Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Brain Gain in Life’s Later Years

As the population ages more and more people are willing to spend time and money to stay looking young and agile. Yet fewer make the same efforts to pamper the mind and protect it from aging, despite the fact that good mental health can have an incredible impact on a person's overall quality of life. The "exercises" below will help an older loved one (or yourself) keep the brain supple and "youthful" without breaking the bank or a sweat.

Stay social. Studies suggest older adults who maintain strong social connections—whether volunteering, attending religious services, paling around with friends, etc.—live longer, have more effective immune systems, and greatly reduce their risk of dementia. Support your loved one's return to the social set by looking into programs offered by senior's clubs or a local community centre. Does great Aunt Martha love to dance? Encourage her to sign up for salsa lessons. Is your father a Bridge buff? Help him find a community card league. New activities are not only a great way to stay connected but can inject enthusiasm into an old routine.

Mentally engage. Research shows that older adults who regularly engage in mentally stimulating or challenging activities have better memory and can function easier day to day. Books, games, the Sunday crossword, or even an engrossing conversation with a family member all help to maintain a sharp mind. It's also never too late to go back to school: indulging in an art class or brushing up on Spanish for a sun vacation not only keeps the brain fit but can boost the spirits and self-confidence.

Get moving. True, this mental exercise actually involves physical exercise (and yes, maybe even breaking a sweat) but both body and mind will reap the rewards. Aside from the many well-known benefits of physical activity-including lowering the risk of heart disease and stroke, maintaining muscle mass and bone density, and reducing blood pressure-research suggests moderate regular exercise may also enhance mood and confidence, alleviate symptoms of depression and improve memory. And older adults don't need to run a marathon or jump out of an airplane to benefit from exercise. Walking, tai chi, and swimming are all gentle and simple ways to get active. For those with limited mobility, look into programs offered at community centres and care facilities designed specifically for seniors with physical challenges.

Know what to look for. If you're a caretaker of an older adult it's vital to seek immediate help from a professional if you notice any marked changes in behavior or mood within your loved one. Common reasons to seek professional help include:

- Memory loss (not just forgetting names or places but entire situations or conversations);
- Insomnia or sleeping too much;
- Drastic changes in personality or mood;
- Inability to communicate thoughts or ideas clearly;
- Noticeable change in appetite;
- Decreased interest in social interaction;
- Problems doing familiar tasks; and
- Disinterest in activities your loved one previously enjoyed.

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Whether you're 37 or 87 a concerted effort to indulge in brain-boosting activities like those above is sure to help you and older loved ones "pump up" confidence, mood and a more positive, productive state of mind.