

Boosting Brain Power: 8 Ways To Sharpen Your Mind

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/13/boosting-brain-power_n_3211255.html#slide=2409820

1) Wake Up in Wonderland

Any time you encounter "meaning threat" -- that unsettling feeling you get when something makes no sense -- [your brain starts to work harder](#), says Travis Proulx, a researcher at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Test-takers were almost *twice as accurate* in analyzing data and learning patterns after Proulx and his colleague made them read bizarre, nonsensical stories by Kafka and David Lynch.

Try this: Expose yourself to unusual experiences that may surprise or confuse you.

There's no surefire prescription for "meaning threat," but experiment with immersive avant-garde theater (like [Sleep No More](#)) or [David Lynch-style surrealist shorts](#) (humanoid rabbits muttering non sequiturs -- chew on *that*)...or hightail it to a country where you don't know the language or customs (Other research has found that [people are 20 percent more likely to solve difficult problems](#) after thinking back to culture-shock experiences they had when living abroad.)



2) Find the Right Coffee Shop

A University of Illinois study found that thinkers were better at coming up with creative solutions when working in a somewhat noisy space than in a quiet room. A certain level of background noise is distracting enough to nudge a stymied brain to think more abstractly -- which [enhances creativity](#), the researchers discovered.

Try this: Leave your quiet comfort zone when stumped. The place you settle in must be energetic, but not *too* loud. The cognitive sweet spot is about 70 decibels, the noise level of a busy café. (A plus: [The caffeine you'll drink will speed you up and help you recall information better](#). Add sugar to enhance the effects.)



3) Pop a Bubble

Chewing gum (even the sugar-free stuff) helps us stick to a task—and be faster and more accurate at it, too, finds a study at Cardiff University in Great Britain. In two studies involving auditory pattern and visual memory tests, [gum chewers outperformed their peers](#). Exercising the jaw -- constantly, rhythmically -- increases blood flow to brain regions responsible for attention. This keeps us focused, even as we're doing something tedious.

Try this: The longer you chew, the greater the benefit. At 30 minutes, gum-chewers remained more focused on their task than the empty-mouthed.



4) Get Off Your Yoga Mat (50 Times, Quickly)

No doubt, yoga is a wonder exercise—it tones muscles, tames monkey mind and even burns some calories. But there's one area in which it can fall short: as a cardio workout. *Only* aerobic exercise -- and most yoga doesn't qualify -- gave rise to [increases in brain volume in regions related to memory and attention](#), found a University of Illinois study that tracked older adults who followed various fitness training regimens. Aerobic activity is the best for raising levels of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), a protein that encourages neurons to grow.



Try this: Three one-hour sessions of aerobic exercise (jogging, speed-walking, bicycling) a week for six months, as prescribed in the study. Even a short, [high-intensity aerobic exertion](#) -- like sprinting -- can dramatically raise BDNF, resulting in 20 percent faster learning in one study. For yogis who want an all-in-one workout, add pulse-raising Vinyasa Flow or Power Yoga to your practice and (this applies to everyone) a [dose of meditation](#)—also proven to help us focus and retain information.

5) Go Deeper into Downton Abbey

TV shows, novels, loopy messages scribbled on the sidewalk -- anything can launch new ideas and insights if you "zoom out" enough, say Sandra Bond Chapman and Shelly Kirkland in their new book, [Make Your Brain Smarter](#). The [key to a stronger frontal lobe](#) is "integrated reasoning" -- finding ways to connect new information to your own life experiences and knowledge.



Try this: Instead of simply following the plotline of a book or TV show, come up with insights or take-home messages that you can apply to your life. Everything can be mined: [Downton Abbey for money lessons](#), [Jane Austen for life advice](#), [anything](#). When study participants pushed their minds this way, they showed cognitive gains after just six hours of training and significant structural changes in the brain's white matter connections in six to 12 weeks. "Mental weight-lifting" is not like physical exercise, Kirkland says. You must do this throughout your day, as often as possible, continually.

6) Mutter the Right Way

You might look and sound crazy (especially sans earbuds), but who cares? [Talking to oneself \(aloud or not\) is now a scientifically proven brain-booster](#), finds a review of 32 self-talk intervention studies from the University of Thessaly in Greece. It helps you to pay attention, steadies you emotionally and cues you to act.



Try this: Self-talk is most effective when learning something new or enhancing performance. Little instructions (Do *this*. OK. Now, do *that*) are more helpful than "atta-girl" self-cheering, the researchers found. In one study, athletes ran faster when they spoke cue words to themselves (*push, heel*) through a race.

7) Embrace a Dying Art Form

Writing longhand -- not texting and typing -- stimulates brain regions involved in thinking, language and memory. In an MRI study at the University of Indiana, children who wrote out letters ("learning by doing," not just "seeing") showed [more complex neural activation patterns than those who didn't](#).



Try this:

Use longhand, [especially when learning foreign alphabets, mathematics and music](#) (or anything else involving letters or symbols). You may recall the information faster and for longer than if you typed it, just as adult students did in a study that involved [recognizing Mandarin characters](#). (If ballpoints are too archaic for you, use apps like [Plus](#) or [Antipaper Notes](#) for hand-writing on your gadget.)

8) Translate Your Doozy of a Problem into Spanish

Your translation may be fuzzy, but your reasoning is clearer when you work out a problem in a foreign language, finds a University of Chicago study that asked bilinguals to make decisions. Speaking in a foreign tongue distanced them emotionally from the matter at hand -- and they became more deliberate and unbiased in their thinking.



Try this: If you speak a second language (even imperfectly), use it when you need to be especially logical, like when making tough financial decisions, the researchers suggest. Should you pay down your mortgage? Sell your penny stocks? Buy a castle? The best answer may come to you more easily than conjugating the subjunctive.