boost energy and brain power. “By relaxing the heart and all of the muscles, your circulation can improve. It’s also part of improving our internal balance, so that the brain works at a higher capacity.”

Tell a funny story. If you need help remembering the most important items left on your to-do list, you can think of them in terms of a funny story.

“If you want to buy batteries, get some milk, go to the hairdresser and the post office, and then pay a bill, then you can make up a story where you’re at your hairdresser’s, they’re pouring milk on your hair, the milk is plugged into a battery, and you’re writing out a bill while thinking about going to the post office,” said Dr. Carolyn Dean, the Medical Director of the Nutritional

Magnesium Association and author of *365 Ways to Boost Your Brain Power: Tips, Exercise, Advice*. “That’s such a crazy image that you’ll never forget what you have to do that day.”

Drink water. Dehydration can affect your memory and shrink your brain. Drinking plenty of water — about half of your body weight in ounces every day — is particularly important if you are taking medications, which can leave residue in your body and dehydrate you.

Follow your bliss. Doing something that you love, whether it is a professional pursuit or a hobby, can go a long way toward keeping your brain active and challenged.

“Our mind gets stronger by curiosity, so when you have a passion, it puts the most powerful gas in your mind,” Chapman said. “Even if you’re not doing the activity in your career, it keeps your brain active.” ♦

Brain Myths

Off-the-wall brain boosters. You may have heard of some of the more off-the-wall ideas for building brain power — such as brushing your teeth with your nondominant hand or eating dinner in the dark. These ideas may sound like fun, but they don’t necessarily help your brain and, according to Chapman, there is no brain science to support that they do.

“People believe these ideas because they are looking for some quick fix,” she said. “But if you’re going to do a simple thing, you’re going to build a simple mind. Your brain is built on how you use it.”

Degree of difficulty. Some people believe that doing something difficult will help build brain power. It’s fine to learn an obscure language, do sudoku every day, or tackle the New York Times Sunday crossword puzzle if you enjoy it — but don’t do these things just because they’re difficult.

“If that’s the case, why don’t we all just do calculus — that’s certainly hard,” said Chapman. “It doesn’t help to force yourself to do something hard. It’s the passion that you have for something that ramps your brain up.”

The percentage problem. We’ve all heard that we only use 10 percent of our brain. The fact is, we don’t use all of our brain all of the time — and that’s a good thing. We use different parts of our brain at different times, which saves it from burning out.



