

Daniel G. Miller, DC, DACNB
Chiropractic Neurologist
The Action Potential @ CMHA
27 Jenison Avenue
Johnson City, NY 13790

www.naturallywell.us

Tel: 607-729-0591

Exercising the Adult Brain

Have you ever forgotten the name of your favorite movie? Perhaps you got confused while driving. Many people laugh off these experiences as a normal part of the aging process. Some will even begin to fear the early onset of Alzheimer's disease. However, for the majority of us, these are not the beginning signs of dementia. Rather, they indicate a loss of mental sharpness. The good news is, just as you can exercise your body to increase muscle mass and tone, you can also exercise your brain. If you are consistent, it won't be long before you see results.

We as human beings are typically creatures of habit. "We like what we like and dislike what we dislike". Many of us will actually state, "As I get older, I get more set in my ways." These habitual activities associated with thought, physical activity or food intake form very strong neural pathways. These reinforced pathways result in our having very strong behavior patterns when it comes to the things we do everyday.

Unfortunately, the more often we do something the same way we have always done it, the stronger these pathways become and the more likely it is that our brains will become bored. Our brain is no longer taking in new information and processing it and making new connections. In other words, instead of our world expanding due to new experiences as it should, it becomes more fixed and is less likely to be able to process new information and will eventually start to break down due to lack of proper stimulation.

Even though we may constantly be seeing new movies, listening to new music, going to new places, etc. we are still creatures of habit. We go to the grocery store the same day each week, often at the same time of day. We turn on the television to watch our favorite shows each day at the same time. We use minimal sensory input to perform our everyday tasks. Good habits make our life easier but remember, the brain likes novelty. Novelty is the key to properly stimulating our brains and thereby helping us to function at our best.

Many adults do classic brain stimulation exercises such as crossword puzzles, Sadoku and word searches. While these are good activities they quickly go from novel activity to habit. This does not mean you shouldn't do these. You should definitely do all of these classic activities. However, you may want to try to perform these wonderful brain exercises slightly differently now that you know what a difference it can make.

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We need to exercise our brains differently. We need to perform our daily activities in unique and different ways on a regular basis in order to properly stimulate our brains and improve our mental acuity.

HOW?

The 7 senses: Vision, Hearing, Taste, Touch, Smell, Vestibular, Proprioception

Here are examples of several brain exercises to help Exercise the Brain!!!!

The first and most helpful step is that these activities should take place in a social setting whenever possible. Long-term memory is far more likely to happen when an emotion is associated with the activity. For example, many people remember their first kiss or being humiliated at school. These are strong emotional situations which readily bring back a memory that is not only vivid but also re-stimulates the same emotion you experienced years ago.

The rules:

- 1) Use as many of your senses as you can while going through your day.
- 2) Substantially change the way you use your senses (don't just change from writing with a pen to writing with a crayon.)
 - a. Involve one or more of your senses in a novel or unexpected way
 - b. Pay attention and engage your intention. Make sure that everyday your activities include things that are unusual, fun, surprising and mean something to you.
 - c. Change your routine activity in an unexpected way. Even small changes will be noticeable and therefore stimulating to your brain.

Exercises:

Disclaimer: These are examples of brain exercises. Each individual should be sure that they are in good enough health to perform any exercise. Individuals who have balance issues should avoid activities where they stand with their eyes closed as they may fall. If you are unsure of the safety of an activity seek professional medical advice before you begin.

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Beginning or Ending the day:

Morning Activity:

- Instead of waking to the smell of coffee
 - o Try keeping an extract of vanilla, herbs or peppermint next to your bed and smell them as soon as you awaken.
 - o A great idea would be to get a small bag and fill it with seven different smells. Each day when you wake up pull a different smell from the bag.
- Showering with your eyes closed
 - o Try closing your eyes while turning on the water and adjusting the temperature. Although we always feel the water before we get in the shower, just feeling the water with your eyes closed is far more powerful and stimulating for your brain.
 - o Once safely in the shower. Close your eyes again and take your shower. Feel for the soap, shampoo...
 - o Try shaving with the opposite hand or with your eyes closed using your other hand to feel if you got all the stubble.
- Make your breakfast with your opposite hand
 - o Pour your coffee, butter your toast, and eat your food with your opposite hand.
- Any activity can be done by using your opposite hand and/or with your eyes closed. In addition you could try getting dressed with just one hand.
- Try using your toes to pick things up from the floor or, while seated, bring both feet together on either side of the item and pick it up by bending your knees or lifting your legs.

Social Activities:

If you are eating breakfast with a group try one or more of the following:

- If you typically have designated seating, switch it up. Have everyone sit in a different seat.
- Try not speaking. Use non-verbal activity to communicate throughout breakfast.
- On another day, eat with your eyes closed or with a blind-fold.

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- After eating, read a play or story out loud. Each person could read the lines of a different character one time and the next time you could take turns alternating paragraphs.

Traveling:

Just as with showering, try to unlock the car, get in, buckle in, put your keys in the ignition, and find familiar controls with your eyes closed.

Take different routes to work, to the store, and trips to the children or friends house.

Switch up who is the driver and where you sit in the car. Try sitting in the back seat if you are always the driver.

When traveling to a new place use an aroma to link your destination with a neural pathway. When you stimulate your sense of smell by using an aroma, you are helping to create associative pathways in your brain that can help you recall people, places and things. Just think of the times when the smell of a certain food reminds you of where you were, what you were doing and who you were with the last time you ate that food.

Make funny faces to the people in the back seat (remember road safety first).

Read out loud to the people in the car and then have someone else read to you. Then discuss the passages you just read.

If you aren't driving, try closing your eyes and experience the movements of the car, the people speaking, music, etc. You can also try drawing a scene on a pad of paper.

Try playing "I see..."

Social Activity:

- Play cards with heavy mittens on. This will blunt your fine touch and make it more difficult in passing cards.
- Play chess/checkers using the pieces on your opponent's side so that you have to look at the board differently.
- Sorting game: Take a variety of nuts and bolts. Place them in a box. Blindfold yourself and see if you can sort out the nuts and bolts and place them in their own jars. Try doing this with a friend and see if you can work out which nut and bolt goes where.

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Computer:

- Use your mouse with your other hand.
- Change the layout of your desktop icons
- Change the background on your computer

Church/Community Activity:

- Try going to a service given in a different language. Experience the service through the emotions of the pastor and priest, their body language, and the reaction of the congregation.
- Go to an ethnic festival and listen to the music, try dancing ethnic dance, eat ethnic food that you do not normally experience.
- Focus on the smells of the food
- Meet new people. Simply speaking with a new person everyday is a wonderful, multi-sensory sensation.

These are just a few examples of brain exercises. You can simply take these basic tools and start to adapt them to your daily life. Simple small changes such as these will provide healthy exercise for your brain with amazing results. Your everyday life will wake up and become exciting and unexpected. You will begin to feel younger. Enjoy!!!!!!

The topics discussed above come from the works of Lawrence Katz and Manning Rubin entitled, "Keeping Your Brain Alive"

For more information on how to incorporate these activities and to address other health issues please call me at the number listed above or email me at dmiller326@aol.com.

Be Well,

A handwritten signature in red ink that reads "Daniel G. Miller, DC, DANCB". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Daniel G. Miller, DC, DANCB
Chiropractic Neurologist

Dr. Miller is a Board Certified Chiropractic Neurologist. He has over nine years of experience working with a numerous conditions ranging from arthritis pain to traumatic brain injury. He utilizes a wide range of therapies and techniques in order to meet your individual concerns. Dr. Miller is a Medicare provider and accepts a wide variety of secondary insurance plans. Please feel free to contact Dr. Miller with any questions that you have. The office number is 607-729-0591.

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