



Maintain Your Mind



Week 3: Unwind Your Mind

Think About Where You Are You may have already made some small changes to **MAINTAIN YOUR MIND**. But like most people, perhaps the time hasn't been right or you just were not ready to make these changes. No matter where you are, take a moment to write down any barriers that have come between you and *maintaining your mind*.

Think About Where You Are Going Now, take a moment to consider where you're going—the changes you would like to make and list them here. Also, consider when you plan to implement those changes.

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This Week's HEADlines

Brain health isn't just about preserving and promoting cognitive function, it's also about emotional well-being. This week's newsletter, *Unwind Your Mind*, considers how to MAINTAIN YOUR MIND by increasing your stress resilience, transforming your thoughts, connecting with a meaningful purpose and sleeping well.

Dr. Seuss once said, "You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes.

You can steer yourself any direction you choose." (Seuss, 1990)

BRAIN-BOOST CHALLENGE I (Words to know before you begin reading.)

ADRENALINE (also known as Epinephrine) is a hormone and neurotransmitter, which is released from the adrenal glands. It plays a central role in the short-term stress reaction or "fight or flight" response.

CORTISOL is a hormone produced by the middle zone of the adrenal cortex, which is part of the adrenal glands. It is usually referred to as the "stress hormone" because it is involved with the response to stress and anxiety.



WORD WORKOUT

Give your brain a mini-workout by learning and using new words. It will help to expand your vocabulary, too. This week's word is:

quagmire (ˈkwag-ˈmī(-ə)r)

Definition: A difficult or precarious situation

Sample Sentence: When I find myself in a quagmire, I get stressed.

Learn other new words by subscribing to a "Word of the Day" from an online dictionary or reference Web site. Or if you're low tech, look up a new word in the dictionary daily. Try to use the word in your conversations and writings this week.

Stress & Your Brain

Chronic stress doesn't just play a role in the health of your heart and other parts of your body—it affects your brain, too. Stress hormones can wreak havoc literally from head to toe.

In response to both real and perceived stress, the hormones adrenaline and cortisol are released by the adrenal glands. While short bursts of these hormones are essential and not harmful, exposure to high, consistent levels, in the case of chronic stress, can lead to anxiety and depressive disorders. In addition, there is an association between high cortisol levels and shrinkage of cells in the hippocampus region of the brain, causing memory problems. Prolonged stress has also been implicated in Alzheimer's disease. In fact, people with Alzheimer's disease have higher cortisol levels than normal aging people (Amen, 2005).

Some stress is good and serves to motivate and protect us, but too much of it (like too much of anything) overloads the resources of the body and the brain.

Unwind Your Mind: What You Can Do

Research suggests that stress and depression management may actually lessen the damage caused by stress hormones, possibly by stimulating the growth of new cells, revitalizing the hippocampus and improving long-term memory (Fuchs E, 2008). It also has a

positive effect on emotional well-being and overall health.

In today's culture of constant connection, to *unwind your mind* is no small feat. At the same time, taking just a few minutes each day yields tremendous benefits for your emotional, cognitive and physical health. There are countless ways to manage and increase your resilience to stress—from daily exercise and meditation to journaling and eating well.



Six Practical Methods to Unwind Your Mind

1. “UNPLUG”

Living in a 24/7 culture, there are many benefits to technology and telecommunication, but constant connection may result in cortisol overload. Creating healthy boundaries when it comes to email, texting, cell phone and PDA use is one way to *unwind your mind*. If you find yourself in constant connection, start small. Disconnect for 30 minutes per day (while awake) and gradually increase this time throughout the day. You might just feel a new sense of freedom.

Are cell phones and your brain another reason to unplug? Concerns have been raised that radiofrequency energy—a form of electromagnetic radiation—from cell phones may pose a potential health risk to users. Studies have not shown any consistent link between cell phone use and malignant or benign brain tumors, but scientists feel that additional research is needed before firm conclusions can be drawn (*National Cancer Institute*, 2010). The majority of studies have been largely inconclusive. Further investiga-

tion is suggested by some researchers on the possible effects of long-term heavy use of mobile phones, increasing mobile phone use, its extension to children and its penetration worldwide (*Cardis*, 2010).

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT, THINGS TO DO

Some researchers suggest that since cell phone safety has not been proven, it may be prudent to reduce your exposure while research continues (*University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute, Center for Environmental Oncology*, 2009). The *U.S. Food and Drug Administration* suggests some steps that

cell phone users can take if they are concerned about potential health risks from cell phones:

- Reserve the use of cell phones for shorter conversations, or for times when a conventional phone is not available.
- Switch to a type of cell phone with a hands-free device that will place more distance between the antenna and the head of the user.



To learn about other suggested precautions for cell phone use, visit the *University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute, Center for Environmental Oncology's* Web site at www.environmentaloncology.org, or check out the *National Cancer Institute's* fact sheet on cell phone use and cancer risk at www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Risk/cellphones.

While you're thinking about cell phone use, research has proven the connection between cell phones and distracted driving. According to the *National Safety Council*, cell phone use while driving and other forms of distracted driving account for 80 percent of all crashes. “Unplug” by eliminating distractions while driving, such as cell phone talking and texting. Also, hands-free cell phones are not always safer—they are still a distraction.

2. TRANSFORM YOUR THOUGHTS

There's no doubt that your thoughts shape your attitude and overall well-being. A positive outlook is one of the most important things you can do to keep your brain healthy and ready for learning. In fact, happiness actually develops the brain by increasing the size of the hippocampus, the part of your brain that organizes and keeps track of memories and feelings.

BRAIN-BOOST CHALLENGE II

To think in a more positive way, follow these simple steps every day for one week and see how you feel:

1. Write down three to five good things that happened to you or that you did well.

2. Write down one thing that you didn't like or that didn't go well. Then ask yourself, "How was it also a good thing?" and "What positive lesson did I learn from it not going well (i.e. a blessing in disguise)?"

“Today was good.
Today was fun.
Tomorrow is
another one.”
—Dr. Seuss





3. SLEEP

SLEEP DEPRIVATION IS THE MOST COMMON BRAIN IMPAIRMENT. —William C. Dement
(*The Promise of Sleep*, 1999, p. 231)

About 10 percent of U.S. adults aren't getting enough sleep to stay healthy and happy—and you may be one of them (*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)*, 2008). Data from the CDC shows that nationwide between 50 and 70 million people are getting less than six hours of sleep per night, an amount many sleep experts consider too low. Yet, research shows that adequate sleep is imperative to brain health and those who do not get enough sleep are at a higher risk for thinking problems and even depression

(*Nussbaum*, 2007). Inadequate sleep also decreases your ability to cope with stress. The good news is that you can learn healthy sleep behaviors.

The key to knowing whether or not you're getting enough sleep is straightforward:

- Do you wake refreshed?
- Do you feel drowsy at work?
- Do you feel irritated or grouchy?
- Do you have a hard time concentrating on tasks?

Things to Think About, Things to Do

Ensuring you and your family get a good night's sleep is easier to achieve if you:

- Maintain a regular bedtime and wake time, even on weekends.
- Establish a relaxing bedtime routine.
- Create a cool, safe, quiet and dark bedroom.
- Sleep on a comfortable mattress and pillow.
- Don't eat or drink too close to bedtime.
- Exercise regularly, but not too close to bedtime.
- Avoid tobacco, caffeine and alcohol close to bedtime.

For more information about sleep, visit the *National Sleep Foundation's* Web site at www.sleepfoundation.org.

4. CREATE POSITIVE SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Are there any happy hermits? Most behavioral health specialists would say, “No.” Studies show that the happiest people have close, positive relationships with others and the more people participate in close social relationships, the better their overall physical and mental health and the lower their risk of developing dementia. In his book, *Love and Survival*, Dean Ornish, MD, discusses the health benefits of social relationships.

Things to Think About, Things to Do

Here are some suggestions for creating positive social relationships. Choose two to three suggestions that you can put into action:

- Express your appreciation for the people you care about—a heartfelt compliment goes a long way.
- Make a point to spend time with people you care about and do something fun together.
- Share something meaningful with a friend. It will deepen your relationship.
- Get to know your neighbors by sharing a meal with them or helping them out with a home project.
- Don’t wait for someone to call. Call them.
- Improve your listening skills. Don’t try to “multitask” while talking with a friend. Give the conversation your full attention.
- Develop empathy—valuing someone else’s issues, needs and feelings.
- Find a place where “everybody knows your name” in which you can feel safe, accepted, loved and comfortable expressing yourself.
- Embrace individual uniqueness. Differences do not make you right and someone else wrong.
- Treat others the way you want to be treated.

“Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don’t matter and those who matter don’t mind.”
—Dr. Seuss



5. CONNECT WITH A MEANINGFUL PURPOSE

Research shows that a life of significance, including service to others, not only increases social connection, improves mood and reduces the effects of stress, it also contributes to happiness. There are many books on this subject available at your favorite bookstore or online.

Things to Think About, Things to Do

For many people, a sense of purpose can be found in service to others and volunteerism. A variety of volunteer opportunities can be found at www.idealists.org, www.volunteermatch.org and www.serve.gov.

Here are some suggestions for connecting with a meaningful purpose. Choose two to three that you can put into action:

- Find a belief system and/or a house of worship.
 - Your community organization, club or program related to your favorite cause, hobby or activity
- Don't wait for someone to ask, volunteer at:
 - Your local charities, food banks, soup kitchens, Meals on Wheels or start a food drive at work
 - Your local school, in the cafeteria or as a crossing guard
 - Your local hospital, nursing home or daycare
 - Your local library as a reader to children
 - Your community garden club, local walking trails, arboretum or environmental action group
- Participate in fundraising walks.
- Help out at the animal rescue shelter.
- Volunteer at women's shelters, local homeless shelters, centers for grieving children, etc.
- Mentor at Big Brothers Big Sisters or become a Boy Scout leader, church youth group leader, teacher's aid or volunteer for another organization that guides children.

“It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson



6. RELAXATION

Earlier, you learned that chronic stress creates overproduction of the hormone cortisol and that prolonged elevated levels of cortisol may damage cells in the brain's memory center. Relaxation techniques that elicit a "relaxation response" can help manage stress, reduce cortisol levels and create a healthier brain. According to the *Alzheimer's Foundation of America*, the following approaches have been proven to reduce cortisol levels by eliciting the relaxation response:

- Meditation
- Guided imagery and visualization
- Deep breathing
- Classical music
- Prayer

Things to Think About, Things to Do

Autogenic training is another relaxation technique that is known to reduce cortisol levels and provoke a relaxation response. Done every day, the simple autogenic exercise below can help you unwind your mind in minutes. Repeat each phrase in your mind three times. Pause after each phrase and notice how you feel.

My mind is quiet. My mind is quiet. My mind is quiet.

My mind enjoys being quiet. My mind enjoys being quiet. My mind enjoys being quiet.

My thoughts are calm. My thoughts are calm.
My thoughts are calm.

There is nothing to bother or disturb.
There is nothing to bother or disturb.
There is nothing to bother or disturb.

My mind is quiet. My mind is quiet.
My mind is quiet.

I feel good when my mind is quiet. I feel good when my mind is quiet. I feel good when my mind is quiet.



Unwind Your Mind for Less Stress (Get More Out of Life)

1. **List your top five values.** Look at your own personal list of values. Live your life according to your values and do not compromise.
2. **Establish personal goals.** Set goals for things that are important to you, such as exercise, spending time with your family or personal discovery.
3. **Don't let the media dictate your goals.** It's easy to get caught up in what our culture defines as "ideal." Set personal goals based on what's truly important—like health—and not on the superficial.
4. **Think about your spiritual needs.** Deeply held spiritual beliefs can help balance and ease stress.
5. **Take time away from the television and the computer.** Discover a new healthy hobby, such as exercise, healthy gourmet cooking or building social relationships at a local club.
6. **Avoid stress-causing situations whenever possible.** Avoid rush hour traffic and long lines in the grocery store, if possible.
7. **Skip the nightly news.** The 24-hour news cycle, which usually emphasizes disaster and misfortune, can be a source of much unneeded stress.
8. **Take time to organize.** Disorganization can cause unneeded stress and extra work. Set aside a day each month (or week) to de-clutter and organize.
9. **Allow time.** Running late can be a source of avoidable stress. Give yourself a cushion (or a little comfort) by allowing extra time to get to where you're going. Don't live your day as if it's a race, it isn't healthy or safe for anyone.
10. **Change your response.** The only response that you can change is your own. Learn not to over react. When all else fails, remember the motto, "Don't sweat the small stuff."



Unwinding Your Mind with Deep Breathing Techniques

1. **Calm your mind.** Sit comfortably in your chair with your eyes closed. Allow any stress or tension to drift from your body into your chair. Empty your mind with the thoughts of your day. Focus only on the quiet and calm of the room.
2. **Improve your posture.** Straighten your back, and put your shoulders back to open your rib cage. First relax your shoulder and neck muscles. Then relax your whole body, allowing the chair to support your body. Then move your focus to your breathing.
3. **Breathe deeply.** Take 10 deep, slow breaths. Breathe from the pit of your stomach and feel your lungs expanding and filling. (Pretend like you're trying to inflate an inner tube around your belly.) Inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth.
4. **Breathe slowly.** Focus on deepening your breathing, inhaling to a count of four—1, 2, 3, 4—and exhaling to a slow count of five—1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Focus on your breathing and how you use your diaphragm. Place your hand above your navel. Notice your hand and abdomen rising (pushing outward and inflating your inner tube) with each inhalation and relaxing with each exhalation. Feel yourself relaxing and *your mind unwinding*.

Daily “Vitamins” for Your Brain

Healthy living is not about popping a pill or downing a handful of vitamins—it’s about the small decisions you make every day. These daily “vitamins” are the daily decisions you can make to *unwind your mind*.

MONDAY

Write down three to five things you liked about your day.

TUESDAY

Turn off your cell phone or PDA one hour earlier.

WEDNESDAY

Secretly serve or perform an anonymous good deed.
(Example: Write a short note of appreciation to someone or look for a chance to serve in a group.)

THURSDAY

Write down one thing you didn't like about your day and then ask yourself, “What is the silver lining?” or “How is it also good?”

FRIDAY

Enjoy listening to classical music during your commute home.

SATURDAY

Take five minutes before bed for deep breathing techniques.

SUNDAY

Treat yourself to 30 minutes with a cup of tea and a book or your favorite magazine.

Five More Ways to Unwind Your Mind in Minutes

1. Take a 10-minute walk during lunch.
2. Call a friend.
3. Say a prayer or do a short meditation.
4. Take two minutes and imagine yourself in a calm and relaxing place (i.e. in the woods or on a beach).
5. Write down one positive statement or affirmation on a note card. Keep it in a convenient place and pull it out when you feel stressed.





BRAIN-BOOST CHALLENGE II

Take a little time today to give your brain a workout with this word search. It's a fun way to destress and *unwind your mind*.

i	m	g	g	m	r	n	s	e	a	l	a	n
e	s	p	a	n	r	e	e	y	i	n	u	g
x	y	o	r	e	o	p	r	g	l	r	n	r
e	a	g	m	b	r	e	a	t	h	i	n	g
z	h	e	y	u	g	e	m	g	h	g	c	m
s	m	u	x	a	s	e	n	c	o	n	j	g
o	a	o	m	e	d	i	t	a	t	i	o	n
i	s	i	e	o	r	e	c	g	s	d	u	i
n	s	i	h	e	r	c	n	c	h	a	r	p
a	a	o	t	t	h	o	i	e	o	e	n	p
m	g	n	s	n	r	n	a	s	w	r	a	a
o	e	o	r	g	a	n	i	z	e	a	l	n
c	g	g	y	m	r	c	h	s	r	g	a	o

RELAXING WORDS

- yoga
- music
- exercise
- breathing
- meditation
- imagery
- stretching
- humor
- centering
- journal
- massage
- reading
- hot shower
- napping
- organize

Make Up Your Mind

This week's newsletter provided a number of suggestions and strategies to promote cognitive, emotional and physical health. Out of the strategies presented, which five can help you *unwind your mind*? List them here.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

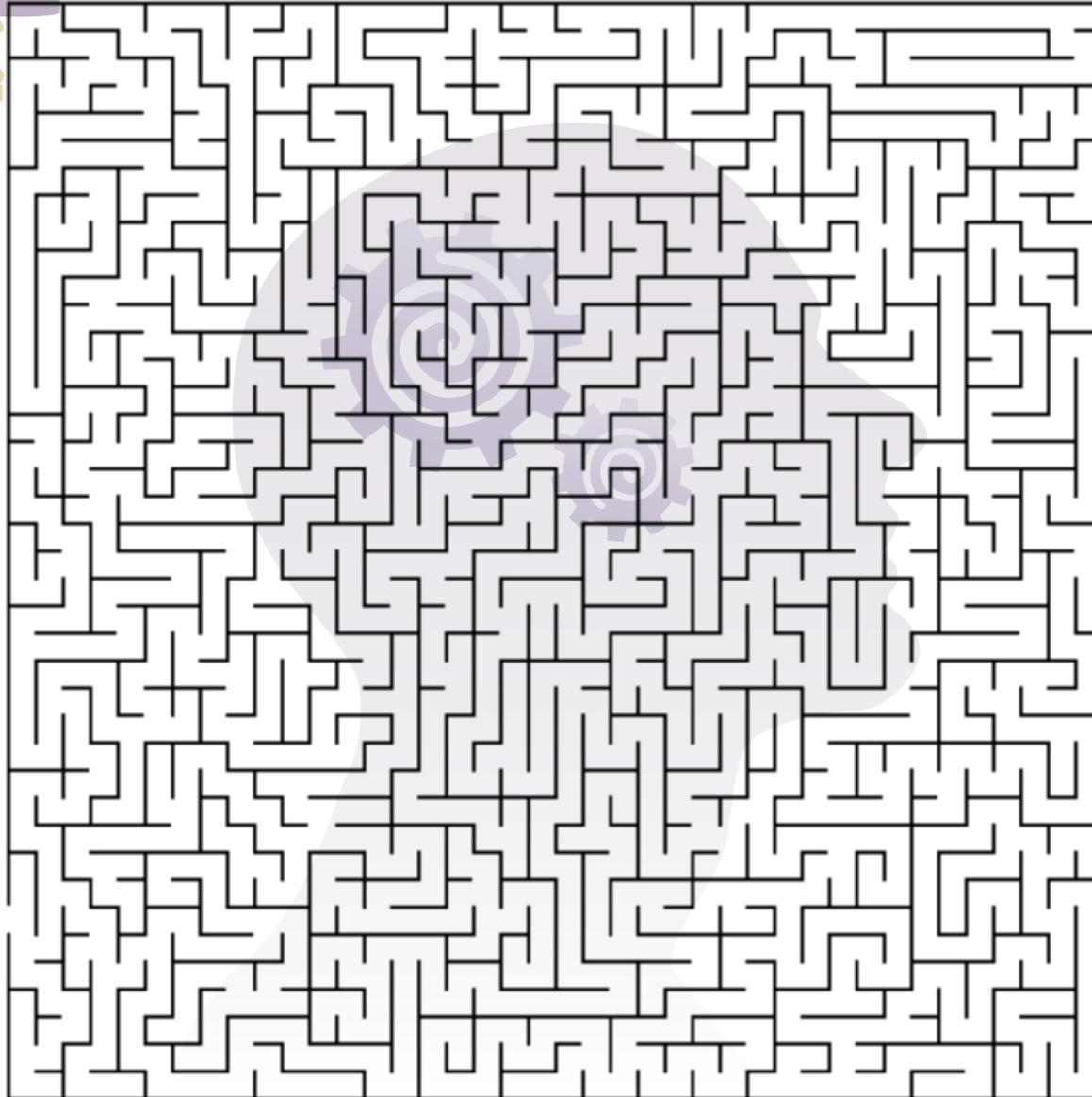


Reading Is Fundamental for Brain Health

Reading, understanding and applying the strategies in this newsletter is good for your brain! Don't know a word or phrase, like "Autogenic training?" Look it up online or in the dictionary, and try to use it in conversation or learn more about it. Expand your mind to other possibilities!

BRAIN-BOOST CHALLENGE III

Take a few minutes to *unwind your mind* with by curving your way around and out of this maze.



Be Mindful of Others

Remember that this program isn't just for you. People of all ages can benefit from a healthy brain lifestyle, so share this information with your family and friends.

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