

Got cognitive activity? It does a mind good

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If you don't have a college degree, you're at greater risk of developing memory problems or even Alzheimer's. Education plays a key role in lifelong memory performance and risk for dementia, and it's well documented that those with a college degree possess a cognitive advantage over their less educated counterparts in middle and old age. Now, a large national study from Brandeis University published in the *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* shows that those with less schooling can significantly compensate for poorer education by frequently engaging in mental exercises such as word games, puzzles, reading, and lectures.

"The lifelong benefits of higher education for memory in later life are quite impressive, but we do not clearly understand how and why these effects last so long," said lead author Margie Lachman, a psychologist. She suggested that higher education may spur lifelong interest in cognitive endeavors, while those with less education may not engage as frequently in mental exercises that help keep the memory agile.

But education early in adulthood does not appear to be the only route to maintain your memory. The study found that intellectual activities undertaken regularly made a difference. "Among individuals with low education, those who engaged in reading, writing, attending lectures, doing word games or puzzles once or week or more had memory scores similar to people with more education," said Lachman.

The study, called Midlife in the United States, assessed 3,343 men and women between the ages of 32 and 84 with a mean age of 56 years.

Almost 40 percent of the participants had at least a 4-year college degree. The researchers evaluated how the participants performed in two cognitive areas, [verbal memory](#) and executive function—brain processes involved in planning, abstract thinking and cognitive flexibility. Participants were given a battery of tests, including tests of verbal fluency, word recall, and backward counting.

As expected those with higher education said they engaged in cognitive activities more often and also did better on the memory tests, but some with lower [education](#) also did well, explained Lachman.

"The findings are promising because they suggest there may be ways to level the playing field for those with lower educational achievement, and protect those at greatest risk for [memory](#) declines," said Lachman.

"Although we can not rule out the possibility that those who have better memories are the ones who take on more activities, the evidence is consistent with cognitive plasticity, and suggests some degree of personal control over cognitive functioning in adulthood by adopting an intellectually active lifestyle."

Provided by Brandeis University

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