



Brain Health

There is much importance given to medication in Parkinson's management. However exercising, relaxing, expressing yourself creatively and retaining a good social life promote brain health, which in turn can help reduce both your motor and non-motor Parkinson's symptoms.

EXERCISE

It is already well established that exercise can help people with Parkinson's maintain and improve their mobility, flexibility and balance. Recently we have discovered that exercise may also help enhance the connections between neurons.

It is not only what we may think of as more traditional exercise that can help people with Parkinson's. Music has a special place in brain health and has been shown to spur healthy brain activity. Dancing is helpful, as is singing to music. Specifically music like the Tango, with a metric beat can improve cognitive processes, reduce fatigue and enhance functional mobility in Parkinson's. Movement is the key and as another example, even non-contact boxing has been associated with more fluid body movements.

On the psychological front, exercise is a powerful antidote to depression for many reasons.

To get the best out of your exercise, you will want a routine that motivates you. Regular Parkinson's exercise classes are a great start. It's advisable to set yourself a realistic plan and stick to it. It's easy to try to do much too early, which means your enthusiasm may wane because you are overly tired or find it excessively difficult to meet your goals.

You can notch up the expectations you have of

yourself once you have your routine well established. It may help you to envisage the realistic results you are aiming for while you're exercising.

People have different body clocks, so it's a good idea to exercise at the time of day that suits you best. Perhaps in the mornings to help you fully wake up, or in the evenings to help you wind down.

NUTRITION

As a rule, good nutrition for the body is good nutrition for the brain. However there are some foods that are especially efficacious for brain health and others that aren't. Omega Three oils help our brains to function better, improve concentration and lessen depression. These oils are abundant in fish, walnut and flaxseed.

Research suggests antioxidant vitamins E and C may help protect brain cells. You want to avoid excessive unhealthy foods. It is advised caffeine and alcohol be enjoyed in moderation only.

CREATIVITY

Creativity in some form is within reach of all of us, not just people endowed with artistic talent. Creativity involves a cognitive brain process which helps develop mental function. It is not limited to the arts—there is creativity in science and mathematics, in fact in any kind of problem solving. In addition to the very

significant discovery that brain cells can be replenished in adult brains, it is now clear that new pathways of communication may form between brain cells and areas of the brain that are used intensely can increase slightly in size.

Many people find taking up new things they do not know much about can be stimulating. For instance, learn a new language; learn how to sail, or play cards. Anything that involves concentration, learning and focus supports brain health.

Exercises, such as memorising lists, can improve your memory and speed up your recollection. Try reading aloud to someone, perhaps a grandchild, regularly as this can help mental development.

Games like Sudoku, crosswords and chess provide a challenge and embarking on a creative activity such as drawing or creative writing may provide a welcome distraction, especially if you're feeling down. Well-designed brain training gym type programmes and apps may help alleviate or slow cognitive decline. It's important that we take time for ourselves and focus on things outside of ourselves that we enjoy and creativity is perfect for doing this.

RELAXATION

There is evidence that long-term stress, depression and anxiety can impair brain function, so learning relaxation techniques is invaluable.

Meditation is one option. It can lower blood pressure and help with concentration, even when you are not meditating. This may help you sleep more soundly, which is important for relaxation and brain health. Tai Chi is becoming increasingly popular among people with Parkinson's as a form of relaxation and exercise.

SOCIAL LIFE

Maintaining current friendships and building new social relationships can be of real value too. Parkinson's can make people feel isolated at times. It's vital therefore that you do what you can to maintain the friendships you currently have, and seek out new friendships. The research increasingly shows that social contact is central to our psychological well-being. We humans are social animals after all.

Source: Parkinson's Association Ireland