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Dolly Parton may have said it best when she sang, “The day you’re born is the day you start to die.” Bleak? Sure, but it also gets to the heart of why we need to take care of our brains while we still can. If you want your cognitive thinking to stay sharp into your golden years, you need to take active steps now to improve and preserve those skills. Luckily, the brain doesn’t stop growing and developing when you become an adult. Our brains are plastic, which means they can continue to change. Therefore, it’s a good idea to learn some tips and tricks on how to improve your cognitive thinking while you still can. This article will give you 6 scientifically proven, research-backed ways to preserve and improve your cognitive thinking. The first three lay the foundation for healthy brain functioning, and the last three are strategies to improve higher-order cognitive thinking skills throughout the day. Cognition is anything having to do with intellectual activity. Examples of cognitive skills are remembering, thinking, and reasoning. Basically, cognition is anything having to do with your conscious thought processes. Bloom’s Taxonomy gives us a cheat sheet for a variety of cognitive thinking skills. Increasing in difficulty and complexity, Bloom’s Taxonomy includes remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and then creating. Ways to Improve Cognitive Thinking 1. Reduce Stress The human brain doesn’t operate at full capacity when it’s stressed out. Research shows that stress exacerbates or even leads to illnesses such as depression, dementia, and post-traumatic stress disorder. ↓ Scroll down to continue reading article ↓ ↓ Scroll down to continue reading article ↓ Therefore, managing stress is crucial to optimal cognitive thinking and overall brain health. Here are a few ways to help manage your stress. Breathing Exercises Stress reduction comes in many forms. Some of the most effective are breathing exercises, meditation, and taking walks. Breathing exercises for stress reduction should include slow, measured deep breaths. Focus on the breath itself as you breathe in and out. This takes your mind off your stressors and delivers some much-needed oxygen to the brain, something it needs for optimal cognitive thinking. Meditation Meditation also helps with stress reduction. Even five minutes of meditation a day can have significant impacts on stress levels. Meditation is about monitoring your thoughts more than forcing yourself to not think. As new thoughts pop in your head, just let them roll on by. Some people visualize their thoughts as clouds to help themselves with their meditation practice. Take a Walk It’s often better to walk away when you’re stressed than to try to muscle through. To reduce stress, take a break. Get some fresh air to help you clear your head and avoid being reactive. Moreover, getting out into nature is good for the soul. 2. Do Aerobic Activity Another way to improve your cognitive thinking is to get some aerobic exercise. Moving your body and increasing your heart and breathing rates have been shown to stop the natural deterioration in the frontal, parietal, and temporal cortices, which decreases cognitive thinking. Deterioration of these regions is a natural part of aging, but getting aerobic exercise can help slow the decline. You may not think walking is vigorous enough to count as aerobic activity, but it absolutely is. Just pick up the pace and walk as fast as you’re able. Twenty minutes of brisk walking each day will go a long way toward boosting your cognitive thinking. ↓ Scroll down to continue reading article ↓ ↓ Scroll down to continue reading article ↓ Swimming Swimming is a great choice for aerobic activity. It’s easy on the joints, and you won’t even know you’re sweating as you do laps in the pool. Certain types of yoga, such as Ashtanga, can give you an aerobic boost in addition to helping you with meditation and flexibility. 3. Get Plenty of Sleep Research also points to sleep as an important part of optimal cognitive functioning. One study indicates that sleep may be an integral part of memory. Sleep is when the brain ditches certain synaptic connections in order to strengthen others. Basically, your brain needs sleep to sift through everything that happens to you each day, remembering what’s important and forgetting the rest. It’s recommended that adults get at least seven hours of sleep each night. Keep in mind that sleep isn’t something that you can catch up on. Consistency is crucial. Consistent Bedtime Routine In order to ensure you’re falling asleep at around the same time each night, a consistent bedtime routine is important. Come up with your bedtime routine and stick with it. Switching up your routine can mess up your sleep schedule. Limit Your Screen Time As part of your consistent bedtime routine, make sure to limit screen time at least an hour before bed. Screens release dopamine in your brain and get your adrenaline pumping, so they also get some people too amped up to easily fall asleep each night. Also, make sure to set your phone to Do Not Disturb, so it doesn’t interrupt your sleep with beeps and buzzes. In fact, researchers now say that keeping it in a different room altogether may be even better for a good night’s rest. ↓ Scroll down to continue reading article ↓ ↓ Scroll down to continue reading article ↓ Melatonin Melatonin can also help you fall and stay asleep. Melatonin is a naturally occurring hormone in the body that spikes during nighttime sleep cycles, so supplementing with a Melatonin pill can help the body with its circadian rhythms, getting you the sleep your body needs for optimal cognitive thinking during the day. 4. Cognitive Simulations Reducing stress, exercising, and getting plenty of sleep lay the foundation for improving cognitive thinking, but to really boost your brain, there are three more strategies you can implement during the day. Cognitive simulations are really just brain teasers where the individual must use their existing knowledge to come up with solutions to novel problems — think crossword puzzles and Sudoku. Cognitive simulations boost the brain’s cognitive processing abilities because the brain is plastic, meaning it’s malleable. If you don’t use the brain’s ability to take new information and solve problems, you lose it. Therefore, it’s crucial to keep your brain challenged and active. Cognitive simulations are one way to do exactly that. 5. Thinking Aloud The next strategy to improve your cognitive thinking is a technique called thinking aloud. It’s as simple as it sounds. Instead of thinking silently in your head, verbalize your thought processes. Thinking aloud is a great training tool. It helps the teacher hear where the student’s comprehension needs improvement. It has also been shown to improve clinical outcomes in nurses. Thinking aloud forces you to verbalize all parts of a problem, which helps you avoid oversights. 6. Concept Mapping Finally, concept mapping can also improve your cognitive thinking. Concept mapping is a visual representation of someone’s thoughts — think word webs. Concept maps are basically just drawings that demonstrate all the connections and relationships between ideas. ↓ Scroll down to continue reading article ↓ ↓ Scroll down to continue reading article ↓ In one study, concept maps improved the critical thinking of grad-level nurses. Similar to thinking aloud, concept mapping showed deficiencies in student thinking, but also strengthened the students’ critical thinking skills. It’s like that saying, if you want to really learn something, teach it. By mapping what we know, we force ourselves to ruminate on all we do and don’t know about a certain topic. This strengthens our understanding and makes clear where we need to fill in the gaps in our knowledge. Final Thoughts Cognitive thinking isn’t the same as critical thinking. Cognitive thinking also includes remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Reducing stress, exercising, and getting plenty of sleep are crucial for making sure our brains are healthy, getting plenty of oxygen, and sorting through memories each night. During the day, we can exercise our brains with cognitive simulations, thinking aloud, and concept mapping to improve our higher-order cognitive thinking. You may have started dying since the day you were born, but a better way to look at it is that your brain can continue to grow and develop until the day you die. Just make sure you’re actively improving your cognitive thinking with these six tips. More on Improving Thinking Featured photo credit: Clever Visuals via unsplash.com Cognitive, negative, and positive are the three types of schizophrenia symptoms. Cognitive symptoms affect how you think and remember. Share on Pinterestkkgas/Stocksy UnitedNegative symptoms represent a decrease in something, such as reduced energy or social withdrawal. Positive symptoms are those that are new or increased experiences, like delusions or hearing voices.Doctors also recognize cognitive symptoms as a third category. Any symptom that affects your thought process is included in this category.Schizophrenia is chronic and lifelong, but treatable. The earlier treatment is started, the easier it is to manage symptoms.Doctors identify cognitive symptoms of schizophrenia using neurocognitive tests, which are tests to identify your capabilities across different areas of mental functioning.Examples of cognitive symptoms of schizophrenia include:processing speedworking memoryattention and vigilanceverbal learningreasoning and problem solvingsocial cognitionThe cognitive symptoms of schizophrenia are usually present at the first onset of psychosis, so they’re not a side effect of antipsychotic medication.The cognitive symptoms of schizophrenia may, in part, be related to changes in the brain. Research, including a 2021 study, shows that people with schizophrenia have reduced cortical thickness, which may contribute to changes in thinking and memory.The cortex is the outer surface of your brain, with gray matter on the outside and white matter underneath. Gray and white matter support cognitive functions like attention, memory, and language.A 2019 study reported that people with schizophrenia had less brain matter in several areas, including gray matter in the cortex, than people without schizophrenia.Some people with schizophrenia don’t experience changes in cognitive domains. A 2011 study showed that the people with no cognitive symptoms had a brain cortex similar to people without schizophrenia.The rate at which you receive, assess, and respond to new information is called your processing speed. This cognitive quality impacts how quickly you think, learn, and respond to your environment.The volume of white matter in the brain affects processing speed. White matter contains nerve cell axons, which transmit signals through brain cells.Axons are covered with a substance called myelin, which helps to speed up the transmission of signals. Schizophrenia is associated with disruptions in myelin, resulting in less white matter and a slower processing speed.If you have slow processing speed, you may need extra time to respond to questions. You might feel overwhelmed with too much information at once, and you might need instructions or information repeated.Working memory is the information you retain to complete an immediate task. Examples of what you might hold in your working memory include:multistep instructionsa short shopping lista new phone number you don’t already have memorizedmental mathimpaired working memory is a common characteristic of schizophrenia. It’s linked to lower levels of activity in an area of the brain called the prefrontal cortex.If you have trouble repeating something you’ve just heard or remembering directions, this might indicate difficulties with your working memory.Attention and vigilance both mean to focus on something. With attention, you focus on a task or something that is happening, whereas vigilance means to focus on watching for something that might happen.If you have schizophrenia, you may have reduced attention and vigilance ability regardless of whether you’re experiencing psychosis.Verbal learning is based on verbal elements like words,syllables,letters,digitsA verbal learner is someone who remembers what they’ve heard and read, and who expresses themselves well using language.A 2018 review of 17 studies linked immediate and delayed verbal learning to reductions in the volume of the brain region called the hippocampus — a key area for memory. Dysfunction in this area, resulting in reduced verbal learning, is one of the cognitive symptoms of schizophrenia.In addition, a 2000 study shows that decreases in brain activity — specifically in the prefrontal cortex — is associated with verbal memory abilities.Executive functioning includes higher level cognitive abilities like reasoning and problem solving, a complex skill with multiple steps. To solve a problem you must first identify and analyze it, and ultimately find a solution. Reasoning stems from perception. A person with schizophrenia who experiences psychosis may have trouble identifying the truth from their hallucinations and delusions. This makes it difficult to perform reasoning tasks.When we interact with people, our brains process and store information about them. We then use this information to understand others and to decide how to interact with them. This is called social cognition.For example, social cognition is how we understand another person’s beliefs and attitudes about us and the world. It’s also how we let others know about our emotions, and how we communicate our emotions to others.Social cognitive impairment can cause issues with daily functioning. If you have schizophrenia, you may have difficulties in social cognition areas that make it difficult to interact with others, like:regulating your emotionsunderstanding the feelings of others, known as mentalizingnoticing emotions and social signals in other people’s faces and voicesSchizophrenia is a complex condition with treatments that aim to help with positive, negative, and cognitive symptoms.Medication and therapy are common treatment strategies. For cognitive symptoms, executive function training may also help, though it usually takes several months to take effect. MedicationUnlike the positive and negative symptoms, the cognitive symptoms of schizophrenia are less responsive to antipsychotic medications.However, some newer antipsychotic medications may be helpful in treating the cognitive impairment caused by schizophrenia. These include:PaliperidoneLurasidoneAripiprazoleZiprasidoneEPL-1020Research is ongoing, with other medications emerging as potential cognitive symptom treatments. These include:VarenciclineEnceniclineD-serineSodium benzoateL-carnosineRaoxiifeneSex differences exist in schizophrenia, with males developing the condition younger than females. 2017 research suggests that estrogen might have a neuroprotective (brain-based) effect against cognitive symptoms.PsychotherapyCognitive enhancement therapyCognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) works toward the goal of improving the functioning of the prefrontal brain. This is one of the areas that causes cognitive symptoms because of reduced function.A small 18-month randomized trial showed improvements to the prefrontal cortex, limbic, and striatal brain regions in participants with schizophrenia who underwent CET.Cognitive behavioral therapyCognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is effective for supporting people with many mental health issues. Your therapist helps you identify thoughts and patterns of thought that lead to distress and counterproductive behavior. You then work with your therapist to reshape those thoughts into those that create a positive and proactive mindset.Social cognitive trainingMany people with schizophrenia report a need for more social interaction. Social cognitive training aims to improve social cognition and social abilities in people with schizophrenia. This therapy helps you understand and perceive the emotions of others, figure out social situations, and then helps you put this into practice.Family support and educationWith support and education, family members and caregivers are better equipped to navigate the landscape of a schizophrenia diagnosis. Learning to recognize symptoms, combined with strategies that are proven to help, can reduce the stress of managing schizophrenia.





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