

How to Make Your Dendrites Grow and Grow

by Daniel Golden, Adapted from Life Magazine

What can the average person do to strengthen his or her mind? “The important thing is to be actively involved in areas unfamiliar to you,” says Arnold Scheibel, head of UCLA’s Brain Research Institute. “Anything that’s intellectually challenging can probably serve as a kind of stimulus for dendritic growth, which means it adds to the computational reserves in your brain.” So pick something that’s diverting and, most important, unfamiliar. A computer programmer might try sculpture; a ballerina might try marine navigation. Here are some other stimulating suggestions from brain researchers:

Do puzzles. “I can’t stand crosswords,” says neuroscientist Antonio Damasio of the University of Iowa, “but they’re a good idea.” Psychologist Sherry Willis of Pennsylvania State University says, “People who do jigsaw puzzles show greater spatial ability, which you use when you look at a map.”

Try a musical instrument. “As soon as you decide to take up the violin, your brain has a whole new group of muscle-control problems to solve. But that’s nothing compared with what the brain has to do before the violinist can begin to read notes on a page and correlate them with his or her fingers to create tones. This is remarkable, high-level type of activity,” says Scheibel.

Fix something. Learn to repair your car or repair a shaver, suggests Zaven Khachaturian, a brain expert at the National Institute of Aging. “My basement is full of electronic gadgets, waiting to be repaired. The solution is not the important thing. It’s the challenge.”

Try the arts. If your verbal skills are good, buy a set of watercolors and take a course. If your drawing skills are good, start a journal or write poetry.

Dance. “We keep seeing a relationship between physical activity and cognitive maintenance,” says Harvard brain researcher Marilyn Albert. “We suspect that moderately strenuous exercise leads to the development of small blood vessels. Blood carries oxygen, and oxygen nourishes the brain.” But be sure the activity is new and requires thinking. Square dancing, ballet or tap is preferable to twisting the night away.

Date provocative people. Better yet, marry one of them. Willis suggests that the most pleasant and rewarding way to increase your dendrites is to “meet and interact with intelligent, interesting people.” Try tournament bridge, chess, even sailboat racing.

And remember, researchers agree that it’s never too late. Says Scheibel, “All of life should be a learning experience, not just for the trivial reasons but because by continuing the learning process, we are challenging our brain and therefore building brain circuitry. Literally. This is the way the brain operates.”