

These are the 7 Habits of Highly Healthy Brains

IN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE

01



SLEEP

A good night sleep every night should be a priority, not a luxury. Sleep is overlooked, underappreciated, and the number one, fundamental bedrock of good health. Sleep deprivation (even a few hours a night) impacts cognition (thinking), mood, memory and learning and leads to chronic disease.

Sleep is essential for consolidating memories and for draining waste products from the brain. Not only do we under-sleep, we under-consume natural light during the day and over-consume artificial light at night leaving our natural circadian rhythms, hormones and immune systems dysregulated.

Short afternoon naps consolidate memory, spark creativity and smooth your rough emotional edges (no guru, course or app required!).

02



MOVE

The best exercise for your brain is physical exercise. Daily exercise increases blood flow to the brain. Exercise triggers the release of brain derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), which promotes neuronal growth and survival, reduces inflammation, and supports the formation of long-term memories.

Exercise reduces the risk of dementia (and other chronic lifestyle diseases), acts as an anti-depressant, and regulates mood.

Our brains evolved to support bodies that move through, make sense of, and respond to the natural world around us. A simple walk outdoors gets you away from digital devices and into nature. You'll do your best thinking when walking.

03



NOURISH

A healthy brain requires a healthy well-nourished body. Research points towards a Mediterranean-based diet of mostly plants (vegetables, fruit and legumes), fish, some meat, olive oil and nuts as optimal nourishment for brain health. Wine and coffee in moderation (yes, really!) prevent cognitive decline, memory loss and protect against dementia (Plus, the little pleasures in life are important too!).

04



CALM

Find your moment of calm. Not all stress is bad, but chronic stress, especially life events that are out of our control, can change the wiring of our brains. Too much cortisol (a stress hormone) prevents the birth of new neurons and causes the hippocampus (the brain structure involved in learning and memory) to shrink, reducing your powers of learning and memory.

To de-stress find your place or moment of calm. Do something pleasurable — meditate, practice mindfulness, walk, or nap. The most pleasure is to be found in doing something you're reasonably good at and that also poses some degree of challenge.

05



CONNECT

We are born as social animals and have a fundamental need for human warmth and connection. Having supportive friends, family and social connections helps you live longer, happier and healthier. Socialising reduces the harmful effects of stress and requires many complex cognitive functions such as thinking, feeling, sensing, reasoning and intuition. Loneliness and social isolation have comparable impacts on health and survival as smoking.

06



CHALLENGE

Keep your brain mentally active. Adults who regularly challenge their minds and stay mentally active throughout life have healthier brains and are less likely to develop dementia. It's thought ongoing education and mentally challenging work build cognitive reserve (the capacity to cope better and keep working properly if any brain cells are damaged or die).

Choose mentally challenging activities that you can practice regularly, that are reasonably complex and that take you out of your cognitive comfort zone. Try activities that combine mental, social and physical challenges.

07



BELIEVE

Seek out your purpose in life. Find your north star, your passion, your bliss, your inner voice, your wisdom, your calling. Whatever you call it. Research has found that people who score high on life purpose live longer, healthier and more fulfilling lives.

Do extraordinary things! Set fantastic, passionate goals and work like crazy to achieve them. Find your place of flow—that sweet spot where you so intensely and completely focus on the present moment and the task at hand and that time passes effortlessly. Some say flow is the point of life.



Who am I?

I'm Dr Sarah McKay and I translate neuroscience research into simple actionable strategies you can apply to your life and work.

I'm an Oxford University-educated neuroscientist, science writer, TEDx speaker, and Founder of [The Neuroscience Academy](#).

My purpose in life is to move neuroscience out of the lab and the research journal and translate it into tools, language and stories you can use to promote health, happiness, and resilience.

I write a popular neuroscience blog [Your Brain Health](#), and through my online program [The Neuroscience Academy](#) I train health and wellness practitioners and those in the helping professions how to apply neuroscience to their work.

[The Neuroscience Academy](#) offers an online professional training program that focuses on applying neuroscience, positive psychology and mind-body medicine to life and work.

CONNECT WITH ME:

www.yourbrainhealth.com.au

www.twitter.com/SarahMMcKay

CONNECT WITH THE YOUR BRAIN HEALTH COMMUNITY:

www.facebook.com/YourBrainHealth



the neuroscience
— academy —