

The background of the entire page is an abstract, textured composition. It features a dense network of thin, yellow and light green lines that resemble neural pathways or tangled roots. These lines are set against a dark green, almost black, background. There are also some larger, more solid yellow and green shapes, possibly representing brain cells or clusters of neurons. The overall effect is one of organic complexity and vibrant energy.

Strengthen Your Memory

**Five True Tales
with
How-To Info
for Improving Senior Brains**

by Carol Van Klompenburg

1 First, the Good News

You need three umbrellas: one to leave at a friend's house, one to leave at home, and one to leave everywhere else.

It happened again just last week. After an acquaintance had told me she enjoyed reading my memoir, *Child of the Plains*, she said, "I also enjoyed another book lately. It was written by—" and she paused.

"Oh, darn," she said, "I can't remember her name. She does the one-woman performances about Mareah Scholte, the wife of Pella's founder."

"Beverly Graves?" I asked.

"Yes, that's it!" she said. "This 83-year-old brain doesn't work so well."

She criticized her brain function, but it had worked on three out of four fronts. She remembered enjoying the book, she could describe the author, and she recognized the name when I said it. Three out of four isn't bad; it's like a batting average of 750.

She was simply having a moment when her brain synapses clicked into pause mode. And research reveals that pause mode already begins happening to people in their mid-thirties. It simply happens a bit more often to older people. I reassured her I sometimes have trouble remembering as well. "I have a photographic memory," I told her. "But occasionally my camera lacks film."

Sociologists have made studies of brain-film effectiveness. One study showed complex pictures to both younger and older people and asked them for a narration about everything they saw. The older people

made more mistakes in naming items as they narrated.

However, when asked simply to name each item in a series of one-item pictures, the older people did better than the younger ones. Semantic memory, our knowledge of words, numbers, and general concepts, improves with age.

Our procedural memory remains unchanged. So older adults can generally remember how to cook an omelet, tell time on a clock, tie a bow, or type as well as they ever could.

Some of our abilities remain strong, but they slow down. Older adults process information more slowly and require more repetition to learn something new. It also takes us more time to shift focus from one task to another. So, it is wise for us to stay focused on one task at a time rather than trying to multi-task.

One memory that declines with age is episodic memory—the what, where, and when of daily life. That memory decline is the reason I sometimes ask my husband to call my smartphone to help me find it. It is the reason I have difficulty recalling what I ate for lunch yesterday.

Our attitudes influence our memories. The more anxiety I experience when I try to remember a name, the further the name retreats. I have one friend who is good at saying calmly, “I’m drawing a blank on that right now. It will come to me later.” Another friend says simply, “Hmm. I’m having a mental pause.” And then my friends move on to another topic, or to telling the story they were going to tell, minus the name that momentarily disappeared. When I relax and move on, often the name comes back to me when I am no longer trying to think of it.

One source of our anxiety is the worry we are developing dementia, a fairly widespread fear in later years according to psychologists. I comfort myself with a reminder, “Forgetting where I put my phone is normal. Forgetting what the phone is for is not.” Statistics are in our favor. Fewer than one in five people over 65, and less than half of those over 85, have Alzheimer’s disease. Besides, worrying about the future accomplishes nothing except to darken the present. (If you are forgetting how to do daily tasks or missing important appointments, though, you might want to consult with your physician.)

A positive attitude, instead of a negative one, allows us to master new skills. We CAN learn a new language; it simply requires a little additional time and repetition. We CAN learn acrylic painting, playing piano, or woodworking. We simply need to allow ourselves time to develop the skill. And retirement living allows us the luxury of extra time.

There are coping skills for some of the declines. When trying to remember a name, my husband cycles through the alphabet for a beginning letter that seems to belong with the missing name. Sometimes if he comes up with a first letter, I can retrieve the name. We joke that between the two of us we have a complete brain. However, when we get into our car, he has never said to me, “Okay, I will remember where we are going. You remember who we are.”

Sometimes, when I walk into a room and can’t remember what I went there for, I can retrieve the memory by returning to the room I started from. Sometimes that doesn’t help, and I simply go on with life. If it was important, it will occur to me again. Simply going on is a healthier choice than being

convinced for some reason I am going to find a clue in the refrigerator.

Older people also cope with misplaced items when we do what our grandmothers preached: establish a place for everything and put everything in its place. Marlo and I always park in the same section of the church parking lot. I have learned a fanny pack is wonderful for keeping track of my smart phone. (A belt clip or pocket would also work.) My keys have a permanent home in a zippered compartment of my purse.

Lest I forget to mention it, there are techniques for maintaining, and even improving memory. But that's a topic for the following sections

And now if I could just remember where I put my glasses.

2 A Healthy Body Aids a Sound Mind

To keep the body in good health is a duty; otherwise, we shall not be able to keep our mind strong and clear.

—Buddha

The last time I visited my 95-year-old mother before she died, I took two of my grandchildren along. She beamed when she saw them. “What are your names?” she asked.

Caleb and Phillip, they told her.

“And how old are you?” she asked.

Five and nine.

“I’m glad to see you,” she said. “What are your names, and how old are you?”

She asked the same two questions eleven times in our half-hour visit. Then we asked her to play “Jesus Loves Me,” on the piano. She obliged, and the boys sang along.

My mother suffered from Alzheimer’s. Her short-term memory had shrunk almost to zero. But she could still play the piano.

Like most older adults, I fear developing dementia. Yesterday I researched whether Alzheimer’s is hereditary. Some of the early onset Alzheimer’s has a genetic component, but late-onset Alzheimer’s, like my mother’s, does not appear to be transmitted to the next generation.

I was relieved, but during that research I also learned we can strengthen our minds and memories by our lifestyle choices. After a day of following up, I had overloaded my brain with the choices that could improve or maintain my brain health. Our physical, mental, and social activities all can impact our brains.

Our brains benefit if we get regular exercise. Aerobic exercise increases the blood flow within our brain. The brain needs oxygen and nutrients, so better cardiovascular health is linked to better brain health.

In a study of one group of women, regular exercise was associated a 9.5 year later onset of Alzheimer's compared to the group that did not exercise. Most experts recommend 30 minutes of moderate exercise five days per week. But they say even 15 minutes of exercise three times per week is better than nothing.

Exercises to maintain balance are also good. Better balance can help reduce the risk of falling and injuring our bodies or brains.

A healthy diet makes a contribution to brain health. The Mediterranean Diet combined with the DASH diet seems to have the most positive impact on our minds. The Mediterranean Diet includes eating lots of fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, cereals, and olive oil. It avoids saturated fat, red meat, salt, sugar, and processed foods. The DASH diet is similar to the Mediterranean diet, except it also includes low-fat dairy products, fish, and poultry.

Drinking enough water is also important. As we age, our sensation of thirst declines, making us more vulnerable to dehydration—which can reduce cognitive function. We should drink six to eight glasses of liquid per day. Since our thirst shrinks as we age, we are wise to drink water even when we are not thirsty.

Drinking alcohol as part of our liquid intake, however, is questionable. Alcohol tends to affect us more as we age. US Dietary Guidelines say the maximum alcoholic drinks per day should be one for

women and two for men. And maximum recommended tobacco use is, of course, zero.

Maintaining a healthy weight is also wise. Studies have shown that obese people experience faster cognitive decline than people with an ideal weight. The recommended weight for a 5-foot person is 100-120 pounds. For someone 5 feet 6 inches tall, it is 120-150 pounds. For someone 6 feet tall, it is 140-180 pounds. (For the recommended weight for your exact height, you can google “BMI Chart.”)

Getting the right amount of sleep, around seven to nine hours, is good for our minds as well. Lack of sleep can lead to difficulty remembering and concentrating, along with an increased risk of dementia. While the results of lack of sleep have long been known, sleeping too much has recently been shown to be associated with lower cognitive and reasoning ability. According to the studies, too much sleep is also associated with increased dementia risk.

An annual routine health screening from our health care provider is also wise. Our provider can screen for diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and depression. All of these have a negative long-term impact on how well our minds work as we age. If we are diagnosed with one of these conditions, we should manage that condition well, as recommended by our health care provider, to prevent unnecessary damage to our bodies and brains.

That’s a boatload of information and choices. This morning, as I put together these options, I felt overwhelmed.

While I was still at my computer, a friend telephoned, asking me to play pickleball in 15 minutes. I said yes. For lunch I chose peanut butter

instead of ham for my sandwich—and I added a lettuce salad and fresh green beans.

I am feeling less overwhelmed. Maybe I just need to make small changes, one choice at a time.

3 Work Your Brain!

The brain is like a muscle. When it is in use, we feel very good. Understanding is joyous. —Carl Sagan

I was studying brain workouts when my phone rang. A friend whom I planned to meet later for coffee said, “I can’t remember if you are picking me up or if we are meeting at the restaurant. Oh, my memory . . . ” Her voice trailed off in frustration.

“We planned to meet at the restaurant,” I answered.

I returned to my research. The first quality I found associated with brain health was this: People who cherish and are open to new experiences tend to have lower dementia rates. Locking ourselves into a familiar comfort zone leads to brain mush. So, travel or watching a travel documentary is good for us. So is going to live theater or a concert.

Hmm. I thought I watched those Rick Steves travel documentaries just for fun. I thought the same of that recent trip to an Iowa state park.

Almost all of my reading indicated that a principle for physical health is also true for brain health: Use it or lose it. By challenging our brains, we build up a cognitive reserve. Even if we enter the beginning stages of Alzheimer’s, we have extra neurons and neuron pathways to offset the losses.

Learning a new skill is one productive brain exercise. Taking up knitting, pottery, painting, or woodworking can train our brain cells to fire in new ways. Learning a new computer program or a new language can do the same.

Wow! I took up quilling because I loved the beauty of the paper designs. And I learned basic Spanish

because I wanted to communicate with Nicaraguans during mission trips. I didn't realize I was doing my brain a favor.

Playing games in short stints is a good brain workout. Crossword, Sudoku, and Word Find puzzles are good options for solo games. Scrabble and card games are good multiple-person choices. Online card games and Words with Friends make good choices as multi-person brain exercise on the computer.

Hurray! My ritual of a daily game of both Gin and Upwards is good for my mind.

Short-term and long-term memory exercises also provide benefit. How many digits of a phone number can we retain when dialing it? All ten digits? Just six digits and then four? How many items from our grocery list can we place in our shopping cart before we consult that list for items we have forgotten? Can we do a simple math problem in our head without resorting to a pen or a calculator? Can we memorize the lyrics of a song or poem we like? Use it or lose it!

I think I'll challenge my memory the next time I go shopping for groceries. The next time I dial a phone number, I will try to retain all ten digits.

Reading—both nonfiction and fiction—is also good brain exercise. In addition, reading provides us with material for telling stories. And telling stories provides a workout for our memory, our vocabulary, and our organizational skills.

I'm glad to hear that. I enjoy reading—and love telling stories, especially to my grandchildren.

The final brain-training exercise I learned about was meditation. Meditation quiets the brain by focusing on just one item, such as breath or a visual image, and returning to that item whenever our hurry-scurry mind gets distracted by other thoughts.

As I researched, I discovered a study of Mental and Physical (MAP) training funded by the National Institute of Mental Health and the National Science Foundation. The program used 30 minutes of aerobic exercise followed by 30 minutes of meditation. During the meditation, participants concentrated on their breathing, counting their breaths. If their attention wandered, they nonjudgmentally returned their focus to their breathing as often as necessary. (It sounds easy, but it's not. Try it and you will see!) The results of the study were reduction in depression and enhanced synchronized brain activity (which is linked to faster learning).

I already get half an hour of aerobic exercise somewhat regularly. Perhaps I could add meditation afterwards and see how it goes.

My friend and I met for coffee, and her memory functioned just fine. We chatted about our lives. In doing so, we used a third practice for brain health: socializing. Not only do physical and mental activity benefit our minds. Being part of a community does the same. More about that in the next chapter.

4 Think Positive!

The effect of cultural expectations on recall and performance is powerful. —Anti-ageism Activist Ashton Applewhite

Sometimes when older adults have a momentary memory lapse, they say, “Oops, senior moment.” I have said it myself.

I used to think it was a pretty harmless phrase. After all, those memory lapses do occur more often in older adults than in younger ones.

Then I read the research of Yale Psychologist Becca Levy and other aging experts. They say that calling a memory lapse a senior moment may be a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we think of ourselves as forgetful because of our age, we become more forgetful.

Levy and others call this term a form of ageism. According to Levy, “Ageism is the most widespread and socially accepted prejudice today.”

In a weekly pickleball gathering of mostly older women, we normally number off and then are assigned partners by numbered pairs. Last week, we were assigned numbers, and the person in charge read off the names of paired partners instead of just the numbers.

“Thanks for reading the names instead of the numbers,” said one member, smiling. “I didn’t have to ask you to remind me what my number was!”

“We are starting to need that!” said another. And we chuckled.

I was among those laughing.

Back home, I wondered. Was my laughter about memory lapses also a self-fulfilling prophecy? Does it

contribute to my belief in a failing memory? How much does my distrust of my memory affect my memory?

In *Breaking the Age Code*, Levy wrote that she flashed positive words about aging on a screen for one group of older adults and negative words about aging for another group, too briefly for the people to be aware of them. The people exposed to positive messages showed better recall and more confidence than those exposed to negative words.

Levy also tested the cultural perceptions and memory of three different cultural groups: hearing Americans, deaf Americans, and mainland Chinese. The hearing Americans had the most negative perceptions of aging—and they did most poorly on the memory test.

In different tests, she found that older people with positive views of aging compare favorably with those who have negative views:

- They have better handwriting.
- They walk faster.
- They are more likely to fully recover from severe disability.
- They live an average of 7.5 years longer.

How do we challenge and change our negative views of aging? Levy says the first step is awareness. She says to write down the first five words that come to mind when you think of an older person. Do this quickly without rejecting any of the words that come to mind. Don't think. Just list. Make your list before reading further.

According to Levy, an awareness of your bias is the first step. If the first three or four words in your list were negative, you probably have negative views of aging.

To increase your awareness, she suggests writing down all the portrayals of aging people you see in a week and making a list of their positive and negative traits.

To counter a negative bias, she suggests creating a portfolio of positive models for aging (maybe five or so) and reviewing this list regularly.

In regard to memory glitches, she cautions not to instantly blame forgetting on aging. It may be that you were multitasking. You might have been distracted.

Besides, younger adults have memory lapses too. Starting in their 20s, all adults have memory lapses. Older adults simply have them a little more often.

You can also counter memory lapses by reframing your self-image. Remind yourself of your wisdom moments—when you pass on a bit of information or a thought to a younger person. Reflect on how over the years you have mastered the ropes of different tasks. Think about your uncommon skills, such as the ability to do math problems without a calculator. Relish the empathy and resilience that have come to you over the years. And enjoy each moment of life as it comes to you.

Will I stop using the term “senior moment?” I think I will. I will probably use the term “memory glitch” instead.

I will not deny others their right to use the term. However, when others call their memory lapse a senior moment, I may gently remind them that they have wisdom moments as well.

Were we ageist at the pickleball courts when we laughed about reading our names instead of our numbers? The women who play certainly don’t see

themselves as decrepit. They are, after all, running around on the court and hitting a ball for two hours.

I think one member of that group had it right when she said, “We can all remember our names!” We laughed at her comment, too, but she had reframed the situation for us. She had given us a positive frame to counterbalance the negative one.

The next week, the person in charge read off just the paired numbers to designate partners. And we all remembered our numbers!

5 Organize!

Our brains are inherently good at creating categories.
—Daniel Levitin

This week, I started reading *The Organized Mind* by Daniel Levitin. It was a clear-out-clutter book on steroids! Levitin wrote that an organized environment frees up your mind for creativity and productivity. Given bait like that, I was hooked.

I put down the book after reading Chapter 4, Home Organization, and I was pumped. I could do this! I would never have to hunt for anything again.

Chapter 4 offered a myriad of new organizational motivations and possibilities. The task of organization, according to Levitin, is to provide me with maximum information with the least effort on the part of my brain. We not only need a place for everything and everything in its place; that place needs to be an appropriate one. Store similar things together, or group items that have a similar use. And make the storage location near an object's place of use. Getting organized means gaining control. Don't keep anything you do not use. Most important, however: Have only one place for everything, and ALWAYS use that place. Designating multiple locations for the same item will result in wasting time hunting for it and more difficulty remembering the location.

I immediately decided to resume always using my fanny pack for my cell phone when I was at home, and a special purse compartment for the phone when away from home. I designated my bedside stand for my Kindle, since bed was where I most frequently read it.

Consistent use of these locations required commitment. I found myself absentmindedly putting the phone or Kindle down on the table, the desk, or the entry table without even thinking about it, and then I didn't know where to find them. The solution for that, says Levitin, is mindfulness. Truly being present to a moment rather than functioning on automatic pilot.

I then started organizing my home storage with a file drawer that was crushed full. I removed all folders dated 2021, a removal long overdue. I disposed of most of their contents. Hurrah! My file drawer now boasted some usable space.

My priority the next day was the bathroom cabinet. I was tired of hunting for the nail clipper, face wipes, and Tylenol in the mishmash on the shelves. I got out some plastic storage boxes and started sorting. Each category received its own box: lotions, over-the-counter medications, hairstyling equipment, manicure supplies, etc. Usable items I no longer wanted went into a cardboard box for the local thrift store. I put some scented lotions and soaps (which make me sneeze) into a bag to gift to my daughter-in-law.

Outdated medications I put in a plastic bag for disposal, called a local pharmacy about medication disposal, and learned I could take it to a Pella Police Station drop box.

Organizing that cabinet gobbled an entire afternoon. When I had finished, I paused for what my husband and I have come to call an "admiration stance." It was satisfying to have a place for everything and everything in its place.

Putting things back into the correct bathroom space was easy compared to putting my cell phone

and Kindle in place. I used an item, took one step to the cabinet, and put it in place. It's what I always have done, except now that place was more specific.

Having one organized space, I considered new goals. It felt so good to have the bathroom organized; imagine how good it would feel if I organized the whole house!

My closet bulged with clothes. I had not pruned my electronic files in several years. Tangles of electronic supplies lurked in the plastic drawers in the office closet. A mess of cleaning supplies hid under the kitchen sink. Cards and envelopes were crammed in a dresser drawer. The laundry room sported a catchall junk drawer. And I didn't want to begin thinking about my portion of the garage shelving.

Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, my energy burst ended. One organized drawer and one cabinet were all my energy could sustain for the moment. I wanted to write and read. I wanted to play pickleball and do some quilling (crafting with paper coils).

When I am ready for another burst of organizing energy, I will reach for my copy of *The Organized Mind* again.

Excerpted from Creative Aging. For the complete ebook or a paperback, find the book on Amazon [here](#).

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