

Mind Health Insights

Could Cinnamon Prevent Alzheimer's?

Oxidation is a process observed in the browning of sliced fruit or the rusting of a bicycle left out in the rain. In our bodies, oxidation is necessary for cells to do their work, but the process results in by-products known as free radicals that can damage neurons and contribute to the development of Alzheimer's disease.

A recent study published in the *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease* found that two compounds in cinnamon — cinnamaldehyde and epicatechin — may prevent this oxidative brain stress and buildup of tau proteins, which are found in Alzheimer's disease. Experiments showed that both of these compounds inhibited oxidation and aggregation of tau.

If cinnamon doesn't agree with your taste buds, you can get epicatechin in your diet from other antioxidant foods, such as chocolate, blueberries, and red wine.

Stress Reinforces Good Habits

New research published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* suggests that sometimes stressful life experiences can actually support our good habits. To demonstrate this potential positive effect of stress, Dr. Wendy Wood and colleagues at the University of Southern California followed the habits of 65 UCLA students for a 10-week period. The investigators compared these behaviors during low-stress and high-stress periods, such as exams.

The researchers found that students engaged in strongly held habits even more during their

stressful exam periods, whether those habits were healthy (e.g., eating oatmeal for breakfast) or unhealthy (e.g., opting for a sweet roll). These findings counter the observation that only our bad habits emerge when we have to deal with stressful situations.

The results suggest that the best time to practice healthy lifestyle habits is when we are *not* under stress, in order to prepare for those periods when life is more challenging.

Low Blood Pressure Can Shrink Brains

A normal blood pressure reading is 120 over 80 or 120/80. The first number is the systolic pressure, which indicates the pressure on vessels when blood is moving through. The second number is the diastolic pressure, which indicates the pressure between heartbeats.

In a 2013 study published in *JAMA Neurology*, Dutch scientists reported that patients with heart disease and lower than normal diastolic blood pressure showed a higher rate of brain atrophy (shrinkage) — a condition associated with dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

The study included 663 patients with various forms of heart disease. Most of the volunteers were men, average age 57. Research volunteers with diastolic blood pressures lower than 70 showed more brain atrophy over time. By contrast, patients with high blood pressure showed a decline in brain atrophy when blood pressure was treated.

The findings did not prove a cause-and-effect relationship between blood pressure and

brain size, but they suggest that correcting hypertension may protect brain health, while decreasing normal blood pressure could pose brain health risks.

Late Retirement May Prevent Dementia

New research boosts the “use it or lose it” theory about brainpower and staying mentally sharp. People who delay retirement have less risk of developing Alzheimer's disease or other types of dementia, a study of nearly half a million people in France found.

“For each additional year of work, the risk of getting dementia is reduced by 3.2 percent,” said Carole Dufouil, a scientist at Inserm, the French government's health research agency.

Researchers used the records of more than 429,000 workers, most of whom were shopkeepers or craftsmen such as bakers and woodworkers. They were 74 on average, and had been retired for an average of 12 years. Nearly 3 percent had developed dementia, but the risk of this was lower for each year of age at retirement.

To rule out the possibility that mental decline may have led people to retire earlier, researchers did analyses that eliminated people who developed dementia within five and 10 years of retirement.

“The trend is exactly the same,” suggesting that work was having an effect on cognition, not the other way around,” Dufouil said.

France mandates retirement in various jobs — civil servants must retire by 65. This study suggests that people should continue working as it may have health benefits, she said. □

Attentive Listening Exercise

This is an effective exercise to bolster empathy skills for people of all ages. One person speaks about something important in his or her life, while the other person simply listens for three minutes. The designated listener focuses on eye contact and tries not to interrupt or comment.

After the first three minutes, the listener and speaker switch roles. When both have spoken and listened, they discuss how the exercise felt to them. Many people find that by simply listening attentively, they develop an almost immediate sense of empathy and understanding for the other person.

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in the exact same area — but the neural activation was significantly greater. This suggests that, with practice, we can improve our empathy skills.

Having empathetic role models and experiencing our own emotions can help shape our understanding of other people's feelings.

With or without these personal experiences, studies have shown that people can learn empathy skills and improve their ability to connect with others. This involves mastering three essential skills:

1. Learn to listen. The best conversationalists are people who know how to listen well. To do this, you must put aside distractions — both external (email, text messaging) and internal (random thoughts, worries) — and truly focus attention on the other person. Think of the last time you tried to explain how great or terrible your day was while your friend glanced down at her phone to read a text message from someone else.

Sometimes, if we are excited about what someone is saying, we may interrupt the speaker to toss in our own thoughts. But by doing this, we run the risk of frustrating the speaker, possibly causing him to stop expressing how he really feels.

Good listeners have self-control — they do not allow their minds to wander, and they don't interrupt. Try the exercise in the sidebar above with a friend or spouse to build your listening skills.

2. Recognize how other people are feeling. Both verbal and nonverbal expressions can convey what other people are feeling. Unfortunately, we

don't always recognize these expressions because we are distracted or self-absorbed.

Simply being patient can help us focus more on another person's emotional expressions. When someone is communicating intense emotions, it often takes them longer to put words together. To increase your awareness, keep in mind some of these methods of nonverbal communication:

- **Body language.** How we stand, walk, or cross our arms and legs can convey mood and attitude; styles of waving, nodding, and other gestures. A grin, frown, or furrowed brow can tell a lot about what someone feels.
- **Eye contact.** A gaze can communicate a wide range of emotions, such as anger, passion, or sadness. Looking into someone's eyes while they speak usually tells the person that you are interested in what they are saying. Looking around the room or over the person's shoulder suggests the opposite. However, too much eye contact can seem intrusive or inappropriate.
- **Touch.** Placing your palm on someone's shoulder can be reassuring; using both hands for a handshake can convey warmth. Such gestures are often culturally based. For instance, many Europeans kiss both cheeks when greeting each other.

3. Let others know you understand. It's one thing to grasp another person's point of view, but the true power of empathy comes from communicating that understanding back to the other person. Try restating what you perceive as the other person's perspective using simple statements such as: "Let me make sure I understand you . . ." or "Tell me if I have this right . . ."

Asking for additional details will show that you're interested in knowing more about the person's situation and emotional experience.

Keep in mind that, despite the current trend toward greater isolation and empathy deficits, our brains are programmed to bring us together as social beings. We all have the capacity to improve our empathy skills and imagine what someone else may be feeling, thereby improving our relationships with others and enhancing our quality of life.

The sooner we start working on our empathy skills, the more connected and better we will feel, and our mind health will benefit from the experience. □