



Enhance your life as you age

Most of us have been to a social occasion where someone toasts to “a long and happy life.” The two just go together, right? Not necessarily. You likely take proactive steps to ensure your health and longevity, but do you put forth equal care and attention to your personal life? Both take work. Staying mentally active, feeling connected to someone or an activity, and sharing intimacy are important ways to make certain you are doing what you can to enhance your life.

Staying sharp

If you hope to live a long life, it pays to ensure that you stay sharp enough to enjoy it. Researchers have found that the time needed to process information grows longer as you age. Generally speaking, tests of memory, learning, and intelligence done with different age groups suggest there is only a slight decline in mental acuity over time. So you can "teach an old dog new tricks." It simply may take a bit more time and effort.

However, problems that become more common with age can compromise your mental abilities. Thankfully, you can do plenty to fight back, including:

Challenge your mind. Staying mentally active appears to help ward off memory loss.

Challenge your body. Just like cells anywhere else in the body, brain cells crave a steady diet of oxygen, so stay physically active.

Get your rest. Too little sleep can affect memory.

Limit stress. Researchers speculate that consistently high levels of stress hormones, such as cortisol, may impair cells in the hippocampus, which oversees certain types of learning and recall.

Watch your weight. Staying within a normal weight range lowers your risk for illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension, and stroke, all of which can compromise memory to varying degrees.

Check with your doctor. Discuss any memory problems with your doctor.

Staying connected Close relationships are surely among the great pleasures of life. A warm friendship, a loving connection with a relative or partner, and other social ties, help smooth some of the inevitable bumps of life and easing the losses that come with time. Productive tasks — whether you are a paid worker or volunteer or simply enjoy an activity like gardening — forge links between you and the world.

Yet the power of any social network goes well beyond that. Research suggests that staying connected might help you live longer. Other studies suggest that the ties that bind might even help ward off dementia and keep you mentally sharp. Fewer social ties added up to a higher likelihood of cognitive impairment and higher mortality, too.

Enhancing your intimacy

In a society skewed toward the young, intimacy among older people is often dismissed or even ridiculed. If you enjoyed intimacy in your younger years, there is no reason you shouldn't keep treading that path, although it's certainly true that you may need to leap some barriers as you grow older.

So what can you do to enhance or revive your intimate life? Here are some tips:

- Explore what brings you pleasure with or without a partner.
- Try to open up with your partner about pleasures, desire, and possible roadblocks to intimate activity.
- Be willing to try new intimacies when old ones pale or, worse, bring on pain or seem more a chore than a joy.
- Consider whether you can be more affectionate and warm outside of the bedroom. Over time, small gestures sometimes change moods and minds.

Be open with your doctor about barriers that might be affecting your interest and abilities. Often, a solution can be found.

For more information on enhancing your life, order our special health report *Living Better, Living Longer: The Secrets of Healthy Aging* www.health.harvard.edu/LLLB.