

Building Resilience: One Step at a Time

Strengthen Your Brain

When we have experienced traumatic stress in childhood or as adults it can change the architecture of the brain in unhelpful ways. This is because traumatic stress changes neural pathways in the brain. This rewiring can make the brain respond to trauma-related stimuli in maladaptive patterns.

The good news is that the science of “rewiring the brain” is steadily progressing. Several talk therapies are very effective in helping people return to more adaptive responses.

If you have experienced traumatic stress over time and think you might be overreactive to stress-related events, you can begin strengthening your brain. Doing so will help you recover; if you need talk therapy, a strengthened brain can help that process move forward.

The most basic brain-strengthening efforts you can make are exercising more, eating more in a more brain-healthy manner, and getting adequate sleep. We have covered some practices related to these three improvements in the presentation archived at the [WellnessMN.org website](http://WellnessMN.org). You can also find a growing list of “one-pager” resources on these and other topics.

So, what can these practices do for your brain? Here are three to ponder:

- Increase the functioning and health of neurons and supportive tissues—especially in brain areas that regulate emotions, improve thinking, and process memories
- Stimulate the growth of new neurons and facilitate the formation of new neural circuits
- Reduce inflammation and oxidative stress, which are linked to a wide range of psychological and medical disorders

So, what can you do to strengthen your brain?

Get a healthy amount of sunlight. Sunlight can optimize serotonin and melatonin levels to affect mood and sleep positively. Sunlight also is how the skin makes nitric oxide, which helps to lower blood pressure. Twenty to thirty minutes of morning sunlight may raise vitamin D levels and increase the metabolic rate while helping decrease inflammation and autoimmune activity. Vitamin D is vital to brain functioning.

Reduce your intake of anticholinergic medications. Anticholinergics block acetylcholine, a neurotransmitter in the brain that helps in attention and memory (acetylcholine is low in Alzheimer’s disease). As a result, these medications may increase memory problems, accelerate brain aging, lower energy levels, and raise the risk for dementia. Anticholinergics include OTC antihistamines, sleep aids like diphenhydramine, and tranquilizers like benzodiazepines. Discuss any changes in usage of these with your medical providers.