

# To stay sharp mentally, work your body, mind

BY FRED RANDOLPH

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It's common for people to forget little things, especially when they're preoccupied. Throughout the day, we might not remember immediately what we ate for dinner last night, or where we placed our keys after a hectic day.

Time can be cruel, however, and our brains can fail to produce memories of larger events and precious moments, such as a child's first steps, major professional accomplishments, or even a loved one's face. These are important aspects of life that should remain secure, and it's never pleasant for me to see an older adult forget them — pieces of who they were and make them who they are today.

Luckily, recent medical research findings show that there are ways to slow the effects of aging on memory. Much of it comes down to spending time with people, whether it's old or new friends. Those in the industry call this "making connections," and it truly seems to be the way to sharpen the brain, continue to learn and grow closer with the community.

For example, try to put things into the perspective of your grandchildren. When school-age kids are away on summer vacation, they tend to forget some of the skills they don't use on a regular basis. Being around friends and participating in activities seems to keep that brain in motion, whether it was a camp, music lessons or a summer reading list. Of course, going back to school helps to brighten them up again. And being older is no different.

For decades, it was common thought that humans were born with as many brain cells and neural pathways as they'll always have. Only recently has research shown that the body continues to generate new cells in the brain throughout life, and there is no age limit. Regardless if you're nine or 90, you're producing new pathways. Activities such as aerobics, ballroom dancing, gardening or even playing board games where you are around other people and using your memory are ways to strengthen the connections.

For example, a recent study released by Columbia University Medical Center found that regular exercise can coax the human brain into growing new nerve cells; a process that was considered impossible when I was going to school.

People who exercised in an aerobics program for only three months saw dramatic effects, such as recalling events. The study found that a healthy dose of

exercise also made participants less likely to develop Alzheimer's, even if they were genetically predisposed to the disease.

An important point to remember is that the physical benefits also enhance the mental ones. Trying something new and working out will help muscles to be used differently — abilities that were once there are now back in full force. Gaining strength to carry groceries and climb stairs more easily can help build confidence about running errands and traveling out to see your exercise companions. It's a win-win for all your muscles, including your amazing brain.

And it's not just working up a sweat with your buddies that help older adults live strong, physically and mentally. With Columbia establishing that exercise and aerobics are beneficial, Harvard is also showing the importance of social ties.

Researchers found that those with connections such as church groups, social networks or just spending time on the phone with loved ones can benefit. Adults who participated in some social activities throughout the week had a lower rate of dementia. Something as low-key as participating in a book club or eating lunch with friends in a café can boost the mind.

Living in Pima County's Northwest region, we're able to participate in myriad activities. Retirement communities, town governments and local community colleges have so many intellectual and social opportunities in which you can participate. Even if your friends don't want to join you, the groups you meet at your new functions can broaden your horizons.

Of course, I can't emphasize enough that eating well can enhance all this connection-making. Eating smaller portions and trying to include nuts, berries, colorful vegetables and omega-3-rich proteins, like salmon or trout, in your diet will pay off wonderfully. I think a great way to do this is by making your meals more social. Try participating in a cooking course or start a recipe-swapping club as a way to combine all the aforementioned medical research into one solid effort.

Your life is special and so are the memories you've created. With getting out and making social links, you'll be living life to its absolute fullest. Make the older years your best years. Trust me, it's very possible.

*Fred Randolph is the administrator of Sonora, Splendido's health center scheduled to open in early 2008. For information on attending a Splendido BrainWorks event, call 878-2612.*



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