

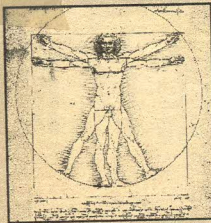
15 ways to think better

You can improve your cognitive performance, experts say. We bring you a variety of suggestions.

■ **Time it right.** Most older people think more clearly in the morning; most younger people, in the afternoon. Figure out your own best “thinking time” and reserve it for your most challenging brain work.

■ Anchor new memories to established ones.

“Think of your existing memory as a scaffold upon which to fit new information,” says University of Michigan cognitive researcher Denise Park, Ph.D. “Don’t isolate new information out in left field. Always relate it to something.”



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■ Learn from Leonardo.

In his new book *How to Think Like Leonard da Vinci*, author Michael Gelb offers several brain-enriching strategies that worked for the ultimate Renaissance Man. Among them: Learn to juggle; draw with your opposite hand.

■ **Pay attention.** Do you sometimes find yourself “forgetting” a person’s name seconds after meeting him? The problem isn’t memory; it’s concentration. As we age, we must consciously remind ourselves to put information into our memory banks.

■ **Get a good education – but don’t overdo it.** Psychologist Dean Keith Simonton says schooling has a positive impact on creativity up through the final year of college. Then the progressively narrow focus of graduate school actually detracts from creativity. “You don’t become a great novelist by getting a Ph.D. in creative writing.”

■ **Listen to Confucius.** The No. 1 “memory aid” used by memory researchers themselves: Write it down. As the Chinese proverb puts it, the weakest ink lasts longer than the strongest memory.

■ Practice, practice, practice.

Learning and repeatedly practicing new skills appears to change the brain’s internal organization. A study showed that periodic training sessions helped volunteers in their 70s do better on cognitive and memory skills than they had when they were seven years younger. “Practice really helps,” says Len Giambra, Ph.D., an emeritus psychologist at the National Institute on Aging. “A well-practiced older individual many times will be faster than an unpracticed younger individual.”

■ Expose yourself to multiple experiences.

Creativity often boils down to the ability to adapt solutions from one domain to another. Velcro (shown below, magnified), for instance,



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was inspired by burrs that stick to your clothing. The “pull-tab” top on aluminum cans was originally patterned after a banana’s peel.

■ **Go for the high octane.** Research shows that the amount of caffeine in a cup of coffee actually can help

you concentrate. But if you’re prone to anxiety, you’re probably better off not jazzing up your brain with a jolt of java.

■ Give your ideas a chance.

Many of us are rewarded for our abilities to quickly evaluate facts and make a quick “go or no-go” decision. Creativity demands a much more leisurely and playful approach – a willingness to give “absurd” ideas their due.

■ Listen to Mozart.

An experimental psychologist has found evidence supporting the “Mozart Effect” – that is, a brain exposed to Wolfgang’s music grows more complex connections. This allows faster, integrated access to more information.



Performing music is beneficial.

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■ **Pick an intellectual profession – and a smart mate.** Intriguing studies from Poland suggest that people whose careers demand an exercise of intellect are more likely to sustain high levels of cognition in their lives. And marrying someone smart may provide you with ongoing stimulation.



■ Exercise the body to improve the mind.

An increasing cadre of researchers now believe aerobic workouts can increase everything from school performance to nerve conduction velocity. Suspected mechanisms: increased oxygen and nutrient supplies to the brain, plus a boost in natural compounds called neurotrophins, which promote brain cell growth. Some studies show mixed results. But exercise has so many other benefits that it definitely makes sense to do it.

■ **End distractions.** If you’re bombarded with irrelevant stimuli, it’s hard to focus. When you absolutely must do something (complete a report, for instance), try renting a motel room where you can unplug the phone and concentrate.

■ **Try something new.** Near the end of his life, Impressionist painter Henri Matisse revitalized his art by exchanging his brushes for scissors, which he used to

create a series of brilliant paper cutouts. Such experimentation appears to be a hallmark of successful creativity, says psychologist Dean Keith Simonton, Ph.D., editor of *Journal of Creative Behavior*. In a study that



compared creative people who burn out with those who continue to create, he says, the chief difference was that the latter were constantly exposing themselves to new knowledge or techniques, in the process giving themselves a fresh start.