

Brain Exercises for the Elderly

When a loved one gets older, it is often harder for their children to cope with even small amounts of mental deterioration, even though the physical changes are more pronounced. Arthritis, diabetes, loss of appetite – these are almost natural, inevitable signs of aging. They can be dealt with by medicines or equipment. Even though, for example, the parent's mobility is reduced, they are still the same parent with the same personality, the same foibles, the same likes and dislikes.

But when there is mental decline, it's much much harder to deal with. That's because a person is defined by their personality, not by their body.

Ask a child if they would rather have a mentally sharp parent with physical ailments or vice-versa – most people would opt for the former. Unfortunately in cases of dementia or Alzheimer's, there's not much that can be done.

But for most elderly, there are ways that they can be encouraged to forestall certain diseases and have a great time doing it.

The key is to understand why mental decline occurs and what can be done to prevent it.

Just as aging results in our body contracting and getting physically smaller, so also the brain gets smaller. This means that some of the nerve cells in the brain shrink and lose contact with other cells. Not only that, but the blood flow slows down as well, so things up there are moving a lot slower and a lot less efficiently. It's no wonder that names are forgotten and glasses misplaced and medicines skipped.

But, it's possible to slow down the normal results of this aging process through stimulation and mental exercise.

Following are so ways of working with your loved one to keeps their brains sharp.

1. **Physical exercise** – When your brain is actively controlling an exercise routine such as walking or swimming, the blood flow to the brain is increased. When this exercise is done in the context of an exercise class, the older person becomes involved socially which is important for people who would otherwise be alone without stimulation. If possible, activities such as dancing or aerobics should be engaged in so that the brain needs to work harder to co-ordinate the body.
2. **Reading** – Seniors should be encouraged to read as much as possible as this is one of the best ways to keep the brain active. One excellent way is to have them read children's books to visiting grandchildren.
3. **The computer** – If basic digital literacy can be learned (emails and simple internet access), the senior can be easily connected to a huge new world. There are many websites specifically oriented to the elderly. There are also DVD's and interactive CD-ROMs that can be borrowed from the library.

4. **Games** – Board games like Trivial Pursuit, card games like bridge, word games like crossword puzzles are all great ways to keep the brain stimulated while having a lot of fun.
5. **Conversation** – Parents should be called everyday by children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. They should be encouraged to get involved in volunteering activities or community groups. Anything to keep them out of the house and stimulated.
6. **New Routines** – Even if they are physically or emotionally unable to get out and do new things and meet new people, even just doing something a little different each day provides mental exercise.
7. **Laugh** – Humour is usually related to the unexpected – in other words, different paths in the brain. Research has shown that the act of hearing something unexpected and connecting it to the expected and seeing the humour in that activates areas of the brain associated with learning and creativity. It really is the best medicine.

For the most part, these are activities that are simple and fun. By consciously getting involved in the mental exercise of your loved one's mental faculties, you have a chance to keep them happy and vibrant for a long time.