

Senior Mental Health: Tips for Improving Cognition and Emotional Health

A lot of attention is focused on maintaining good physical health in seniors, but not so much on their cognitive health. Yet the ability to think clearly, learn, comprehend and remember is just as important for independent living as the absence of chronic illness. Emotional wellness also has a role to play in preventing depression, a key risk factor for dementia.

Fortunately, there is much that we can do to improve our cognition as we get older. And the best news is that it is almost never too late to start with simple tactics that will help you stay sharp and maintain mental well-being. Here are ways you can support brain health, according to the National Institute on Aging:

- 1. Stay mentally active** – People who have hobbies or volunteer, or who make learning a priority, report being healthier and more satisfied with their lives. Working your brain can also be as easy as playing games or crossword puzzles, or practicing your memory by making lists and trying to repeat them later. It is even better if you try these activities with a partner or in a group setting.
- 2. Make time to socialize** – Although it is challenging right now with the COVID-19 pandemic making social isolation a priority, connecting with friends and family has never

been more important. Maintaining relationships is key for emotional health, and socialization may help to reduce the risk of cognitive impairment and dementia.

- 3. Get physical** – Research has shown that physical activity benefits the brain in addition to the heart, in part by helping the brain to maintain old network connections and produce new ones, which are essential for cognitive health. One study reported in the National Library of Medicine found that exercise helped grow the part of the brain critical to memory, learning and spatial ability. The activity does not need to be strenuous. Federal guidelines recommend 30 minutes of activity on most days.

It is also important to be aware of factors that can adversely affect cognitive health. A poor diet, smoking, a sedentary lifestyle, too much alcohol and some medicines such as antihistamines for allergies, muscle relaxants, or sleep aids may harm cognition. Medical conditions can also be risk factors, such as heart disease, diabetes and stroke.

As always, before starting any diet or exercise program, check with your physician. And remember: Maintaining cognitive health and emotional connection is important. It may add years to your life and life to your years!



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