

Your Brain On Retirement

Finally – RETIREMENT! The chance to kick back, relax and get out of the rat race. It is a goal we all share, especially on very stressful workdays. Have you ever thought about or even planned for the cognitive functioning of your brain on retirement? Chances are that wasn't the top most priority as you put all of your retirement plans in place.

The reality of the workplace is – it is a complex environment that challenges your brain. Even if work has become routine and mundane, interacting with co-workers is an extremely valuable part of brain health. What happens to your brain when you remove yourself from that environment?

Initially the release from the day-to-day grind of working will enable your brain to relax. You might experience the euphoria you feel on a very relaxing vacation. This positive feeling will confirm your joy of being retired. Having all the time you need to do whatever you want is its own reward. Once you are feeling refreshed again, your brain needs stimulation. It needs exercise and socialization. If you don't satisfy the basic needs of remaining cognitively sharp, your brain will start a steep aging decline in functioning.

The brain has the ability to adapt to its environment. If you are in a challenging environment your brain will reorganize itself by creating new connections between brain cells. These connections accommodate communication in your brain. Your speed of processing (the time it takes to

take in information and then respond) stays at a higher level. In the workplace you challenge your brain to keep up.

If you haven't made plans to replace these challenges in retirement your brain responds to a more sedentary, less challenging environment. The brain slows down and in some cases – dramatically. Depending on your lifestyle you can actually place yourself at a higher risk of developing dementia.

So what can you do to keep this cognitive cascade from happening? You have to draw up a brain healthy lifestyle plan. This plan is every bit as important as your retirement financial plan. What do you include in this plan? Generally you need to have a strategy for staying physically active. Physical exercise can grow new neurons in the hippocampus – the center of learning and memory. Walking is an easy and effective way to fulfill the physical exercise component. Your walking goal should be at least 15-20 minutes of brisk walking 3 times per week at a minimum. Playing golf certainly would be an effective way of getting your walking in.

Now you have to use these new cells or the brain will let them die! Mental stimulation will keep these new cells active and help build new neural pathways. You must challenge your brain to stimulate it. Crossword puzzles and Sudoku don't fit the bill because your brain adapts to those challenges. If you increase the difficulty or put time limits on completion you are making the activity more challenging. But get more creative with

mental stimulation. You can mentor or volunteer, travel, learn a musical instrument or a new language. Older brains are more patient and creative so you can try doing things you have always dreamed about. Your brain will love that!

It is really important to get out of the house and be with other people. Isolation breeds depression. Retirement is a huge transition and being at home all day can be very depressing after awhile. You need to interact with other people either in person or on social media, Facetime, or Skype. The art of conversation and debate is a big brain booster.

There are other pieces of a brain healthy lifestyle but these pieces are excellent for putting together your brain healthy retirement. Your brain will continue to keep you young and healthy if you take good care of it.

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