Don’t forget to keep your brain healthy too

Brain health is as important as your physical health.

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This is part of a series looking at micro skills – changes that employees can make to improve their health and life at work and at home, and employers can make to improve the workplace. The Globe and Mail and Morneau Shepell have created the Employee Recommended Workplace Award to honour companies that put the health and well-being of their employees first. Read about the 2017 winners of the award at [tgam.ca/workplace award](http://tgam.ca/workplaceaward%20).

Registration for the 2018 Employee Recommended Workplace Awards have closed. Companies can pre-register for 2019 at[www.employeerecommended.com](http://www.employeerecommended.com/).

Bill Howatt will be speaking about mental health at The Globe's Solving Workplace Challenges summit on March 20 in Toronto. [Click here to find out more or to register for the event.](https://www.globeandmailevents.com/ehome/index.php?eventid=297151&utm_source=Bill_Articles&utm_medium=Gillian_Article&utm_campaign=SWC18)

What do you do daily to promote your brain health?

Brain health refers to the things we do to assist the brain to work at its optimal potential. Brain health habits can predict risk for decline in mental function as we age.

This micro skill introduces the concept of daily brain health and how micro decisions can impact us today and into our future.

**Awareness**

Whether you're 25, 35, 45, 55 or 65, are you aware of your daily workplace routines, micro decisions and behaviours that impact your brain health? The first step to improving your brain health is to self-evaluate how much you're paying attention to it and being clear on what will positively impact it.

Most of us are motivated to protect our brain health, so don't take powerful, dangerous, illicit drugs that can create permanent brain damage. However, many don't pay conscious attention to brain health the same as heart health.

Our brain requires the same attention as heart health for long-term, sustained health and high quality of life – especially in a job where we're bored or don't feel challenged. People in such a situation – often without realizing it – over the years risk declining mental fitness if they're not proactive outside the workplace. A decline in mental fitness over time can impact your [brain reserves](https://healthybrains.org/pillar-mental/) that provide a buffer to adapt to change and resist damage.

To impact brain health, you also need to be motivated and understand the value for your current and future vitality.

**Accountability**

The brain is our most important organ, and like our heart, lungs and skin it benefits the most when we pay attention to it and don't take it for granted. As we age, there's no guarantee of preventing dementia. In fact, the Alzheimer Society of Canada suggests that it's never too late to make improvements that can support brain health. The earlier you adopt brain health, the more likely you will age with as healthy and functioning a brain as possible.

We can turn proactive actions into lifestyle habits to support us over our lifetime so that when we're ready financially to retire, our brains will be ready and able to allow us to enjoy that phase of life.

**Action**

Adopting simple lifestyle changes can have a positive impact on brain health. It's to our advantage to not delay the habits that can promote good brain health.

Consider a person who didn't pay attention to their diet, had a heart attack at 45, and that to live longer had to make massive lifestyle changes. Their heart was damaged and would never be as healthy as it could be. Brain health is the same. It would be a mistake to think that it's something that's applicable only to senior citizens looking to offset dementia.

**Mental**[**gymnastics**](https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/12-ways-to-keep-your-brain-young) – Engaging in new learnings, word puzzles, drawing, crafts, reading and taking courses can have a positive impact on the brain by stimulating the generation of new connections between nerve cells and even new brain cells that facilitate neurological plasticity. This can build up functional brain reserves for future cell loss.

**Make smart diet choices** – All the stress that we're exposed to daily, including commutes, environmental hazards (such as noise and chemicals), people interactions and financial challenges can increase our risk for a process called oxidation that damages brain cells. Making smart food choices and eating healthy foods that are rich in antioxidants can support brain health.

**Reduce your stress load** – Bad stress accumulates over time from many sources and if not dealt with can cause [vascular changes](http://alzheimer.ca/en/Home/About-dementia/Brain-health/Reduce-stress) and chemical imbalances that negatively impact brain health.

**Make sleep important** – A good night's sleep is important for your immune system and mood. It can reduce the risk of the brain building up an abnormal [protein](https://healthybrains.org/pillars/) called beta– amyloid plaque, which is linked to Alzheimer's disease.

**Pay attention to lifestyle choices** – For maximum brain health, remove all forms of tobacco, and limit your drinking to two drinks a day, to reduce your risk for dementia that can result from chronic abuse of alcohol.

**Physical activity** – This is a proven strategy for increasing blood flow. It creates chemical changes in the brain to support learning, memory and ability to think and solve problems.

**Maintain your social interactions** – Staying connected with family, friends and your community puts you in position for engaging conversations and stimulation that are important for brain health.