

## Mental Fitness for Seniors

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### Slowing The Brain's Inevitable Decline- No IFs, ANDs, or BUTs

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Whilst wisdom is the great hope that comes with age and deep life experience, many seniors' greatest fears are fading health, immobility, disconnection, and declining memory. As a psychologist I have a special interest in brain function and memory – a healthy brain is essential to a joyful life. Brain function is at its best at a younger age, and the brain grows to its maximum size in our early twenties, then shrinks at a rate of about 2% each year from then on. As the brain deteriorates, so too do our capabilities, sometimes leading to brain disorders.

My Mum, Beth, was a gregarious, graceful, fun-loving person. She was full of life and radiated charm and energy that was uplifting to many. It was heart-breaking to watch this beautiful soul that I loved, fade away because of dementia. It started slowly and innocuously, and progressed so quickly in her final two years until I was unrecognisable to her. She passed away, aged 94. We were the lucky ones, having had her with her full capacities albeit normally declining, up until those last few years.

Not long after that, one of my loveliest clients said to me she had been worrying about dementia for about ten years. An 86-year-old woman long suffering from anxiety and clinical depression, had become especially concerned after forgetting something that was very important to her. She became fretful this was a sure sign she now had dementia on top of her multiple failing physical conditions. With deep resignation, she revealed suicidal thoughts, that she had “had enough of it all.”

I suggested that together we could complete a standard dementia test to measure the health of her brain function, focusing on her memory, which she willingly did. To her great relief, she achieved a 100% test score that a person fifty or sixty years her junior would have been pleased with, including flawlessly repeating the sometimes difficult for seniors test phrase “**No IFs, ANDs, or BUTs.**”

Now, with self-interest as I enter my own senior years, these events got me scrambling to learn how we can best maintain our marbles as we age! This article summarises what my research discovered.

### So, What Is Normal Ageing?

None of us is immortal. Ageing of course occurs in us all.... IF we are lucky to live long enough. My research found that much of what is known about age-related mental decline is relatively recent information that seriously questions previously established medical treatments. Reassuringly, I learned that it is never too late to address and slow the process.

Whether we like to think about it or not, ageing is just the normal, natural, gradual, and continuous process of change that ends with death. It begins in early adulthood, during the mid to late twenties, when many physical and mental functions are typically at their peak but then start to deteriorate. Our skin, teeth, nails, muscles, bones, eyes, ears, and internal organs all start to decline. Inevitably, as our mobility, vision, and hearing go - so too does our memory.

Everyone notices some changes in their memory as they age – a slowing in thought processes and reaction times, gaps in short-term memory, finding it harder to recall what happened yesterday, or forgetting the name of a familiar place, object or even person.

But, while this kind of mental decline is normal, dementia is not. Dementia is an abnormal disorder of severe mental decline that affects 10% of people aged over 65, 20% of people aged over 80, and 40% of people aged over 90. In other words, whilst dementia can affect many who reach later-life years, it is not universal, and most people will retain their faculties, and experience only normal age-related mental decline.

The causes of dementia are not yet clearly known but are believed to be a combination of age, DNA, health, and lifestyle. In 5% of dementia cases, onset of symptoms is preceded by other disorders, such as Parkinson's disease, Multiple Sclerosis, and alcohol-related brain damage. Anyone overly worried that they might be developing dementia can ask their GP or specialist mental health practitioner for an assessment, which most often will initially involve doing a brief, non-invasive, in-clinic test, perhaps leading to an MRI brain scan. This was the case for my client, who after just ten minutes of testing was immediately relieved of the decade of worry that had her contemplating suicide.

### Can We Delay Mental Decline?

Luckily, even with this understanding and acceptance that age-related mental decline is normal, the resounding evidence is that there are known ways for us to delay the effects of ageing on our brain and reduce the likelihood of dementia. Even though the brain shrinks over time, it can actually work more efficiently and more effectively to support healthy brain function.

A person's biological age is not **absolutely** tied to their chronological age. This means that it is possible to slow biological ageing and reduce the chances of suffering age-related diseases like dementia by adopting lifestyle habits that help to grow and maintain healthy brain function. Of course, there are two approaches to consider – what to do and what **not** to do. Both are important, and both will be considered and addressed in the following recommendations:

### Mental Fitness

Mental health is essential to healthy brain function. The brain fog created by stress and anxiety is detrimental to brain function and human performance – a principle which now underpins the science of elite performance in multiple fields, such as business and sports. And so, being able to cope with stress and anxiety caused by the inevitable challenges of life is essential to maintaining good mental health. Learning and practising various physical and cognitive calming techniques that help to quickly defuse stress and anxiety when it arises will strengthen coping skills:

- **Physical Calming Techniques?** Examples include slow deep breathing, body scan muscle relaxation, and exercise, such as yoga. Free apps like *Smiling Mind* can offer a selection of these kinds of techniques.
- **Cognitive Calming Techniques?** Examples include developing calming self-talk, and using imaging and grounding techniques, such as "SafeCalm", "Dropping Anchor" and "Five Senses".

I recommend all seniors meet with a specialist mental health practitioner, such as a psychologist, for at least a couple of sessions to learn these basic calming techniques. Seniors should also consider continuing with regular counselling sessions to get ongoing professional support in monitoring and fine-tuning their mental health with our Medicare rebates now making this affordable for most.

### *Nutritious Diet*

Diet plays a key role in promoting and maintaining physical **and** mental health. The change in society towards non-nutritious takeaway, processed, and high sugar foods are a well established and accepted explanation of why many diseases and disorders, such as obesity and mental health disorders, are now at all-time highs. A good diet can delay mental decline by as much as eight years and five simple diet practices can support healthy brain function:

- **Three Squares A Day** – Make sure you have breakfast, lunch, and dinner each day. Don't skip meals.
- **Eat In Moderation** – Overeating and undereating can both cause problems. Eat enough to maintain a healthy weight without consistently eating more or less calories than needed.
- **Aim For Balance** – Adopt a balanced diet that includes fish and other lean proteins, fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts, seeds, and unsaturated fats. The Mediterranean and Keto diets have good evidentiary support too.
- **Return To The Source** – Eat home cooked meals of minimally processed, fresh foods.
- **Reduce Or Eliminate** – Reduce sugar intake and minimise alcohol use.

I highly advise seniors to consult a dietician about good diet practices and food choices, particularly in the context of maintaining healthy brain function.

### *Regular Physical Exercise*

Physical exercise is essential for maintaining optimal blood flow to the brain which helps with thinking, learning, and problem-solving. It has been found that mental decline is almost twice as common among adults who are inactive when compared to those who are active. No matter what age or fitness level, remaining active every day, with any amount of physical activity and in as many ways as possible, can provide immediate benefits. People aged over sixty-five are recommended to participate in a variety of exercises.

- **Aerobic Exercise** – Twenty minutes of brisk walking, jogging, bicycling, swimming, or other cardiovascular activity on most days.
- **Strength, Weight or Resistance Training** – Squeezing rubber balls, resistance band exercises.
- **Flexibility And Balance Training** – Bending, stretching, Tai chi, Yoga, and Pilates.
- **When In Doubt, Anything Else!** – Turn on some music and dance; twist and turn; squat or march on the spot; stand on one leg while watching television. Remember ... use it or lose it!

I suggest seniors seek advice from a specialist, such as a GP, on what type and intensity of exercise is best for them, whilst appreciating that any light exercise, such as walking and doing chores, is still beneficial. Seniors can also keep a daily exercise record and share their progress with family and friends to assist with monitoring and motivation.

### *Regular Mental Exercise*

Just as muscles get stronger when exercised, so too does the brain. Exercising the brain to improve focus, memory, or daily functionality is a top priority for many older adults, but people of all ages can benefit from incorporating a few simple brain exercises into their daily life. Puzzles, such as crosswords, jigsaws, or Sudoku, playing card or board games, and learning new skills which challenge the brain to work are ideal for this purpose.

Learning new activities and skills, such as learning to speak a foreign language or play a musical instrument, helps to strengthen the brain by changing old neural pathways and creating new ones. Learning challenges the brain, causing it to grow new brain cells called neurons in a process called neurogenesis. With practice, the neurons learn how to work with each other, improving memory of and performance of the new activity or skill.

## *Sleep*

Sleep is a key and natural restorative process both physically and mentally. Inadequate sleep, at whatever age, undermines normal brain function, and can lead to decreased concentration, attention, and memory, as well as impaired judgement, reduced reaction times, and reduced physical coordination. Mental health assessments typically check for underlying causes of sleep loss, such as medication side effects, sleep apnoea and other airway issues, or an overactive bladder that interrupts sleep for trips to the bathroom. A Sleep Study Test, overnight in-clinic or at home, is often recommended by health professionals to assist in diagnosing sleep disturbance. Once underlying causes are identified and treated, restoring sleep to normal levels – typically six to eight hours each night – can improve brain functioning.

## *Sunshine*

Vitamin D deficiencies have also been linked with mental decline. The sun is the best natural source of Vitamin D, which promotes reduced inflammation and modulates cell growth. Sunlight also enters the brain through the eyes and arouses (lifts) our mood. Fifteen minutes of sunlight a few times a week, whilst remembering to use sunscreen, elevates Vitamin D levels and lifts mood.

## *Prescription Medications*

Finally, there is mounting evidence of grave risks to brain function by prescription medications. This should be especially concerning to seniors given that 40% of people over sixty-five take five or more prescription drugs.

Whilst modern medications work wonders for treating the symptoms of many diseases, despite decades of research and billions of dollars of investment, medications currently offer nothing to people with dementia. To the contrary, many of the medications commonly prescribed for senior health conditions can actually accelerate mental decline.

Because of brain impairing side-effects, Seniors especially need to be guarded when using medications with brand names of Crestor, Ezallor, Lipitor, Atorvaliq, Nexium, Valium, Amoxicillin, Zoloft, Panadene Forte, Aspirin, Nurofen, and Voltaren, and I encourage seniors to review their medications regularly with their GP, with a focus on understanding side effects that impair brain function, and minimising unnecessary medications, perhaps adopting some of the more natural remedies noted earlier where possible.

## *So, What Now?*

What I found? A healthy life, physically and mentally, is the best defence against the effects of an ageing brain. The most common ways to prevent age-related mental decline are also those that will keep our bodies in the best shape as we age – maintaining a good diet and regular physical exercise – as well as adopting good mental fitness practises.

A world leading dementia research and education centre, proudly Australian, is the Wicking Institute at University of Tasmania who put it succinctly:, “what is good for the heart is good for the brain.”

It is never too late to address your physical or your mental health. The time to start is now!

For more information about dementia, assessments and maintaining life quality, consider calling the Dementia Australia helpline (1800 100500) or visit their website at [www.dementia.org.au](http://www.dementia.org.au).