

Stay Healthy

12 WAYS TO THINK FASTER

Tone up your brain with these simple, proven strategies.

By Lisa Mulcahy

Wouldn't it be terrific to be able to make great decisions in a snap? You can start thinking faster and more effectively immediately with one step: Get moving. "Starting moderate aerobic exercise, at any age, will absolutely help protect brain health," says Peter J. Snyder, professor of neurology at Brown University in Providence, R.I. "Recent research has convincingly shown us that a regular program (such as fast-paced walking for 30 minutes, three times per week), for just six months, leads to the growth of brain cells and their connections in parts of the brain that are critically important for learning and memory." Feeling inspired? Try these other simple, research-proven brain-boosting strategies.

1. Don't skimp on D. The vitamin protects against the neuron loss that can cause cognitive decline, according to a new Duke University–NUS Medical School study. Adults need between 600 and 800 IU (international units) of vitamin D per day.

2. Trust your instincts. The longer you mull over a decision, the more likely you are to choose the wrong option, according to Columbia University researchers. Write down a simple summary of the choices you have to pick from, then list a few pros and cons for each. You should quickly see the right decision; act on it and you'll feel satisfied.

3. Speed-read the right way. Mobile apps aimed at teaching speed-reading techniques are everywhere, but researchers believe most of them don't really

help your brain retain written info faster or better. Instead, focus on reading comprehension, which does increase your brain's reading speed over time. To improve your comprehension, choose reading material on a wide variety of topics that interest you.

4. Say these words: "I can do better!" It may sound silly, but research shows that silently repeating this phrase to yourself is very effective when it comes to shoring up your brain's reaction time. World-class athletes use this trick for mental motivation.

5. Go for a drive. Researchers in the UK recently found that the concentration required while motoring down the highway, and specifically while changing lanes, clears your head so effectively you'll think better overall. Try this when you're stuck on a problem.

6. Get physical four hours after learning something new. If you need to memorize that presentation for work, go over the material, then jump on the treadmill a while later. Research from the Netherlands found that a time-delayed exercise session consolidates memories in the hippocampus, the part of our brain that helps us learn quickly and effectively.

7. Never stifle a yawn. The physical mechanism of a good yawn actually cools down your brain, leading to better mental efficiency.

8. Pretend you're in Hamilton. Research from the Dana Foundation, which studies the brain, found that performing musical improvisation exercises or rapping—which require you to think on your feet moment to moment—improves your thinking speed overall the more you learn and practice this performance skill.

9. Crack open a classic. Researchers have found that good literary fiction improves connectivity and function in our brains and helps strengthen imagination too.

10. Think on your feet. A number of studies from Texas A&M University have shown that working at a standing desk improves our brains' time management, fact retention and comprehension skills. The change from sitting to standing while at work or home may break up boredom and refocus our attention in a fresh way.

11. Chew gum. Research shows that chewing increases cerebral blood flow enough to help you remember words much faster—handy when you're blanking as you say hello to your new neighbor.

12. Stay curious. Push yourself in fresh directions. For example, learn a new language. "It is never too early or too late to focus on your brain health," says Sandra Bond Chapman, Ph.D., founder and director of the Center for BrainHealth at the University of Texas, Dallas. "The key takeaway for those who haven't been training mentally or physically is to challenge their thinking, and get moving at any age."



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