

FORTUNE Well.

Staying fit as you age isn't just about exercise. Experts say to prioritize these 4 habits

Kristine Gill | July 23, 2023



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Dr. Bill Dorfman, a 64-year-old cosmetic dentist in Southern California, prides himself on looking years younger, a characteristic he attributes to good genes and a daily workout regimen.

Three days a week he focuses on abs and cardio, the other days are for lifting light weights at high reps.

Dorfman says he got serious about exercise following a lull during dental school when he found himself frequently in pain. That's when he realized his fitness had taken a back seat following years as a high school swimmer and gymnast. "What I found was the more I exercised, the better I felt," he says.

Outside of the gym, he credits his daily Words With Friends habit with keeping his mind sharp. He also makes nightly dinner plans with various friends to stay connected.

Dorfman's wellness habits underscore that one key to a longer life is a fitness regimen—but one that incorporates mental and emotional fitness as well.

"We really need to look at the life of an older adult with a holistic lens—if they're really happy, healthy and whole," says Dor Skuler, co-founder and CEO of Intuition Robotics and an expert on loneliness in aging adults.

Here are four ways to focus on whole-body fitness as you age.

Exercise for the body and brain

Staying physically active can prevent injuries and help the body heal faster when they happen, plus it's also strongly linked to good mental health and brain function.

Dr. Kirk Erickson, director of Translational Neurosciences at AdventHealth Central Florida, where he studies the plasticity and modifiability of the brain systems, has found physical activity to be one of the best ways to keep the brain healthy throughout its lifespan.

Erickson's research shows that as we age, the brain shrinks, specifically the hippocampus which is responsible for memory formation. Exercise can help maintain this portion of the brain, and in some cases, increase the size. There's much to be learned about how and why this is, but Erickson says the effects are better the longer you engage in these habits so it's good to start young.

Of course you can still reap the benefits if you start later in life, he says. You might find that with time, you can recall memories and information more easily and have better executive function and a longer attention span when your brain is at its best, he says.

He recommends moderate exercise, like walking, 5 days a week for 30 minutes.

Aside from walking, Dr. Gary Small, chair of psychiatry at Hackensack Meridian Health says strength training helps combat age-related muscle loss, and can lead to a longer lifespan. Additionally, balance exercises can help prevent slips and falls—the leading cause of injuries in adults ages 65 and older.

Jasmine Marcus, a physical therapist at Cayuga Medical Center at Ithaca where she works with patients from all ages and physical activity levels, recommends tiptoeing into exercise if you're new to it. She suggests starting with some kind of group fitness class like Zumba—anything that elevates your heart rate. It helps, too, if you have a partner to hold you accountable, she says.

Strive for mental fitness

Small also recommends doing activities that keep the brain in shape. One study showed the simple act of reading articles online and searching topics on Google offered valuable mental stimulation. Doing crossword puzzles, reading books, playing games, practicing hobbies and daydreaming all contribute to mental sharpness.

Stress management is also a critical part of maintaining mental fitness. Just 10 minutes of meditation a day can improve mood and cognitive agility, says Small, rewiring the brain and strengthening neural circuits.

“You don’t have to go to a retreat in Nepal or India to meditate, but you can learn the skills,” he says.

Stay social

The U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory this year warning of the nation’s loneliness epidemic, which negatively impacts health. One study equated lack of social connection to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day. Other studies show social connection reduces the risk of premature death. It’s clear that social and emotional fitness is key to aging well.

Skuler, whose company makes AI-powered social companions for aging adults aimed at keeping them active and engaged, says major life changes such as the death of a spouse, often trigger loneliness.

“That is by far a watershed moment,” he says. Suddenly no one is asking how you slept or what you have planned for the day. A similar problem happens with asynchronous aging, where one spouse has a decline with dementia, for example. Other events such as retiring or sending the kids off to college might have similar impacts on social well-being, Skuler says.

ElliQ, the robot companion Skuler’s company makes, is one way to help aging adults stay connected, but he encourages all people to maintain friendships and relationships with family members. Volunteering, he says, can also add purpose and connection to your life.

Develop good sleep hygiene

There’s a myth that seniors need less sleep as they age, but Dr. Jamie Zeitzer, advisor and scientific reviewer at Rise Science, says the reality is sleep becomes more difficult with age. The result is that many seniors find themselves going to bed later and rising earlier.

“Humans are programmed to stay awake 16 [hours] and sleep 8 hours,” he says. “An older person’s ability to do that diminishes, so they have to work a little harder at it.”

The causes for poor sleep can be both social and physical. We become more sensitive to sounds and temperatures as we age, says Zeitzer. So the garbage truck that never woke you on its weekly route, might now rouse you at 6 a.m., he says. Similarly, a bedroom that’s too hot or cold might make it difficult to sleep.

As we age we also become more sensitive to caffeine. So if you used to be able to drink a cup of coffee in the evening, you could find you now have trouble falling asleep hours later.

There's also a major shift that happens once we retire where the social constraints around sleep are suddenly lifted. Seniors who don't have social obligations early in the morning might find they're less inclined to sleep at typical hours. A nap during the day, for example, may "cannibalize their sleep at night," Zeitzer says.

Older adults might find that sleeping too little or having a fragmented night of sleep can lead to acute problems with cognition the following day, Zeitzer adds. Poor sleep over the long-term is linked to health conditions including depression, Alzheimer's disease, and cancer.

A good routine can solve some sleep problems. To start, avoid caffeine later in the day. And be mindful that you adjust the temperature in your sleep environment to encourage rest.

And he recommends finding a way to wind down before bed. While some experts warn against the use of electronics before you grab some shut eye, Zeitzer says watching a TV show can be helpful if it means you feel more relaxed and ready for bed afterward.

"It's always good to aspire to closing your eyes and falling asleep but other people need more kinds of wind down routines," he says.

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