

Here are some of the most practical and enjoyable ways for you to expand and protect your mind with mental cross-training.

Perceptual flexibility. Be more observant of the people, places and objects that enter and leave your awareness during the day. Notice shapes, textures, colors, shadowing, movement and the other distinguishing features of each image. Can you draw sketches of an image right after seeing it (short-term memory) or at the end of the week (long-term memory)? On the telephone, practice recognizing voices the moment you hear them, and stretch your skill at recognizing different sounds, touches, tastes and smells.

Feature calisthenics. Use this kind of “visuospatial activity” to increase your ability to make quick and accurate estimates of areas, distances, volumes and other proportions of things you encounter. When you walk into a room, immediately notice the number and placement of people, furniture and other objects. On occasion, sit down and draw a map of what you’ve seen. Have fun mentally rearranging the furniture. And if a meeting or travel delay allows it, doodle—connecting whatever seems to grab your interest, such as geometric shapes, irregular line contours and so on. For an added challenge, use your nondominant hand. If you have access to a personal computer, video games are another good way to heighten your visuospatial abilities.

Integrative swiftness. Here you want to sharpen your ability to create coherent wholes from divergent pieces. For example, select a sentence at random from a newspaper, book or magazine. Try to make another sentence with the same words. Practice fitting together jigsaw puzzles as quickly as you can. Or cut up a newspaper page into various shapes, scatter them and see how quickly you can reassemble the page.

Get logical. Games of all kinds involve logical, reasoning-oriented activities. Alone and with various partners, play a variety of amusements—bridge, pinochle, chess, checkers, Japanese Go, crossword puzzles, math games and so on.

Expanded language skills. “The more words you know and recognize in English and other languages, and the more words you can use

intelligently, the greater will be your brain capacity,” says Dr. Vernon Mark in *Brain Power*. “And all other things being equal, the more resistant your brain will be to injury and disease.”⁴¹ Whether or not you learn a second (or third) language, the broader your vocabulary and the more precisely you can use your mother tongue in referring to concrete and abstract concepts, the more you strengthen your short-term and long-term memory. Each time you meet someone new, practice coming up with an anagram of his or her name. Find enjoyable ways to study the language, use your dictionary and thesaurus, read aloud, engage in mind-stretching conversations, listen to books on tape while you drive and strive to be more accurate and descriptive whenever you write and speak. Play word games such as Scrabble and get immersed in crossword puzzles—both playing them and making them. Sometimes when you hear a radio or television program, practice distilling the key points as briefly and clearly as you can. Whenever you come to the end of a chapter in a book, imagine that you must summarize it—aloud or in writing—for someone who has not read it.

More creativity—“outside the walls.” Creativity involves not a single type of brain activity but a wide-ranging, ever-changing collection of skills. In addition to the preceding mental exercises, spice up your experiences by asking “What if . . . ?” questions, writing your own mysteries (on paper or in your mind), creating limericks and enjoying punning and humor—which, at their best, push you into looking at familiar things in different ways, escaping from one pattern of thought into another. Puns, for example, can spur you to think of words or word patterns that sound alike but have a humorous twist.

Get physical. It may sound surprising: You can also strengthen your mind by developing your body. One of the reasons is that the more sensitively aware the surface of your body is, and the more fit your muscles, the larger the active involvement of the related areas of your brain. For example, you can augment the area of the brain assigned to your fingers simply by increasing and varying the use of your fingers.⁴² Consider giving some special attention to those physical activities that challenge your balance and coordination. Playing the piano, stacking coins, using tweezers to pick up small objects, playing jacks, completing puzzles that require tracing from dot-to-dot, connect-the-numbers, mazes and so on, are among the exercises recommended by some neuroscientists for improving hand dexterity and hand/eye coordination.⁴³

Lighten up. “Overwork is a prime cause of mental impairment,”