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# Mind, Mood & Memory™

*Maintaining Mental Fitness From Middle Age and Beyond*

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## How Being a Lifelong Learner Reinforces Memory, Sharpens Other Thinking Skills, and Elevates Mood

*Acquiring new information and new skills throughout your life stimulates the brain and provides other benefits, too.*

The simple act of learning new and challenging information can often be enough to stimulate the brain to support a stronger memory and sharper thinking skills. Research suggests that lifelong learning contributes to the birth of new neurons and supports healthy brain connectivity.

But what does it mean to be a lifelong learner? The idea may conjure up images of a retiree going back to college to earn a degree, adult education classes, or travel tours that focus on history or the arts. But lifelong learning doesn't require a formal educational setting or an expensive trip to immerse yourself in another culture, says Bonnie Wong, PhD, director of neuropsychology in Massachusetts General Hospital's Frontotemporal Disorders Unit.

"I think of lifelong learning as something driven by a person's innate curiosity," she says. "It doesn't have to be part of a class, though that probably makes it easier. People can explore their interests on their own, too." Regardless of how learning takes place, the key,



Being a lifelong learner can involve taking classes or pursuing challenging subject matter on your own.

Dr. Wong explains, is that acquiring knowledge can and should go on for a lifetime. Brain functions such as memory, processing, concentration, communication, as well as mood and self-confidence all can benefit through learning new information and skills.

### Learning and the Brain

Numerous studies in recent years demonstrate that the kind of cognitive stimulation associated with

lifelong learning promotes neuroplasticity, which is essentially the brain's ability to reorganize itself and respond to changes, including those associated with Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia.

A 2022 British study, published in *Neurology*, the medical journal of the American Academy of Neurology, suggests that continual learning over a lifetime may protect the brain and boost what is known as "cognitive reserve," the brain's resistance to aging and disease. Cognitive reserve also refers to how the brain best uses its available resources. A vibrant social life and

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## EVEN SHORT-LIVED STROKE SYMPTOMS SHOULD BE TREATED AS AN EMERGENCY

Stroke symptoms that last less than hour, known as a transient ischemic attack (TIA), need an emergency medical evaluation to help prevent a full-blown stroke, according to an American Heart Association (AHA) statement released earlier this year. A TIA is a temporary blockage of blood flow to the brain. The AHA estimates that about 240,000 people have a TIA in the United States each year, though the organization acknowledges that the estimate may be low because short-

lived stroke symptoms often go unreported. TIA symptoms often start strong, but fade quickly, usually lasting less than an hour. Symptoms include a facial droop, weakness or numbness on one side of the body, dizziness, and difficulty with communication. The reason TIAs should be considered emergencies is because about one in five people who has a TIA goes on to have a full-blown stroke within three months. And about half of those people have a stroke within two days of a TIA. **MMM**

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**Diversify Your Social Encounters for Greater Happiness**

A Harvard Business School study suggests that, just as it can be financially beneficial to have a varied investment portfolio, you may benefit emotionally from a social portfolio that includes a healthy mix of family members, friends, acquaintances, and the people you encounter running errands. The study, published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, suggests that while time spent with a partner or other member of your household can provide comfort and other benefits, your encounters with other individuals may boost your well-being in other ways. The researchers noted, for example, that people tend to behave differently with others than they do with their partners. If you call an old friend or strike up a conversation with a neighbor or someone in line at the grocery store, you may ask questions and talk about things that you might not at home. These encounters can enhance feelings of connectedness to others and improve your sense of happiness and well-being. The researchers, who gathered data from nearly 600 people across the United States, found that the amount of time spent interacting with others and the number and variety of people who made up those interactions were all associated with greater levels of self-reported happiness. While there is no exact prescription for how much time to spend interacting with people outside your home or how many people to include in your diverse social portfolio, the researchers did suggest that starting with a call to a friend or even chatting for a few minutes with the barista making your coffee is a good way to start making an investment in your happiness.



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**Eating Disorders Not Limited to Younger People**

While eating disorders are most commonly associated with adolescents and young adults, a recent study by the North American Menopause Society suggests that these conditions can occur at any time during a woman's life. The study's findings note that dissatisfaction with body image is a core feature of eating disorders across a woman's lifespan. Specifically, researchers found that eating disorders in perimenopause and postmenopause were based primarily on fears of gaining weight and losing control over eating habits. Previous research suggests that about 13 percent of women experience an eating disorder at some point in their life. And while the percentage of women older than 40 who develop an eating disorder is closer to 3.5 percent, some studies suggest that nearly 30 percent of women older than 40 have symptoms such as dissatisfaction with their eating patterns. Researchers, who published their findings in the journal *Menopause*, say the study should be used to develop more targeted treatment strategies for women in midlife and beyond maintaining serious concerns about weight gain, eating habits, and body image. It's also worth noting that while eating disorders may be more common among women, men also struggle with body image concerns and eating disorders.

**Living with Dementia Means Having a Greater Fall Risk**

For any older adult, falls are a major cause of injury and disability. And for individuals with dementia, fall risks may be especially high. In a study published recently in *Alzheimer's & Dementia: The Journal of the Alzheimer's Association*, researchers found that older adults with dementia have twice the risk of falling and three times the risk of experiencing serious fall-related injuries compared with older adults without dementia. Factors such as a history of falling the previous year, impaired vision, and living with others (versus alone) were strongly associated with greater fall risk among people with dementia. The researchers suggest that assessing a person's environment for fall risks and instituting fall-prevention interventions are particularly important if that individual has dementia. This means checking for poor lighting, throw rugs, and other items that may cause falls. It also means evaluating a person's functioning and ability to move safely in their environment, whether it's at home or in an assisted living or skilled nursing facility. **MMM**



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# The Truth Behind Common Meditation Myths

*Meditation is an increasingly popular practice associated with several benefits, but it remains misunderstood by many.*

Nearly 15 percent of U.S. adults practiced some form of meditation within the last year, nearly triple the estimates from a decade ago. Though there are many types of meditation, they are all essentially practices that focus on mind and body integration to calm the mind and boost well-being.

Research continues to find numerous health benefits associated with meditation, including stress management and improved mood, better concentration and memory, improved sleep, pain control, and reduced blood pressure. However, despite evidence supporting its psychological and physical health benefits, meditation remains largely misunderstood by a portion of the general public.

To help dispel some meditation misunderstandings, we asked Matthew Sacchet, PhD, director of the Meditation Research Program at Massachusetts General Hospital, to address some common meditation myths. His responses are below:

## **Meditation is primarily a religious or spiritual practice**

Meditation is often relegated to mystical, spiritual, or religious domains, and is thus ignored by individuals and organizations that prioritize empiricism or secularism. While there is some truth to the religious and spiritual embeddedness of some meditation traditions and practices, meditation engages fundamental human capacities that are not bound by any religious or spiritual practice. Meditation is accessible to anyone. Just as anyone has the freedom to think or breathe, anyone can engage in meditation and reap its benefits.

## **Meditation requires years of training before it can be helpful**

While repeated and intensive meditation training over extended periods of time may very well contribute to prolonged and increasingly deeper effects, growing evidence suggests that even short-term training—on the order of minutes—can induce health-related physical and mental benefits.

## **Meditation must be practiced while seated on the floor**

Many forms of meditation exist. I suggest following the instructions of the tradition one is practicing. Contrary to common knowledge, some traditions allow and even recommend

meditation while standing or lying down, depending on one's circumstances and their particular practice goals. On the other hand, some techniques are best practiced in a stable and grounded position while seated; still others may be completed while moving or engaging in activities. "Daily mindfulness," for example, may be practiced while eating, folding laundry, or engaging in other tasks.

## **I can't learn to meditate because I'm too easily distracted**

This misconception is very common. If you believe that your mind or personality inherently limits your ability to meditate, first practice compassion toward yourself. Everyone experiences these types of limiting thoughts. Also, start small—perhaps with five-minute sessions—building up at a slow, achievable pace and reducing the duration when necessary.

Finally, examine the beliefs that might underlie your self-limiting feelings. With some investigation, a new path forward may emerge.

## **I'm too old to learn meditation**

Older individuals can benefit from meditation, too. This practice isn't just an activity for younger folks. Indeed, considerable evidence indicates that age doesn't limit one's ability to benefit from practicing meditation.



*Meditation can be learned at any age and practiced just about anywhere.*

## **Takeaway**

Dr. Sacchet notes that people of all ages are practicing meditation in greater numbers these days. "This is true for a number of reasons, in my opinion," he explains. "The scientific study of meditation has recently exploded, providing empirically supported insights into its health-related benefits. Many individuals in positions of power—including celebrities, athletes, business leaders, and politicians—have espoused the benefits of meditation. Opportunities and access to meditation training now abound, including through smartphone applications."

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic led more people to stay home to manage their rising stress levels and seek out smartphone and computer apps dedicated to meditation and other wellness pursuits. As there is no one-size-fits-all meditation practice, experiment with different online programs, books, and in-person classes to find a routine that works for you.

"Other reasons for the popularity and growth of meditation include that it is highly modifiable and personalizable, applicable to general well-being and a wide array of health-related conditions," Dr. Sacchet says, adding that it serves as an alternative treatment to medications for some conditions.

By keeping an open mind about meditation, and viewing it as a way to calm your mind for a few minutes a day, you may find yourself joining a growing population of people who enjoy its many benefits. **MMM**

# Is Your Emotional Health Undercutting Your Physical Health, or Vice Versa?

*Addressing conditions such as depression and anxiety may help you feel better physically and improve your overall quality of life.*

**W**hen you're very nervous you might feel knots tighten in your stomach and have trouble taking deep breaths. But then you receive good news, and soon you're breathing easier, feeling energized, and the knots have disappeared.

The relationship between your emotions and your physical health—often referred to as the mind-body connection—is a complicated one. There's much more to it than momentary worry affecting your breathing and appetite, for example. It's important to understand that how you feel emotionally and psychologically can have long-term and profound effects on your physical well-being. Similarly, your physical health and lifestyle can greatly impact your mental health.

"The relationship between physical and mental health is bidirectional," explains psychiatrist Masoud Kamali, MD, with the Dauten Family Center for Bipolar Treatment Innovation at Massachusetts General Hospital. "Many would consider mental and physical health to be entirely separate entities, but they are strongly correlated."

## Is It Mental or Physical?

Dr. Kamali notes that, historically, some of what we consider mental health problems would be described in physical terms. "For example, 'soldier's heart' was used to describe a group of physical symptoms in soldiers, including fatigue, rapid heart-beat and shortness of breath, and represents what we now call PTSD," Dr. Kamali says. "Also, in many other parts of the world and other cultures, what modern medicine considers psychiatric disorders are primarily experienced as physical symptoms. This leads to many individuals



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*Seeing a doctor for your physical symptoms may lead to a diagnosis of a mental health disorder that is causing your pain, fatigue, and other problems.*

seeking care from their primary care doctor for physical conditions, while the underlying cause for the symptoms is a psychiatric illness."

Another example is the close connection between pain and depression. "In a vicious cycle, chronic pain can cause depression and depression can cause pain," Dr. Kamali says. "This is further highlighted by the fact that some antidepressants are beneficial for chronic pain conditions."

Anxiety is another emotional state that can trigger physical symptoms. "Many emergency room physicians are familiar with the case of the individual who presents with symptoms mimicking a heart attack—chest pain, palpitations and shortness of breath—only to recognize that these symptoms are due to underlying psychological distress or panic disorder," Dr. Kamali says. "The gut and the brain are closely connected through the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems and the release of stress hormones."

Stomach cramps, appetite changes, nausea, diarrhea, and constipation are widely known to be symptoms of anxiety. Depression can have a wide range of negative effects on physiological functions such as DNA repair, platelet function, and heart rate variability, which in turn can have serious negative health consequences, including

worse outcomes in cancer, heart disease, stroke, or diabetes, Dr. Kamali says. "However, depression can also lead to a slew of unhealthy behaviors that lead to serious negative health consequences, such as smoking cigarettes, excess alcohol use, lack of physical activity, poor eating habits and social isolation," he adds.

If you're experiencing physical symptoms such as headaches, gastrointestinal distress, fatigue, or heart palpitations, among others, consider that they may be signs of emotional distress. Chronic stress, anxiety, and depression can linger so long that you aren't necessarily aware that you may have a mental health disorder that can be diagnosed and treated. Feelings of sadness, hopelessness, excessive worry, and other emotions can start to seem "normal," so the presence of physical symptoms may not immediately make you suspect they are the body's responses to emotional or psychological problems. This is especially true among older adults, who may have aches, pains, and other ailments that are truly rooted in physical health problems such as arthritis or cardiovascular disease.

## Sleep and Health

Depression and anxiety can also drastically disrupt sleep, the quiet intersection of mental and physical health. The quality and quantity of your sleep affect your energy, cognition, immune system, and other aspects of your physical functioning. And, if you've ever found yourself a little grouchier than usual after a poor night's sleep or felt less able to deal with a weighty emotional dilemma, you would know that insufficient sleep affects mood, as well.

Conversely, consistently good sleep is associated with better physical and mental health. The problem is that sleep quality is vulnerable to any number of factors.

"Most psychiatric conditions affect sleep in a negative manner," Dr. Kamali says. "This may range from sleeping too much in some forms of depression, to a complete lack of sleep in mania."

Sleep can be delayed or disrupted in many ways, some of which are due to physical health issues, while others are related to mental health. For example, Dr. Kamali notes that individuals struggling with anxiety will ruminate and worry before falling asleep, which can lead to more arousal and insomnia. People suffering from depression can have a combination of trouble falling asleep, trouble staying asleep during the night, and early morning awakening. They may experience fatigue and spend long hours in bed, but will spend few hours actually sleeping.

“In general, depression leads to fewer periods of deep, restful sleep,” Dr. Kamali explains. “Poor sleep itself has multiple negative consequences. In addition to leading to daytime sleepiness and fatigue, insomnia can lead to health problems such as obesity, impaired glucose tolerance, and high blood pressure.”

### Takeaway

If you’ve been ignoring sleep problems or other signs of depression, anxiety, or other mood disorders, talk with your primary care physician or consider working with a therapist. It’s not just your mental health at risk.

“Poor physical and mental health are both associated with low levels of life satisfaction in older adults; however some studies indicate mental health may be the more important factor of the two,” Dr. Kamali says.

When addressing mental health, in addition to specific treatments targeting specific disorders—for example medications to treat depression or cognitive therapy for anxiety—recommended strategies are almost identical to strategies that improve physical health.

“This only further emphasizes that physical and mental health are intertwined,” Dr. Kamali explains. “To stay mentally and physically healthy, make sure to have enough physical activity, avoid social isolation, get adequate sleep, maintain healthy eating habits, limit use of alcohol and avoid smoking.” **MMM**

## MEMORY MAXIMIZERS

HERE’S THE LATEST RESEARCH TO HELP YOU KEEP YOUR BRAIN SHARP.

### Short Bursts of Physical Activity May Improve Memory and More

Think the brain-boosting benefits of exercise are possible only with long workouts? Think again . . . and if you can take time out for mini-workouts of six to nine minutes each, your



© Janet Wall | Adobe Stock

*A quick ride on a stationary bicycle or other burst of activity supports stronger memory.*

thinking may be even sharper. In a British study published in the *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*, researchers found that doing just under 10 minutes a day of moderate-to-vigorous exercise daily may improve executive function (planning, organizing, decision-making, etc.) and working memory, which is the information you hold on to for short periods to be used for various cognitive tasks (memorizing an address while also getting directions to that location, for example). Examples of moderate physical activity include brisk walking or bicycling. Vigorous exercise includes jogging or running, swimming, biking uphill, and aerobic dancing. In the study, nearly 4,500 participants wore 24-hour activity monitors and took tests that assessed short-term memory,

problem-solving, and processing skills. While short bursts of activity were associated with modest cognitive gains, the researchers found that additional time exercising was associated with greater cognitive benefits.

### Orienteering May Help You Find Your Way to Better Cognition

Orienteering, a sport that combines navigation and map reading with physical exercise, could be helpful in fighting off cognitive decline, too. In a study published in the journal *PLOS One*, researchers surveyed healthy adults, ranging in age from 18 to 87, with a range of orienteering experience—from none to elite. The

individuals who participated in orienteering, which involves following checkpoints on a map in a race against time and other competitors, tended to have better spatial navigation and memory skills, compared with those with no orienting experience. The researchers suggested that adding elements of wayfinding into regular workouts could be beneficial over the span of a lifetime. They noted, for example, that modern life may have removed certain cognitive and physical challenges that help the brain thrive. The absence of active navigation may lead to the loss of certain aspects of neural architecture that support a strong memory and healthy brain function. The researchers pointed to Alzheimer’s disease, in which losing the ability to find one’s way is one of the most common early symptoms of the disease. It affects about half of all people with Alzheimer’s disease, even those in its early stages. You can look for orienteering clubs in your area ([orienteeringusa.org](http://orienteeringusa.org)) or even try to incorporate orienteering skills into your everyday life by turning off your GPS and using a map to find your way to your next destination. You can also stimulate the parts of your brain used in wayfinding by taking different routes to familiar destinations. **MMM**



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*The sport of orienteering combines outdoor exercise with the cognitively stimulating challenges of map and compass reading.*

# Overcome Loneliness and Isolation to Preserve Memory and Forge a Brighter Outlook

*Making an effort to forge new relationships can help, but you may need to reframe your thinking and try other solutions, too.*

The social isolation associated with the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a range of health consequences, including increased rates of anxiety and depression, skipped doctor's appointments and delayed medical tests and procedures, as well as an uptick in self-reported complaints of fuzzy thinking and cognitive impairment.

Likewise, many studies in recent years have also shown that loneliness is strongly associated with declines in memory and thinking skills.

While isolation and loneliness are often paired together or used interchangeably at times, they mean two different things. Isolation refers to a lack of social connection and interpersonal contact. Loneliness, however, is a subjective feeling of being alone, regardless of how many or how few social encounters populate your daily or weekly routine.

"You can be lonely in a crowd, but also be physically isolated and not feel lonely at all," explains Nancy Donovan, MD, director of the Division of Geriatric Psychiatry at Brigham and Women's Hospital and a researcher at Massachusetts General Hospital. Dr. Donovan also recently co-authored the book *Loneliness: Science and Practice*, which explores the mechanisms and consequences of loneliness in various populations.

"There is evidence to support the idea that loneliness and social isolation are risk factors for cognitive impairment," Dr. Donovan says, adding that the progression to dementia is common among people experiencing chronically high levels of loneliness.

## Loneliness and the Brain

Isolation and loneliness can affect brain health in several ways. "Loneliness is a type of psychological stress," Dr.



*Volunteering is an excellent way to expand your social circle while engaging in activities you find rewarding and purposeful.*

Donovan explains. "And stress triggers an inflammatory response in the body"

Stress alone can lead to memory problems and make it harder to concentrate. But research has also shown that neuroinflammation (inflammation in the brain) can kill neurons and cause other physical changes to brain structure that affect most aspects of cognition and mood.

Scientists also believe that social interactions, whether they are in-person or over the phone, provide the kind of cognitive stimulation that is vital for optimal brain health. Having emotional support from others also appears to help protect brain health. It's associated with higher levels of brain-derived neurotrophic factor, a molecule that plays a key role in learning and memory.

## Strategies to Consider

The overly simplistic solutions to feeling lonely and having few regular contacts with other people is to "make a friend" or get together more with existing friends and family members. But for many people, those options are not so easy.

Even before the pandemic and once social distancing guidelines eased, social isolation has been a challenge for many people, especially older adults. Individuals who live alone or are the primary caregiver for a spouse or

family member can struggle without a vibrant social network.

Loneliness has many causes. Dr. Donovan notes that the roots of loneliness can start to grow when we're very young. Early-life experiences and the nature of parental attachments can have both positive and negative effects on feelings of loneliness and connectedness.

Loneliness can also spring from changes later in life. The loss of a spouse or partner can trigger feelings of loneliness, as can moving away from friends and family or experiencing major events such as retirement that change the nature of your relationships and everyday activities.

A person's psychological makeup can also contribute to loneliness and isolation. Dr. Donovan says, for example, that people who tend to be introverted and who don't regularly practice social skills are often especially vulnerable to social isolation and the consequences it brings. People who practice negative self-talk are also prone to feeling lonely and unwanted.

Modifying negative thought patterns that result in individuals thinking "people don't want to be around me" or other similar notions can often help curb feelings of loneliness. "A lot of treatment modalities focus on reversing negative thought patterns," Dr. Donovan says.

One commonly used approach is cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), which is based on the ideas that psychological problems are based, partly, on unrealistic and unhelpful ways of thinking and learned patterns of unhelpful behavior. CBT seeks to change thought patterns in order to affect changes in how people feel and behave.

Dr. Donovan adds that behavioral activation therapy is another useful way of addressing loneliness because it helps people identify their values (defined as the things that provide meaning in their lives) and then focuses on motivating individuals to engage in behaviors and activities that align with those values.

*continued on bottom of page 7*

## LEARNING *(cont. from page 1)*

high education attainment early in life are also associated with developing a deeper cognitive reserve, but researchers found that lifelong learning may compensate for lower academic achievement in your younger years.

“Lifelong learning engages the systems in the brain involved in creating new memories,” Dr. Wong says. “You’re connecting new information with older information.”

The multitasking that can go on in certain learning environments can also stimulate regions of the brain that promote better memory, focus, and communication. Dr. Wong notes that the socialization aspect of learning in a class, on a tour, in a discussion group, or in any other setting can improve your outlook and your cognition.

“When you’re connecting with other people, it can help elevate mood and be a great real-time exercise for the brain. People don’t always realize what’s going on with socialization. You’re solving problems and responding to people in real time. You’re integrating a lot of social cues. It really forces the brain to work on a lot of different levels.”

### Learning Opportunities

Though the wave of baby boomers hitting their retirement years in the last decade or two has sparked the growth of lifelong learning programs and pursuits nationwide, the concept has been around for some time. In 1962, New York City’s New School for Social

Research (now New School University) helped establish one of the country’s first major lifelong learning programs—the Institute for Retired Professionals, which continues to offer college-level study for individuals wanting to learn more about topics ranging from foreign policy to film history.

The Harvard Institute for Learning in Retirement began in 1977, and other, similar university-based programs followed. They usually include a combination of instructor-led courses and seminars, as well as peer-led classes and discussion groups. Adult education programs at community colleges, vocational education centers, libraries, and other locations continue to attract more participants annually in cities and towns across the country.

“There are many opportunities and ways to continue to learn,” says Dr. Wong, adding that many people discover new learning activities through their social circles. For many, it’s their grandchildren or the teen volunteers at senior centers who become learning partners. At the same time, retirees who become mentors to students and young professionals can impart decades of wisdom, while also picking up some knowledge in the process.

“My older patients say they often learn something when they’re engaging in games with their grandchildren,” Dr. Wong says. “I find there’s a novelty to what younger generations bring

to these interactions. This young generation has acquired a body of knowledge faster than previous generations, especially when it comes to technology. And yet they don’t have the years of experience that older generations have. There’s a kind of cross talk between the generations that can be very helpful.”



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### Takeaway

Whether you’re engaging with young people or with your peers, the key to successful lifelong learning is to challenge yourself. Taking a class in a subject you know well could become boring quickly. On the other hand, teaching a subject you know well could enhance your own understanding of the topic and could be made more interesting when others challenge the way you’ve always thought about it.

You also want to make sure that the skills or information you’re trying to learn aren’t too much beyond your reach. When learning becomes too stressful, it’s not helping your brain and it’s not likely to be an activity you’ll stick with for very long.

Think about the subjects that pique your curiosity, or hobbies or interests you’ve always wanted to pursue, and challenge yourself to learn and do more. “Pursuing new and novel information and activities on your own is great,” Dr. Wong says, “as long as you’re constantly adding to your own ‘encyclopedia.’” **MMM**

## OVERCOMING *(cont. from page 6)*

Dr. Donovan says it’s helpful to view loneliness as a temporary feeling not that different from other emotions. “Loneliness is a normal reaction to have when your social needs aren’t being met. Accept loneliness the way you accept other stresses that are just a part of life. It comes and goes, and we shouldn’t assign other negative characteristics to it.”

To get through lonely periods, consider self-selected activities, such as reading, gardening, or other hobbies to help you feel more in control and connected to the rest of the world. “People feel less lonely when listening to music,” Dr. Donovan says. “It can make you feel more connected to others.”

Interestingly, there is also research to suggest that a walk in nature—even when by yourself—can alleviate loneliness and isolation.

“Walks in nature imbue those feelings of connectedness,” Dr. Donovan says. And of course, activities such as volunteering can address both isolation and feelings of loneliness. Finding a cause you feel strongly about or one to which you can contribute your time, energy, or skills can introduce you to others with similar values and interests and may become a rewarding pastime and the basis of new friendships that will enhance your social circle and make you feel less lonely. **MMM**

ASK THE DOCTOR



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**MCI DIAGNOSIS...IMPORTANCE OF A PRIMARY CARE PHYSICIAN...PTSD SYMPTOMS RETURNING**

**Q** My father has been diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment (MCI). His attitude is hopeful and he's doing okay now, but what should we expect moving forward? How often should he see his doctor?

**A** Having MCI means having some noticeable problems with memory and other thinking skills. However, many people with MCI are able to take care of themselves and participate in most of their usual activities. The condition can be an early sign of Alzheimer's disease, but not everyone with MCI progresses to Alzheimer's. Some people diagnosed with MCI experience little further change in their cognition, though over time the symptoms often become more pronounced.

Looking ahead, it's hard to predict when or if your father's condition will change. Generally, a person with MCI is advised to see a doctor every six to 12 months to assess any changes in memory, processing, attention, and other brain functions. More frequent appointments may be recommended. Earlier this year, the FDA approved lecanemab, a monoclonal antibody, for the treatment of MCI if screenings suggest that the early stages of Alzheimer's are the likely cause of the mild cognitive impairment. Other Alzheimer's drugs, such as cholinesterase inhibitors, may be prescribed to someone with MCI if memory loss is a major symptom.

Because the path of MCI is uncertain, it's a good idea to help your father maintain a healthy lifestyle and engage in cognitively stimulating activities to extend his quality of life.

**Q** I don't have a primary care physician (PCP), but I regularly see several specialists, who have suggested I find a primary care physician. Why is this so important?

**A** A PCP can act as a central figure in coordinating care with your other doctors. This is especially important when it comes to medication use. All of your doctors should be kept current on all the prescription and over-

the-counter medications you take, as well as any supplements, such as vitamins, you consume. Improvements in electronic patient record keeping make the sharing of this information easier than it used to be, but it's still possible for one specialist to be unaware of a prescription written by another doctor. A PCP would ideally know about all of your medications and treatments, and be able to spot any potential drug interactions or other problems before they arise.

A PCP is also the person you can turn to for health and medical issues that don't fall neatly into the purview of one of your specialists. Cancer screenings, a urinary tract infection, back pain, etc., all may be concerns that your PCP can address. The medical landscape and the delivery of health care are certainly changing these days, but consider making a PCP part of your health-care team in the years ahead.

**Q** I had an experience as a young adult that resulted in PTSD, though I was unfamiliar with the term. Things seemed to get better over time but recently my symptoms returned. Therapy helps, but why would this happen?

**A** Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has been around forever, but it wasn't formally declared a diagnosable condition until 1980. In the months and years immediately following a traumatic experience, symptoms are often at their most intense. Over time, their impact on daily living often eases, while the ability to cope improves. But this pattern doesn't apply to everyone, and it's not always clear how and when symptoms will appear or recede.

When symptoms do come back, it's often because there was a trigger that stirs up old memories and feelings. There have been significant advances in PTSD treatment in recent years. Strategies including stress management (meditation, deep breathing, etc.), pursuing hobbies and socializing with others may complement your therapy and enhance the progress you're making. **MMM**

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**Can Walking More Really Boost Your Memory?**

**The Factors That Foster a Brighter Outlook**

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