

# AARP Bulletin today

## Mind Aerobics

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*Mirko Ilic*

Andrew A. Skolnick, a 57-year-old editor and writer, moved last year to Amherst, N.Y., to take a new job with the Center for Inquiry, a research institute promoting science and reason. To his chagrin, Skolnick, overloaded with new numbers, addresses and passwords, couldn't memorize his phone numbers for three months.

"I pride myself on my mathematical ability," Skolnick says, "so it was a humbling experience."

Talk to almost anyone over 50 and you hear the same stories about memory glitches—time-consuming searches for misplaced glasses and keys, difficulty recalling names only minutes after an introduction and, perhaps most frustrating of all, coming up empty when a familiar word is on the tip of the tongue.

People tend to joke about "senior moments," but often the humor masks an underlying fear of Alzheimer's disease. Their concern isn't unfounded: about 5 percent of people age 65 and older (and a much larger proportion over 80) develop Alzheimer's. However, there is mounting evidence that memory lapses don't necessarily foreshadow dementia.

What often leads to these lapses are "brain busters" such as fatigue, depression, poor physical health and medication, says Janet Fogler, a clinical social worker at the University of Michigan's geriatric clinic and co-author of *Improving Your Memory: How to Remember What You're Starting to Forget*.

Stress is another factor getting closer scrutiny. Researchers at Yale Medical School, for instance, reported in the journal *Science* last fall that stress activates a brain protein called kinase C, or PKC, that can undermine short-term memory. Other researchers have found that sustained high levels of the stress hormone cortisol can damage the hippocampus, a part of the brain that's central to memory.

"People experience tremendous changes between ages 50 and 70" that are stressful, says Gary W. Small, M.D., director of the Center on Aging at the University of California, Los Angeles. You're retiring or starting new careers, taking care of aging parents, watching your children leave the nest. "There's more to remember," he adds, "than ever before."

It's possible to fight brain busters, scientists increasingly believe, by taking control of your life and reducing stress. What works is a strategy to improve overall health—and to stimulate the brain with exercises that Small calls "aerobics for the mind."

"The next big fitness movement is the brain fitness movement," says Small, who wrote *The Memory Prescription*. "We can modify a lot of the risk factors for brain disease in the same way that we can reduce the risk factors for, say, heart disease."

Get a jump-start. Here's a 10-step memory workout based on the latest scientific findings.

### **1. Exercise regularly**

Aerobic activity—walking, dancing, biking, for at least 20 minutes three times a week—increases blood flow and the delivery of oxygen, sugar (as glucose) and nutrients to the brain. In 2003 researchers from Wayne State University and the University of Illinois, Urbana, showed that aerobic fitness may reduce the loss of brain tissue

common in aging.

## **2. Stick to a healthy diet**

Avoid sugar and saturated fat. And eat lots of antioxidant-rich fruits and vegetables such as blueberries, spinach and beets. Scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology reported in December that the magnesium found in dark green, leafy vegetables appears to help maintain memory.

## **3. Learn something new**

Mastering activities you've never done before, such as playing the piano or learning a foreign language, stimulates neuron activity. For best results, remember this: People exposed to positive reinforcement before completing memory exercises scored well above others exposed to negative reinforcement in a study led by Thomas Hess, a North Carolina State University psychologist.

## **4. Get enough sleep**

Too little sleep impairs concentration. Anecdotal evidence shows a good night's sleep appears to boost memory after learning something new.

## **5. Devise memory strategies**

Make notes or underline key passages to help you remember what you've read. Invent mnemonics—formulas to help you remember things. An example in Fogler's book: a man's two cars—one tan, one black—had gas tank doors on opposite sides. To remember which was which, he associated the lighter-color car with the word "left," the side the gas cap was on.

## **6. Socialize**

Conversation, especially positive, meaningful interaction, helps maintain brain function.

## **7. Get organized**

Designate a place for important items such as keys and checkbooks. Keep checklists for things like daily medications or items to pack when you travel.

## **8. Turn off the tube**

Some experts say too much TV watching weakens brain power.

## **9. Jot down new information**

Writing helps transfer items from short- to long-term memory.

**10. Solve brainteasers**

Crossword puzzles, card games and board games like Scrabble improve your memory. Other games are good for remembering numbers (Concentration), spatial concepts (pinball, pool) and strategizing (chess, checkers). Try your luck.

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