Lifestyle Strategies to Boost Brain Health (Ask the MD Podcast) Transcript

English (US)

00:00:04.160 — 00:00:13.040 · Michael J. Fox

This is Michael J. Fox. Thanks for listening to this podcast. Learn more about the Michael J. Fox Foundation's work and how you can help speed a cure at Michael J. Fox.

00:00:14.840 — 00:00:35.160 · Veronique Enos Kaefer

Welcome to a recap of our latest ask VMD video. Tune in. As a movement disorder specialist at the Michael J. Fox Foundation answers your questions about Parkinson's research and care. Learn more about living well with Parkinson's disease. Free resources like this podcast are always available at Michael J.Fox. Org.

00:00:41.920 — 00:01:52.940 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

Hi, I'm doctor Rachel Dolhun, I'm a movement disorder specialist and lifestyle medicine physician at the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research. You've probably heard a lot about heart health, and you know what to do to keep your heart in tip top shape. Exercise. Eat well. Don't smoke. Well, what about brain health?

Here's an easy tip. Heart health is brain health. More and more research is showing that there is a lot you can do to keep your brain healthy. No matter how young or old you are, whether you live with disease or not. And the most powerful tools for brain health are part of your everyday, what we call your lifestyle.

How much you move, what you eat, how well you manage your stress. We're going to talk about brain health, lifestyle and everything in between and take your top questions. I'm talking with the brain docs Dean and Aisha Sures. I. Doctor Dean Tsai is a behavioral

neurologist and neuroscientist, and doctor Aisha Shirazi is a vascular neurologist and a research scientist.

They are best selling authors and currently leading a large community based brain health initiative. Thank you both so much for being here.

00:01:52.980 — 00:01:54.700 · Ayesha Sherzai, MD

Thank you so much for having us, Rachel.

00:01:54.740 — 00:01:59.600 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

So first let me ask you Call yourself the brain docs. Why is that?

00:01:59.640 — 00:02:08.360 · Ayesha Sherzai, MD

It's an important topic for people to remember. We want the word brain to come up in everybody's day to day language, because it's such an important topic.

00:02:08.399 — 00:02:15.520 · Dean Sherzai, MD, PhD

This is a vital organ that we've avoided throughout history because we didn't know much about it, but there's a lot that we know now.

00:02:15.680 — 00:02:31.400 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

So you mentioned the word brain health. And this is a term, you know, I personally throw around a lot. So we have a question from our community member on this topic. It comes from Dave Harris and his wife Kim, who live in Missouri. Dave was diagnosed with Parkinson's in 2022.

00:02:31.560 — 00:02:46.320 · Dave Harris

My question is, what does brain health actually mean? And am I able to boost my brain health through lifestyle strategy changes like change in diet or exercise? If I'm older and living with a disease like Parkinson's?

00:02:46.560 — 00:03:26.710 · Dean Sherzai, MD, PhD

Uh, brain health is, as you said, heart health, but also it's understanding that the brain is the most active organ in the body. We're talking about 87 billion neurons, 1 quadrillion potential connections. A brain that never sleeps. In fact, the very function of sleep is mostly for the brain to recover.

So brain health is about maintaining this incredibly powerful organ and an environment that's constantly changing. There's no static state in the brain, and we need to be aware of it. Everything that goes into that brain, into that environment of that brain that can make it worse and things that can make it better.

00:03:26.710 — 00:03:41.510 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

And brain health isn't just the absence of disease or just keeping our memory. I think a lot of times we think about brain health being I still have, you know, my memory and my thinking, of course, that's part of it. But it's it's much broader than that, isn't it?

00:03:41.550 — 00:04:44.530 · Ayesha Sherzai, MD

Oh, definitely. It is broader. I mean, the brain being the most active organ in the body at any moment, it consumes 25% of your body's energy. It's only about, you know, like 2% of your body's weight but consumes up to 25% of your body's energy. So that is a great reflection of how active it is. And if we do the right things, it will continuously work at its peak.

And when we say your brain functions well, it's basically you functioning well as a human being. You think better, you are faster, you process information better, you have greater relationships with other human beings. You feel good. And if you don't, if you actually compromise some of your lifestyle factors, like for example, if you compromise your sleep or if you don't move around, or if you don't eat well, definitely there's going to be a cumulative damage later on in life.

But even at that very moment, you are actually going to feel the consequences. And so this amazing organ gets impacted by everything we do every single moment. Mhm.

00:04:44.690 — 00:05:32.470 · Dean Sherzai, MD, PhD

And the power of that is that all these things are cumulative, both on the positive direction and in the negative direction. In the negative direction. We are aware that when you don't sleep, your affect, memory, attention, focus, all of these things and if you don't eat well, that affects other systems as well.

And if you don't exercise the blood flow as far as cardiovascular health, everything else, it will be affected. And the cumulative negative effect of that over the years is powerful and incredibly destructive. But the positive side of that is if you start doing those things, the cumulative effect of those are not just additive, they are multiplicative.

Because when you exercise you your sleep gets better, the blood flow gets better. When you eat better, the same thing it over encompasses everything else. So I want people to focus on the positive aspect of this.

00:05:32.470 — 00:06:18.850 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

And we're going to talk about all of those things, all the lifestyle factors. And I love what you said about how they compound each other, how, you know, if you're exercising, maybe you want to eat better and vice versa. And so we'll get into that. But before we do, I want to talk about aging. And you mentioned this cumulative things.

Adding over time and aging is a big risk factor for disease like Parkinson's, like Alzheimer's. And of course, we're all getting older and our brains change, just like our bodies change. And for a lot of people, there's a question of what's normal with aging and what might be disease. So can you talk to us a little bit about that?

What happens normally as our brains age, what should we expect and what's normal? And then what might be concerning for disease?

00:06:19.290 — 00:07:36.150 · Dean Sherzai, MD, PhD

There was a time that when we answered that, we said that there are some changes that happened to everybody as we get older. And there probably is as it stands now, as it stands for the majority of people who live a particular lifestyle now. And that's the cumulative trauma. I call it trauma. The cumulative trauma of poor input, food stress, things of that nature, the cumulative trauma of sedentary life.

Because when you don't move, it's not just movement, It's blood flow. It's lymphatic flow. So we. We don't want to focus on aging, because we really think that the effect of cumulative negative is more important than the aging process itself. And the positive side of that is the cumulative effect of positive is also going to be great as we get older.

So instead of mapping it out the way it is, which is when you get older, yes, your memory might get a little worse, your attention is going to get worse. But that really the science with

that is just particular population. And it's not for the broader population. So I want this language to flip from aging being a negative thing and focusing on the cumulative effect of negative forces and the cumulative effect of positive forces.

That's a better way. Otherwise, we're going to focus as an aging, as a negative.

00:07:36.470 — 00:08:00.450 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

Yeah. The positive point of this is that more and more research is showing that throughout our lifespan, there is so much we can do, right? Whether it's our education, our relationships, our exercise, taking care of our heart, our hearing, our vision, all of these things, as you said, add up together and framing it in that positive way that there are so many things that we can do to help care for our bodies and our brains as we age.

00:08:00.570 — 00:08:03.490 · Ayesha Sherzai, MD

Yeah, absolutely. I think it's important for people, like Dean.

00:08:03.490 — 00:08:03.970 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

Said.

00:08:04.010 — 00:08:53.080 · Ayesha Sherzai, MD

To know that there is a positive side to this as well. And we have to stay away from this negative picture that we've created about aging. As a matter of fact, Dean, and I believe, and this has been the message that we want to propagate, is that the brain is the only organ that can get better as we age. There's always this thought that you lose your memories or you get slower, or you don't function as you did when you were younger.

But, you know, we actually have a lot of data from successful agers and successful cognitive agers showing that if you address the lifestyle risk factors, you have more experiences, you have more stories, you have more creativity, you have more ideas. And when you put all of that together, that's a beautiful brain.

And it can actually stay beautiful and healthy for the rest of your life.

00:08:53.080 — 00:09:07.160 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

And I want to emphasize something you said, which is that our brain can change in positive ways throughout our life. I think we long thought that kind of what's done is done in the brain, and you can't change things, but you're here to tell us that's not true.

00:09:07.640 — 00:10:05.260 · Dean Sherzai, MD, PhD

This brain is supposed to get better. This brain is supposed to grow. Each neuron can make a couple of connections. Remember, 87 billion neurons. Let's do the math. Each of them can make a couple of connections or as many as 30,000 connections. And in certain cells, the Purkinje cells in the cerebellum, in other places, as many as 50,000 connections, those connections.

Now do the math. If you even have a billion cells times 50,000, that's way more than 87 billion. That's the power. And that's happening constantly, all the time, at an hour by hour basis, minute by minute basis. The cells are changing, the connections are changing, connections are being pulled back, others are being created.

And those connections being pulled back and created, for the most part, are under our control. What we do, what we say, what we think, how we feel, how we interact. Those are the the things that make the connections. That's powerful.

00:10:05.300 — 00:10:23.180 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

So everything that we do in our day to day can help fuel more connections in your brain or kind of take away those connections. But I love what you said to about it not just being our activities, which we'll talk more in depth about, but also our attitude and our mindset, which we often don't talk about as much.

00:10:23.300 — 00:11:45.020 · Ayesha Sherzai, MD

Definitely yes, because I think it's a two way process. Your attitude and your thoughts determine your activities, and your activities can determine that background soundtrack of your life. You know, how do you how do you create a picture on a palette? So that palette is your mood and that gets affected with everything you do.

So it's a beautiful, symbiotic relationship between your activities and the things that you choose every single day and how it manifests in your mood. And you know, if there is an imbalance in one part, say, for example, if you were not doing, let's say, you know, from some of the studies that show that when people exercise, they have better mood.

We have these chemicals called endorphins that are created when we exercise. We have growth hormones called BDNF, brain derived neurotrophic factor that actually gets produced when you exercise, that creates more connections, that actually creates a feeling of elation. If we're not moving, if we're sitting on our desk all day long, and if we're not exposing ourselves to some sunlight or some nature, you kind of have this, like, really dreary, this down feeling and you're not moving.

So it kind of affects your mood the other way around. If somebody has some mood problems or if they have anxiety, or if they have some psychological issues that are not addressed that can impact their lifestyle as well. So it's bidirectional and it's very important for people to determine what they need to do for better brain health.

00:11:45.060 — 00:12:43.360 · Dean Sherzai, MD, PhD

Along that line, we have this concept of motivation, which I absolutely abhor that term because it's not a functional term. What do I do with motivation? There's nothing I can pull, push, pull. You know, it's not a functional word instead of a motivation is an emotional state that moves us in small steps toward a direction.

Okay. There are some terms that I can work there. The mental state is the driver. The mental state is the thing that gets you past those little small steps. The resilience at the meta level, that's the most powerful thing, which is how do we get to do this exercise? How do we get to interact when I don't want to?

How do I get to, you know, eat something when I don't want to? It's the attitude that moves it, not the molecular level. At the neurological level, it has function as well. There's a several studies that have shown when people change their mindset about a concept had changed their entire perspective of success and their biochemistry.

00:12:43.400 — 00:13:19.880 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

So our thoughts impact our brain and how our brain works, and what we then do or don't do. And lifestyle, as we've touched on, is everything we're kind of doing or not doing to take care of our brain and to take care of our bodies. And those are some of the most powerful tools to help us care for our brain, whether we're just getting older or whether we're living with disease, helping us live as well as possible.

So tell us a little bit more about lifestyle, particularly when you talk with people about taking care of their brains. What kinds of activities are you telling them to think about?

00:13:20.080 — 00:15:53.390 · Ayesha Sherzai, MD

We, you know, created this acronym that's easy for our patients to remember. We call it the neuro factors or the neuro plan or lifestyle factors. And it stands for nutrition, exercise unwind, which is stress management. Our hours for restorative sleep, the deep kind of sleep that allows the brain to cleanse itself, and always for optimizing cognitive activity.

And when you look at each and every factor backed by decades of data and science, and we were actually looking at some factors as well in the community, we know that when people adhere to these and it's not an all or none phenomenon, every small little step of change towards these factors makes a huge difference.

Let's start with nutrition. We know that what you eat on a regular basis, the kind of dietary patterns that you adhere to, matters. It impacts your brain health, whether it's slowing down or preventing Alzheimer's disease or dementias, whether it's Parkinson's disease, whether it's stroke or vascular dementia.

We know that a diet that consists of fruits and vegetables and whole grains and legumes and nuts and seeds, that is plant predominant in its lower end ultra processed foods and saturated fats, is very healthy for brain health as far as exercise is concerned. Movement is really important and we have so much data supporting that as far as stress management is concerned.

We kind of touched on it of how important it is to address mental health issues as far as anxiety and stress is concerned. And as it happens, you is in the middle of neuron. It's such an important factor because it impacts everything. It impacts the foods that we choose. It impacts the kind of companies that we keep.

It impacts what activities we choose to keep our minds active. And then sleep is a whole world on its own. We know that the different stages of sleep are a very important purpose for the brain to cleanse itself and to also consolidate memory. So all of this information that we accumulated during the day gets stored in the right file folder and cabinet.

When we go through the deep stages of sleep. And anything that disrupts sleep can actually disrupt our memories and our cognition as well. And then the last one is optimization of cognitive activity, which means keeping your mind active with activities that are meaningful to you, that give you purpose.

Whether it's painting, whether it's interviewing neurologists, whether it's being a filming crew and being a specialist in any particular form of art. All of these actually, they're very important for brain health. And they create all those necessary connections for the brain to grow and thrive.

00:15:53.390 — 00:16:03.110 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

So crosswords can be good if that's meaningful to you. But it's not just about a crossword puzzle. It's about finding activities that are exercising your brain. That means something to you.

00:16:03.150 — 00:17:43.390 · Dean Sherzai, MD, PhD

We did a meta analysis in 2018 and showed that even simple games improved brain health. But complex behaviors. Real life behaviors matter more because they are interconnected with other things, aren't they? Remember, the brain is about interconnectedness. It's not just about those axons and dendrites sprouting, it's about them connecting to other ideas, other islands of thought.

And so when you're doing something like learning a musical instrument. It's not just adding column to nine, which is fine, but it's about learning to read the language of music, which is the left prior on love for the most part, and simplifying it. It's about you learning to be dexterous. That's your motor cortex and your it's being able to creative.

It's the it's the totality of the brain. And then it's processing it. Visual processing emotionally involved. That's the entirety of the brain being activated. And then of course the emotional

component because you like it. So doing real life activities that are, you know, around your proclivities but also you like.

And then here's the rub. The important part you have to push yourself the same way that walking is good, but brisk walk is better. Learning a, you know, a song with four chords. And if that's all you playing, first of all, you got to get kicked out of your house. But if you're learning four chords, then learn five chords.

Learn the next thing. If if you're learning to dance, if you're just doing, you know, two by two little step, that's going to get old. Push yourself. This combination makes the neurons connect and connect across different islands of thought. This concept of idea density is incredibly protective and important.

So build your idea density.

00:17:44.030 — 00:18:05.470 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

A lot of these can seem deceptively simple, right? I eat better. Go out and get sunlight. Move! These are all the things our mom was telling us when we were little. Right. So I think for a lot of people, it can seem like, can these really have an impact? Are they just as good as the shiny new treatment out on the market?

They do.

00:18:05.470 — 00:19:00.890 · Ayesha Sherzai, MD

And I think it's the simple activities and simple things that we do every single day on a regular basis that make the biggest impact. Unfortunately, when people think of brain diseases, unfortunately we start thinking about our brain when we are Experiencing the disease, whether it's in ourselves or in a loved one.

And I think it's really important for us to kind of change that narrative and start thinking about our brain health from, you know, childhood. There are a lot of things out there that may have promises for better brain health, but when you look at scientific evidence and evidence based medicine, it's these lifestyle factors that actually come to surface and are the most important things.

So yes. Um, and I think adhering to them and making them a part of our life and creating really solid habits around them is key. That's what takes a little bit of time, but it's not difficult.

00:19:00.890 — 00:19:26.120 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

And that's the thing about it. Even if we know that we're supposed to do this, it's not necessarily easy to do. Our lives might not be set up in a way to exercise, or we may live with disease that's progressing. So it's more about how do we actually bring those into our lives. And we have a question along those lines from Lisa Blank, who's a Nebraska native who was diagnosed with early onset Parkinson's in 2014.

00:19:26.160 — 00:19:57.240 · Lisa Volenec

Challenge for me is the fact that I get fatigued so easily, and then I want to kind of beat myself up, and here come the waves of depression, because I can't go out and do the same things that I used to do. And so I think I need motivation to know what does exercise truly do to my brain, and does it help me long term?

I know I'm going to feel better if I work out. Everybody feels better when they work out. But for Parkinson's patient, is it a bigger impact on the brain than perhaps we realize?

00:19:57.440 — 00:21:48.480 · Dean Sherzai, MD, PhD

So the studies on exercise are just mind blowing. It's absolutely brilliant. And when it comes to cognitive state and cognitive health and brain health, there hasn't been much that's been more powerful than exercise. We'll leave the mood component, apart from whether it's reducing anxiety and depression and things of that nature.

But when it comes to the very function of the brain physiology of the brain, there's really not much that's more powerful than exercise. We both have degrees in nutrition, but we're kind of now saying that it's as powerful, if not more powerful than even nutrition. We can't do without one or the other. We have to do all of it.

Exercise increases blood flow to the brain powerfully. Remember this little 3 pound organ? 2% of the body's weight consumes a lot of blood, and it needs a lot of blood that's oxygenated. That, that and what gets it to it? Exercise does. It also increases this hormone called BDNF brain derived neurotrophic factor.

If there is a growth factor out there that grows the connections between neurons, it's BDNF. And now we know other neurochemicals and hormones, brain hormones such as TNF and IGF, which are vascular growth as well as glial cells. Health also is enhanced with exercise. Exercise increases the number of connections more than anything else.

We say that whereas nutrition creates the environment for growth and health also takes away the negative things and stress also creates the environment and takes away the negative things. It's mental activity and exercise that are the things that create the connections. And this is true for Parkinson's.

And the studies have shown this, and this is true for Alzheimer's or basically for brain health. There's literally nothing that helps grow connections between neurons better than exercise.

00:21:48.480 — 00:22:34.780 · Ayesha Sherzai, MD

Sometimes we make exercise seem such a monstrous activity to take part in that it becomes really difficult and we get scared and we kind of push it back. But it doesn't have to be a dedicated time. Every small little thing you can do move around, you know, stand up if you're sitting for more than an hour matters.

So you can actually basically just spread it throughout the day. Don't make a thing out of it. Even moving around. Engaging in anything that makes you stand up. Bend down. Do some squats and just being conscious and being aware of your movement throughout the day makes a huge difference. So you know, anything that Lisa can do during her daytime is more than enough.

00:22:34.820 — 00:23:15.840 · Dean Sherzai, MD, PhD

And I love that concept so much. And it's because the limitations that we hear as time and space. I said, do you watch a show? Yes. So while you're watching the show, stand up and do some squats or walk in place. That's it. Space and time taken care of. And that's important for people to realize that it doesn't have to be a very fancy program.

It is the space you have and it's the time you have. But the critical factor of exercise cannot be taken away. It is is important for everybody to do enough exercise to break a little sweat, to really push your body, because it really grows the connections between the brain.

00:23:15.920 — 00:24:27.550 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

Yeah, exercise is absolutely critical for all of us, but especially when you're living with something like Parkinson's. And I've heard this concept that you're talking about building exercise in throughout your day described as exercise snacks. And I always say, who doesn't love a snack? Right. So, so if you can get in ten minutes here, in ten minutes there, and ten minutes later you've got your 30 minutes in.

But it's just about figuring out how it works in your life. And specifically to Lisa's question on Parkinson's, of course, we know that exercise helps with all of the symptoms. It helps your medication work better, and we even see from research that it may slow progression of disease. So for a lot of people, those are I hesitate to use the word motivating.

But those are motivating factors for a lot of people. But sometimes that's just not enough either. It's not enough to get you out on the rainy day or when you're feeling fatigued. And so I always remind people to bring it back to something tangible and meaningful to you. Do you want to be able to walk hand in hand with your spouse without feeling off balance, then that's your goal.

Do you want to be able to get on the ground with your grandchildren and play? What is the motivating factor that will get you going when life invariably gets in the way? Your Parkinson's invariably gets in the way.

00:24:27.590 — 00:24:28.390 · Ayesha Sherzai, MD

Absolutely.

00:24:29.070 — 00:25:01.350 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

And outside of exercise, we talked about a lot of the other lifestyle tools. You mentioned sleep and stress reduction. This is good news and bad news, I think, because there's so much we can do, but then it can feel overwhelming and like a full time job. How do we get in all of these lifestyle factors? So we have a question from Susan Levy, who lives in Washington, about this.

Susan's mother lived with Parkinson's. Susan doesn't have the disease, but she does have a genetic change that increases her risk for Parkinson's. So here's her question.

00:25:01.390 — 00:25:03.150 · Susan Levy

I know that lifestyle habits are Really important for brain health. If you had to choose between 3 and 5 habits, what would you say are the most important? And if you could only choose one to start with? Which one would you suggest?

00:25:17.170 — 00:26:23.790 · Dean Sherzai, MD, PhD

Beautiful question. Um, and this speaks to making sure that you take on habits in a way that are sustainable and stackable. And of those, the hardest one is sleep, and the easiest one is exercise the most. We'll use that term. The most motivating one is exercise, and the one that you immediately feel an effect with is exercise.

So I would say exercises first and again I say that it doesn't have to be a complex exercise regimen. If you do a walk, a 25 minute walk in the morning outdoors or in the in the room, if you have no space, it is incredibly powerful and then slowly increase the pace so that you feel it more and more and more. And add to that a little bit of strength training, especially leg exercises.

Leg strength seems to have a lot of correlation with long term health. We know this from false studies and and as age as people age, but also as far as brain health is concerned. As far as preservation of brain like strength seems to have a strong correlation. So I would start with exercise first and then we would add nutrition.

00:26:23.830 — 00:26:27.310 · Ayesha Sherzai, MD

Uh, well I was going to I was going to say squats.

00:26:27.830 — 00:26:28.870 · Dean Sherzai, MD, PhD

That was part of exercise.

00:26:28.910 — 00:26:31.870 · Ayesha Sherzai, MD

Yeah yeah yeah. Not to copy you but squats are amazing.

00:26:31.910 — 00:26:32.430 · Dean Sherzai, MD, PhD

Amazing.

00:26:32.430 — 00:26:54.750 · Ayesha Sherzai, MD

And I usually like joke around. I have three tips for my my lovely, you know, like, uh, female patients and community members. I was like, do squats, stay away from drama and eat your greens. Um, in that order. Uh, so. But but at the end of the day, it comes down to whatever is easy for for the individual and for them to choose what's worked best.

But squats. Definitely. Yeah.

00:26:54.870 — 00:27:42.730 · Dean Sherzai, MD, PhD

And as far as the other two, I would say nutrition and greens. If there is a superfood and we don't believe in superfoods, it's greens. Whatever dietary pattern you have. Adding greens seems to be incredibly positive and incredibly beneficial. So we don't go into a hole, follow this dietary pattern, or restrict many things.

We have a certain pattern ourselves, but for our populations, we say the first step is increase greens. Studies have shown that people who have added 1 or 2 extra servings of

greens per day have significantly improved their brain health significantly. We're talking about years and we don't rely on one study.

One study showed 11 years. We usually look at multiple studies, but the trend is very positive. Agreed.

00:27:42.770 — 00:27:47.490 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

And greens can be kale, spinach, collard greens anything like that.

00:27:47.530 — 00:27:48.090 · Ayesha Sherzai, MD

Absolutely.

00:27:48.090 — 00:28:05.670 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

And I love what you say about add or increase right. It's about what we can add to our lives, even if it's exercise or more sunlight when we're out taking a walk. Focusing on that framing around the positive and what we're adding to our lives versus what we might have to think about taking away.

00:28:05.710 — 00:30:12.720 · Dean Sherzai, MD, PhD

I think that's critical. I think the first ten habits that you slowly add over time should be adding. Don't take it. Take away anything, because once you have ten positive steps, then you're not turning back. Now you're going to take away the negatives, but don't even start there. Add positives and greens is one of them.

So I want to add the third, which is very important both as far as quality of life and as far as how it affects your brain. It's mental activity. Keep engaged. Keep connected both with society, with society, with community, with others. That's mental activity. When you're talking to somebody here, I have to be aware.

I have to read the person, I have to read the concept. I have to analyze the concept. I have to formulate an answer. Then I have to come up with multiple answers and then give one. That is mental exercise. When you're actually socializing and leading a group volunteering, that's mental activity. And then of course, if you do mental activity around things that you love, whether it's music, learning a musical instrument, or learning new musical songs, uh, learning how to dance, um, learning how to do crafts.

Clay, what do you call pottery? We were getting into pottery and and things of that nature. These are real mental activity that grow the neurons. I want people to recognize that a diagnosis or even a risk, is something that should motivate you to move you towards doing the thing that grows your brain. And between exercise and mental activity, there's nothing out there that would be sold for a while.

That's going to grow the connection between your brain as as powerfully. So be engaged if you're doing one activity, find 2 or 3 other activities. Nowadays, there are courses online that very course that you wanted, that esoteric philosophy of history of of of New Guinea. Do it. Take that class. It's going to help grow the brain.

And you will now learn about New Guinea. So activities like that are not just a little two side things. They are literally the vitamins, the social vitamins, the cognitive vitamins that grow the connections between the brain cells.

00:30:12.760 — 00:30:16.760 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

The exercise for your brain, just like the exercise you do for your body.

00:30:17.080 — 00:30:52.040 · Dean Sherzai, MD, PhD

Even more so because your brain that's 87 billion neurons, wants to be challenged. It's there to be challenged. It's there to be curious. It's there to connect. It's there to socialize. It's there to think. And when you don't do it, especially when you get older, all this energy, the brain says, I don't need to spend all this energy just to watch some some show on TV.

It collapses. There's a concept of Eulerian degeneration. Well, it's true also in the brain, the connections withdraw. But when you're engaged, they connect even further. That's powerful.

00:30:52.080 — 00:30:53.440 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

Use it or lose it.

00:30:53.480 — 00:30:55.360 · Dean Sherzai, MD, PhD

Use it or lose it.

00:30:55.600 — 00:31:16.500 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

We've talked about so much and so many habits we can build, but building new habits can be really tough, right? And our community often asks how to bring these tools into their lives. So we've got a question from Ellen and Jonah Zemeckis, who live in new Jersey and have a close family member who lives with Parkinson's.

00:31:16.660 — 00:31:28.900 · Jonah Zemeckis

We're in our 60s and know that diet and exercise is very important to people with Parkinson's. And frankly, anybody who's aging, how can we start and get build healthy habits for our family?

00:31:28.940 — 00:31:29.580 · Ayesha Sherzai, MD

That's a great.

00:31:29.580 — 00:31:30.420 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

Question.

00:31:30.740 — 00:33:19.140 · Ayesha Sherzai, MD

I think in anything in life, when you start a or when you introduce a new theory or a new activity in your life, you have to find out where you are. First of all, so assessing where you are, who you are, what your likes are, what your dislikes are, how much you can do and how much is too much. And so understanding who you are and what works best for you is the best place to start.

And as far as nutrition, to kind of make it more substantial as far as nutrition is concerned. Make it very, very easy and small things. And like we said earlier, the additive nature of things. So say for example, not don't get rid of anything. Just add these add greens. Add say for example whole grains and add some berries.

You know those are like very, very healthy foods that have a lot of antioxidants and anti-inflammatory compounds. And they're great for brain health as well. And then once that becomes a habit, then after a few weeks saying, okay, what are some of the unhealthy things that I am doing that I can slowly and gradually get rid of, not do that right away?

Do one small thing. So say, for example, if somebody is eating some candies. I have a lot of community members who love sugar, and that's one of the most difficult things to get rid of. Coming from a chocoholic myself and a sugar addict. And so you don't go cold turkey, you say, okay, I'm eating some jelly beans, and instead of eating a packet of jelly beans every other day, I'm going to cut it down to say, you know, this much.

So, for example, I'm just going to cut it down to about 50% of it. I'm going to eat half of it. And then two months goes by and that becomes a habit. And then you cut down a little bit more. So it does take a very long time to introduce a habit, but it has to be done very, very slowly, incrementally. And it should be based on the person's likes and dislikes and their capacities.

00:33:19.180 — 00:33:23.660 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

We don't want to overhaul everything all at once because that's not going to work long term.

00:33:23.700 — 00:33:33.100 · Ayesha Sherzai, MD

Never. We're not dieting. We're not introducing, you know, like things into our life. We're changing habits and.

00:33:33.100 — 00:33:34.260 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

Changing how we live.

00:33:34.300 — 00:33:43.700 · Ayesha Sherzai, MD

We're changing how we live. We change our relationship with things that we eat on our plate. So, you know, relationships take a very long time. And so we have to give ourselves time.

00:33:44.060 — 00:34:12.120 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

And there are some practical things that people can do as well. You've talked about stacking, which is this idea of building in a new activity with something you always do. So maybe if you want to drink more water, you drink a glass of water before you have your morning coffee you have every day, or you do your five squats before you brush your teeth because hopefully you're brushing your teeth every day.

Building these into your daily routines. Are there other things people can do practically when getting started or keeping going?

00:34:12.159 — 00:36:11.170 · Dean Sherzai, MD, PhD

Yeah, we love the morning walk. The morning walk. Morning sun is so, so important because of exercise, because of how it affects mood, how it starts, the movement of behavior from the very beginning, especially with Parkinson's patients. This this system is affecting both movement and motivation and things of that nature.

So what your exercise shoes right next to your bed. So when you get up you know that's the primer. That's what will move things for food. Have the greens chopped and ready the wheat on the weekend for the whole week and have it in front of the fridge and every time you open the fridge to eat anything else? Your rule is you're going to have a serving of that green, whatever that is for you.

And that's important. And as far as the other part of exercise is if you're going to watch shows at night, pick one of the shows every night, and for that half an hour or an hour, you're standing and you're doing some exercise. That's incredible positive standing as far as

mental activity is concerned. If there's nothing new that you want to pick up, let's say a course or or a pottery or dancing or musical instrument, if there's a show that you're watching that's got some content.

Have a note, paper and pen next to you. So that show every night or a couple of shows every night is going to be about learning. You're going to pay greater attention to that show to see how much of the details and I mean details. Not the main characters, but the side characters, you know, you can remember after that show, then that show becomes an exercise that becomes you haven't done anything extra.

You walk out from bed and there's the shoes, you open the fridge and there's the Greens. And then you were watching a show and you stood up and did squats and walked in place, and you were watching a show, and afterwards you recall more details. Those are powerful. Those are habit changes that actually then instigate other things.

Imagine if you're doing those four things. Aren't you motivated to now take away some negatives? I did these things consistently. That's how behavior change takes place.

00:36:11.170 — 00:36:19.250 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

And as we bring these things into our life, how do we know whether it's working or we're making progress? How do we measure that benefit?

00:36:19.370 — 00:37:11.710 · Ayesha Sherzai, MD

The most significant sign is just feeling energized. I mean, we have all felt it in a way. Say, for example, if you sleep well the next morning, you're happier, you're more energized. You actually call more people. At least I do. When I'm having a conversation, I'm faster, I make eye contact, I'm not irritable, and I come up with better ideas as well.

When we exercise that first few hours after a walk. That is such a powerful moment for people to be creative because you're energized, you feel good, you're your blood is actually flowing into the brain. And so those are the day to day changes that you feel. But reminding yourself that it's almost like putting money in the bank account.

You're building a bank account for yourself. And that's cognitive resilience and cognitive reserve. That's going to come in handy later on in life.

00:37:11.750 — 00:38:54.190 · Dean Sherzai, MD, PhD

And that beautifully stated. And one of the measurable ways to do this, short of going to clinicians where they do cognitive testing, is that list that you had next to you when you were watching the show and recalling? Look at that list from a month ago, from two months ago, you'll realize that your list is getting better and better, and that's a tangible, measurable way of doing things.

And then for other shows that you weren't doing this for. See if you can actually get better at that. See how much you can recall. That's a very nice in-home cognitive test that you can see over time. One of our patients, two, actually a husband and wife that's been on the show in my American life. They started with a list where they would take a magazine and the wife would underline some words in that magazine, some names 20 of them, and the husband would do the same thing.

Initially they could recall three of the words, and then after a few months, they actually had to extend the words to 27 words. So that's how much they could recall. So that's a good measurement recall of recall. The other thing you can do over time is see how many of the family members you can recall, or when you go to a party, how many of the names you can remember.

Make that a game. See how many of the names you can remember later on. These are tangible things you can do in real life. Don't do that for everything, because as we get older,

it's not necessarily that our memory gets worse. We have more complex lives. So therefore more things to remember and more things to forget.

So pick a couple of things I'm going to see how much I'll recall. names of people in a party or in a show, or for my friends or for my family. And that becomes a tangible, measurable way of looking at your own memory and cognition.

00:38:54.350 — 00:39:20.830 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

Tangible and memorable and also fun. I like what you were saying about, you know, get creative and think about how you get if it's underlining words and testing your loved one. And speaking of loved ones, loved ones and family members can be such a strong support for us in building these healthy habits.

So let's hear from two community members, both of whom we met earlier, who have a similar question. That's top of mind for anyone who cares for someone living with Parkinson's.

00:39:21.070 — 00:39:22.750 · Kim Harris

I'm wondering how I can. Best inspire and support Dave and starting and maintaining healthy habits. How can we best support family members in their journeys?

00:39:32.230 — 00:40:45.240 · Dean Sherzai, MD, PhD

This is an important question because when we're in medical field, we are all about prescription and dictating and telling people and giving them lists and giving them directions. The first step is listening. The first step is loving them. Loving is deeply understanding the other. And I said that beautifully earlier.

Understand them what their proclivities are. You can't just go whole, full plant based or go Mediterranean. Telling people to do something is often disempowering. The first step is understand how motivated they are and if they are, that's their choice and if they are. The next step is finding out where is the lowest hanging fruit, where you and them can agree on to take the first step.

It could be as simple and don't do everything at once. Add greens, add the walk you know. Simple things. Help them make sure that they're successful in that behavior. So for the loved ones, listen to them, understand them, care for them, and find together. Find that one or 2 or 3 low hanging fruit that they can start doing and shouldn't be taking away, adding to their life.

And you be an assistant, a coach, a friend to that.

00:40:45.280 — 00:40:46.000 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

A partner.

00:40:46.040 — 00:40:46.760 · Dean Sherzai, MD, PhD

A partner to.

00:40:46.760 — 00:40:52.360 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

That. Yeah. As we close, what is one thing you want people to walk away with.

00:40:52.560 — 00:41:23.560 · Ayesha Sherzai, MD

That they have the power to take care of this most beautiful organ ever. That is the brain. And I want them to think of the brain as themselves, as you would take care of a younger version of yourself. You're going to show a love and care and affection. You're going to be very patient. You're going to be very understanding, and you're not going to give up on them.

00:41:23.600 — 00:41:54.300 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

That's wonderful advice. I personally want you to walk away thanking yourself. You're here seeking information to help you best care for your brain and your full self. Wherever you are in your journey with brain health and lifestyle, that's a positive step forward. Thanks to our community members for sharing their questions and thanks to our Brain Doc's Aisha and Dean Shirazi for sharing your insights and tips.

Learn more about brain health and lifestyle at Michael J. Fox.

00:41:56.380 — 00:41:57.020 · Rachel Dolhun, MD, DipABLM

MD.

00:42:01.500 — 00:42:12.660 · Veronique Enos Kaefer

Thanks for listening. Looking for a specific topic not covered in today's episode. All Akhmed blogs and videos are available for free at Michael J. Fox. Org.

00:42:15.140 — 00:42:24.620 · Michael J. Fox

This is Michael J. Fox. Thanks for listening to this podcast. Learn more about the Michael J. Fox Foundation's work and how you can help speed it. Cure and Michael J. Fox. Org.