

# FYI October 2011



We all know how important physical exercise is for our bodies. It helps control our weight, strengthens bones and muscles, and improves balance. But, how often do we remember to give our brain a workout?

Many people believe that memory loss, slow thinking, and a decreased ability to problem solve are unavoidable as we age. **That is simply not true!** Our brains learn and grow by interacting with the world around us. No matter what age, our brains have the ability to continue growing and developing. According to The Franklin Institute, most memory loss is a result of brain inactivity and a lack of mental exercise and stimulation. When it comes to our brains and mental abilities, the saying **“use it or lose it”** is true. The more you think and use your brain, the better it functions.

If you have experienced some age-related loss of mental abilities, do not worry. Studies have shown that the loss of mental capacities can be reversed if you put in an effort to use your brain everyday.

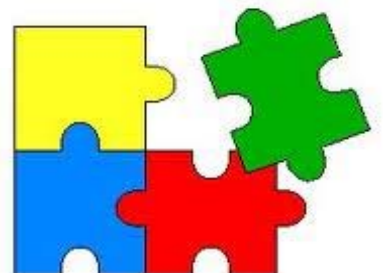
There are many activities you already do each day that help strengthen your brain. Breathing increases the oxygen supply to the brain, which helps it function better,

and clears the mind to help relieve stress. Try closing your eyes and taking 5 to 10 deep breaths. How do you feel afterward? I imagine that you feel more relaxed and feelings of uneasiness or anxiousness have lessened.

Reading is another activity you may do each day. Reading forces brain cells into activity. While reading, the brain changes words into pictures, helping you understand what is occurring in the book or article. This constant working of the brain helps keep you sharper and smarter.

Here are some other activities you can do everyday to help strengthen your mind:

- Play games – including Bingo and Chess
- Word Games – Crossword puzzles, Scrabble, etc
- Sudoku
- Meditate
- Alter your daily routine
- Learn a new skill or try something you have never done before
- Logic Puzzles
- Play cards
- Put together a jigsaw puzzle
- Write a letter or story



When exercising your brain it is important to remember that your brain needs to be challenged in order to learn new tasks. Activities that strengthen your mind should activate both hemispheres of your brain. The left side of the brain works with facts, dates, letters and numbers, while the right side deals with imagination, creativity, and color. Drawing a picture and writing a story to describe it is an activity that will help sharpen both hemispheres of the brain. It is also important to do a variety of activities. If you do the same activities each day, your brain will become accustomed to them and will no longer work as hard to complete them. The more you challenge your brain, the more you benefit.

How often you train your brain is just as important as how you train it. Some doctors recommend doing mental exercises one to two hours a day. For one person this may be adequate and for another it may be too much or not enough. You should spend as much time on mental exercises as you think is invigorating and refreshing.

Although, many activities can help improve your mental abilities, there are also activities that do nothing to improve brain power. Watching TV is one of those activities. Even though there are TV shows that can actively engage our brains, most programs lessen our cognitive skills by allowing the brain to be inactive. Try limiting TV watching to 1-2 hours a day to help boost brain function.

Mental exercise is not the only thing you can do to keep your brain healthy. Getting 30 minutes of physical exercise each day and eating a healthy diet will add to your brain power. Foods that protect your brain and improve memory include: walnuts, salmon, blueberries,

broccoli, asparagus, corn, strawberries, plums, onions, and whole grains.

Training your brain does more than increase memory. There are many benefits to keeping your brain fit. Exercising your mind can improve reasoning skills, boost creativity, and improve physical coordination and motor skills. Good mental health can also help decrease depression and make us better able to cope with difficulties.

**Does your brain need a boost?  
Try these from Attainment's Mental  
Fitness Cards by Marge Engelman.**

**1.** Using a kitchen timer or your watch, write down as many four letter words as you can in two minutes.

Now write as many five letter words as you can in two minutes.

Six letter words will be more difficult but give it a try.

**2.** Choose an article from a newspaper or magazine. Hold it upside down and try to read it.

**3.** Play a recording of a piece of music that you enjoy. You may want to listen to the music on the radio.

While you are listening, draw a picture or pictures of what you hear.

The picture need not be realistic but can simply be lines or shapes or textures or colors that express the ideas or feelings that come to you as you listen.

This newsletter prepared by Katie Folwarski, MSW student and intern at Catholic Charities Aging Services, with information gathered from: Attainment Co Inc's Mental Fitness Cards by Marge Engelman; 2001, The Mental Fitness Center at [www.thementalfitnesscenter.com](http://www.thementalfitnesscenter.com), The Franklin Institute at [www.fi.edu/learn/brain/exercise.html](http://www.fi.edu/learn/brain/exercise.html), and [http://longevity.about.com/od/mentalfitness/tp/Mental\\_fitness.htm](http://longevity.about.com/od/mentalfitness/tp/Mental_fitness.htm)