

# Tips for Brain Health

Learn a skill, start a hobby and stay connected with others.

by **Kindra Gordon**, field editor

**A**s people age, many also carry with them a fear of memory loss. Are there things you can do to keep your brain healthy and your memory intact?

Leacey Brown, a gerontology field specialist with South Dakota State University Extension, says, “The most common question I hear is, ‘How can I prevent dementia?’”

Her response is to apply the mantra: “If it’s good for the heart, it’s good for the brain.”

As examples, she suggests a well-balanced diet, physical activity and healthy habits, such as not smoking and limiting alcohol consumption.

Additionally, she says, “To prevent or delay the onset of disease and disability we know that it’s important to remain cognitively active and socially connected.”

With that said, she cautions, “It is important to note that the cause of many diseases are not well understood, so a person may still develop dementia or Alzheimer’s disease even after engaging in activities known to prevent or delay the onset of disease or disability.”

She also offers a caution about the plethora of “brain games” — from crossword puzzles to Sudoku — that are targeted at senior citizens with claims that brain training improves memory, attention, problem solving and much more.

Brown says, “There is no silver bullet or

game you can play to prevent dementia or Alzheimer’s disease ... The science of the brain is still in its infancy.”

To this point, Brown shares a statement released by the Stanford Center on Longevity in 2014 that more than 70 scientists from around the world concluded that to date, science cannot support brain training as a legitimate way to prevent or reverse dementia or Alzheimer’s disease.

Specifically, the statement said: “We object to the claim that brain games offer a scientifically grounded avenue to reduce or reverse cognitive decline when there is no compelling scientific evidence to date that they do. The promise of a magic bullet detracts from the best evidence to date, which is that cognitive health in old age reflects the long-term effects of healthy, engaged lifestyles. We encourage continued careful research and validation in this field.”

## Practical and applied

As a gerontologist, Brown says the findings make sense.

“I encourage individuals to consider this: Our species has existed for millions of years, and widespread literacy has only emerged in the past 500 years,” she says, adding that the brain training humans have engaged in for most of our history did not involve solving problems on paper or a computer screen. “It

applied to our everyday lives and was deeply practical.”

For instance, Brown says early problem solving required physical activity and trial and error. She gives this example: If we needed to push a boulder up a hill, we gave it a try. If it kept rolling back down, we would add a log or another rock to keep it from rolling. We might sketch a drawing to visualize what we wanted to try.

“The point is that the problem solving early humans engaged in was practical and applied,” she says.

So what’s the best advice to keep the brain healthy?

Brown encourages individuals to remain active as they age.

“Continue to be cognitively active, socially connected and engage in a healthy lifestyle to prevent debilitating illness and early cognitive decline,” she says. If you enjoy playing brain-training games, Brown says, “continue to do so.”

Additionally, Brown encourages individuals to learn a new skill, start a new hobby, and become involved in activities that keep them connected with other people.



**Editor’s Note:** Kindra Gordon is a freelance writer and cattlemaster from Whitewood, S.D. She cited SDSU Extension as the source for information for this story.