

Aging and Memory: Important Information to Kick Off Your 2025

Judy Harvey PhD CCC-SLP

February 2, 2025



Judy Harvey, Ph.D., CCC-SLP

Associate Professor of Practice
University of Nebraska - Lincoln

judy.harvey@unl.edu

<https://cehs.unl.edu/secd/faculty/judy-harvey-0/>

Speaker Disclosure

- I have no financial conflicts with the resources, concepts, or interventions I am discussing today

Shameless Plug

UNL-Tabitha Memory workshop

A weekly class at UNL's East Campus Barkley Center for individuals concerned, or who merely want to learn more about cognition (thinking) and aging.

Begins **February 12th**. Meets each Wednesday from 10-11:30.

Includes written handouts, discussion, opportunity for cognitive and hearing screenings, opportunity to discuss individual concerns and questions.

Come Join Me!

Workshop Topics

- Week 1 Typical aging and memory – The Science
- Week 2 Specific strategy training – Repetition
- Week 3 Specific strategy training - Attention
- Week 4 Specific strategy training – Organization and routine
- Week 5 Exercise (led by a licensed and certified physical therapist)
- Week 6 Nutrition (led by a licensed and certified dietician)
- Week 7 STUMP THE STUDENT – we answer your questions
- Week 8 Community resources and Wrap up

Spoilers for today's presentation...

Every common sense cure you've heard of for improving memory is **true...**

- Exercise
- Eat a nutritious diet
- Get good sleep
- Socialize
- Try to manage stress

Why are we here?

With age, thinking skills (*cognition*) change

There are NO exceptions!

These changes begin in late middle age and include:

- Slowed processing of information

- Memory

- Word Retrieval

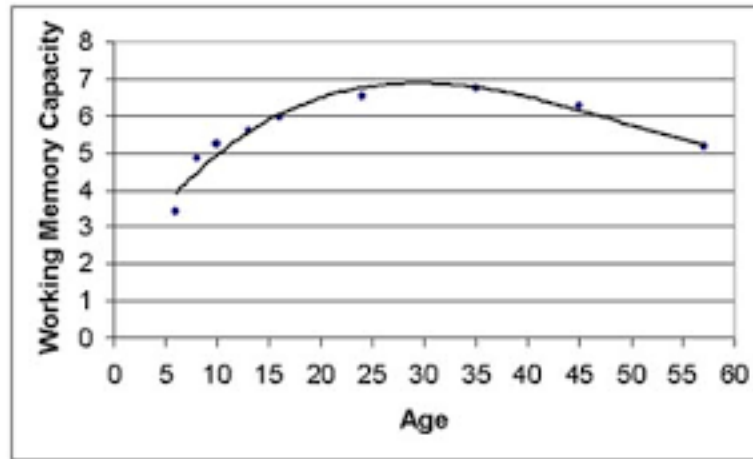
But...

While cognitive changes are part of the normal aging process, *Dementia* is NOT.

In fact...

We have a built-in *forgetfulness*

Some information has to be erased or our brain gets cluttered with useless information



What does typical aging look like?


How do I know if I am “*typical*”?

What can I do to preserve my cognitive skills?

Not everything declines with age!

Improves	Maintained	Declines
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Learning• Vocabulary• Wisdom – problem solving through experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Semantic Memories – accumulation of your memories throughout your life• Procedural Memory – things you “know by heart”• Recognition Memory	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attention and Concentration, particularly with distractions• Speed of processing• Multi-tasking• Specific word retrieval

What's the difference?

Typical Cognitive Changes	Red Flags 
Exhibit poor judgement once in a while	Can't be trusted with decision making
Missing a monthly payment	Inability to manage money and keep a budget
Mis-remembering what day it is	Losing track of date or season
Occasional word-finding problems	Difficulty having conversations
Losing things from time to time	Being unable to retrace steps to find things
Typical age-related visual changes	Trouble understanding visual images and special relationships

Consider Frequency and Severity of Changes

- Disrupts daily life
- Difficult completing familiar tasks
- Confusion with time or place
- Withdrawal from social activities
- Changes in mood and personality



Still, I'd just rather not talk about this



Possible reasons for cognitive decline

Not Dementia

- Mild Cognitive Impairment
- Medical conditions that are not dementia (e.g. concussion, normal pressure hydrocephalus)
- Medication interactions or overmedication
- High stress levels
- Poor sleep

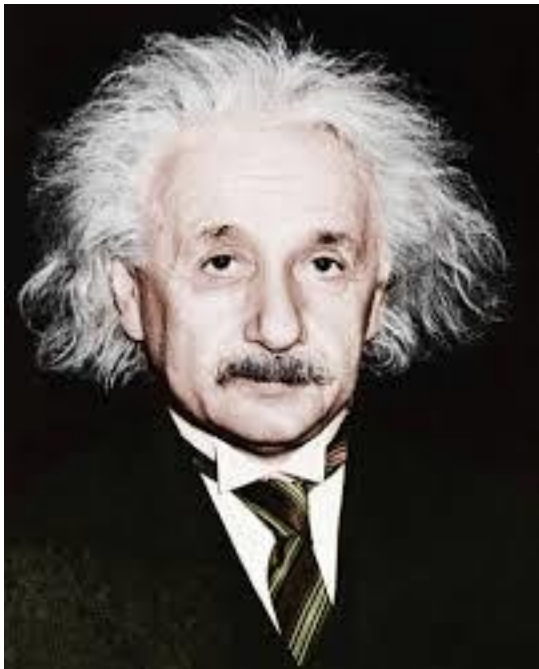
Dementia

- Alzheimer's Disease
- Vascular Dementia
- Dementia in Parkinson's Disease
- Dementia with Lewy Body Disease
- Frontotemporal degeneration

Reasons to talk to your physician about your concerns...

- You might be experiencing memory loss because of something other than dementia and it may be treatable
- There are several types of dementia that have different characteristics and expected outcomes and treatments to manage symptoms
- New medications and treatments are coming out all the time
- You may be eligible for an experimental medication trial
- You may benefit from adding medical professionals to your careteam (e.g. psychology, physical therapy, speech therapy, dietician...etc.)
- Knowledge is power and knowing your medical situation helps you be a part of the decision making

Tips to improve cognition



We used to think...

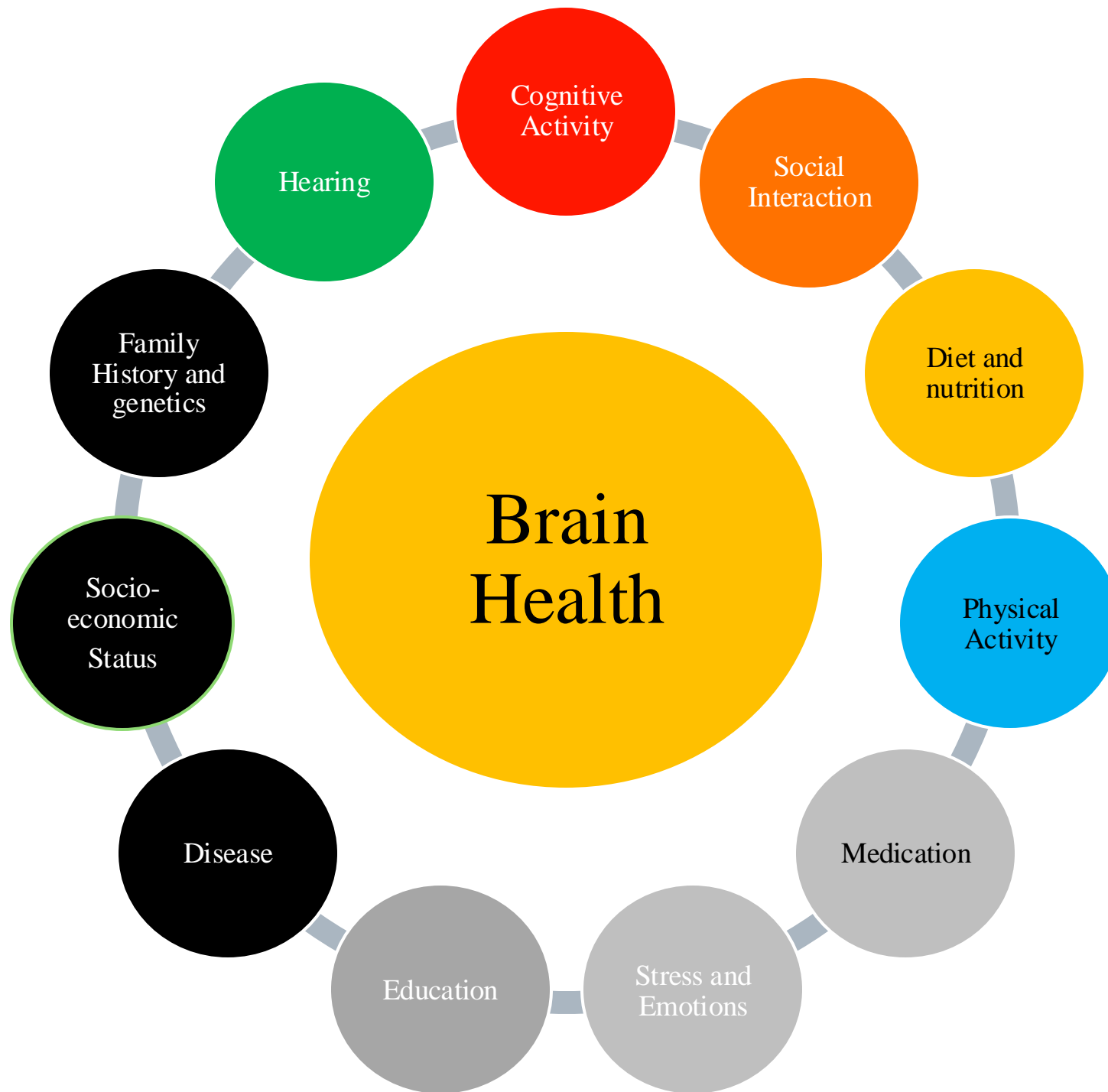
...that the number of brain cells (neurons) shrink with age and the brain never generates new ones

Remember the saying...“You can’t teach an old dog new tricks” ?

Now we know this is NOT TRUE!



Which of
these
variable
associated
with brain
health can
you
influence?





Set yourself up to be as successful as possible

Check your Hearing

According to 2013 Johns Hopkins Study...

“Older adults with impaired hearing had 30-40% steeper declines in cognitive function than those with normal hearing.”



Think about **Attention**

- **Sustained** – maintaining attention for an extended period of time
- **Selective** – ability to block competing stimuli

More complex...

- **Divided** – focusing on more than one task at a time (you can't do this with two equally difficult activities)
- **Alternating** – shifting your focus from one task to another without losing your place in either

Attention

- **Anticipate** activities that require your attention
 - Cards, noisy restaurants, big social events ...etc.
- **Schedule** cognitively demanding tasks during optimal times of day for you if possible
- **Manage** the environment to optimize attention
 - Turn off the TV during conversations
 - Ask speaker to slow down, repeat
 - Take a trusted friend or family member with you to office visit as a “second pair of eyes and ears”
 - What else?



Question:
Do computer
games and
crossword
puzzles improve
my attention and
memory?

What can I do to improve attention and memory?

- Stay cognitively active
- Learn new things
- Continue to gain experiences
- Socialize



Work on Memory

- PROCEDURAL memories are habits and routines
- They are formed through repetition
- PROCEDURAL memories are the most resistant to change in the human brain

Procedural Memory

You likely learned to perfect these activities through repetition...

- Tying your shoe
- Directions to a familiar place
- Playing the piano
- What else???

Can you *purposefully* build and improve
procedural memory?

YES

New PROCEDURAL memories can be developed through conscious repetition and rehearsal



How to build procedural memory

- Be thoughtful – what should be made into a routine (“I always lose my glasses, I can never remember my passwords, I don’t know how to sync my car with my phone....”)
- Be purposeful – take extra time to follow your routine
- Be consistent – don’t quit. Follow your routine
- Make adjustments – if something isn’t working about your routine, make needed changes
- Keep trying

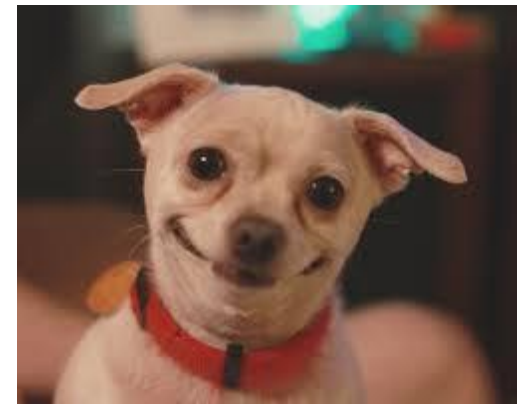
Practice makes...

Procedure

Examples of procedures...

- Establishing a “home” for your gadgets (phone, wallet, keys, glasses, cane, garage door opener...etc.)
- Taking medications at the same times every day (pair it with another activity you already do, like meals)
- Paying bills on the same day of the week
- Learning to use a new remote control, phone, app,etc.
- Set a standing monthly get-together with friends
- Introduce a new exercise into your routine or tack a few minutes on
- Change one thing about your diet
- What else?

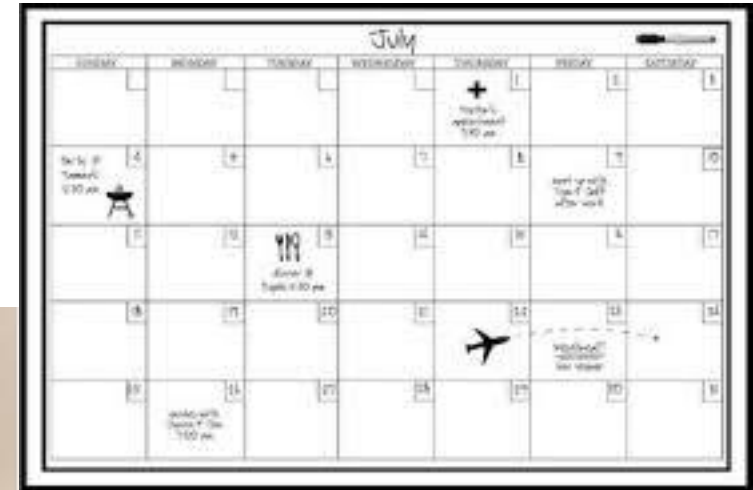
Old dog, new tricks →



Add this procedure...

Write it down

Calendars and journals not only provide a record and a reminder, they provide multisensory input and generate recall.



Using written notes

- Add calendar review or journaling to your daily routine – maybe over coffee or breakfast
- Write information in a place you expect to find it again
- Refer to your notes
- Consider a back-up

Building new procedures

- It takes trial and error
- No one routine fits all memory problems
- Sometimes multiple strategies are the answer
- No matter what, adopting new habits and routines takes repetition, rehearsal, PRACTICE

A word about words

Word finding

- A common complaint of individuals over 50 (it's actually thought to begin as early as in your late 30s, we just don't notice it, or attribute it with age at that time)
- It is typical
- It does not signal dementia
- It is frustrating
- There is no known “cure”

Forgetting names

Prime by practicing people's names you might see in a group setting

Pay attention

Make associations – Carol with the curly hair



Use nametags

“Own” your difficulty with names

Make an effort

Can't come up with the word you want

Prime by rehearsing a story or anecdote you might tell at a social event

Use another word

Describe

Engage a familiar listener

Use the alphabet to see if a first letter cue helps

Let it go and come back to it

(and finally....Yell the word out in the shower when you think of it far too late and no one is around to share your success 😊)

A word about stress

Understand that stress may compete for your attention and interfere with memory and other cognitive functions

Manage stress if you can

- Socialize
- Exercise
- Hobbies/interests
- Meditate
- Counseling
- What else???

A recommendation:

*Remember:
The Science of Remembering
and the Art of Forgetting*

By Lisa Genova



”You are more than your memory.”

Thanks for Coming!

Questions?

