



**TAKE FIVE
TO AGE WELL**

My Brain Health Diary

A personalised planner
for better brain health in
later life.



Who we are



The Open University is the largest academic institution in the UK and a world leader in flexible distance learning. Since it began in 1969, the Open University has taught more than 2.3 million students worldwide.

In 2021, an assessment exercise for university research rated more than three quarters of Open University research as 4 or 3 star – the highest ratings available.

The Open University's commitment to research and societal impact was also recognised, with 82% of its research impact assessed to be world leading or internationally excellent.



Age UK is the country's leading charity dedicated to helping everyone make the most of later life. **Age UK's vision is for a world where every older person feels included and valued.** The charity's mission is that together, we provide crucial support for older people and drive change locally, nationally, and internationally.

The Age UK network also includes Age Scotland, Age Cymru and Age NI. This guide has been developed by Age Scotland and the Open University.

Introduction

You may be aware of some of the ways you can improve your wellbeing and health but perhaps you find it hard to put what you know into practice.

The good news is that studies have found we can use our tendency to do things by habit to help us take better care of ourselves. Your habits are the things you do regularly and almost without thinking, like brushing your teeth.

This booklet will make you more aware of your habits regarding brain health. It explains how to use that awareness to ensure your brain is getting the stimulation and rest it needs for daily wellbeing and long-term health.

While life's challenges can't all be fixed with different habits, there will be opportunities in your daily routines for small changes that boost wellbeing over time. **This guide will help you to identify and make the most of these.**

➔ **For advice on other factors that can affect our wellbeing, such as finance, housing and caring, call:**
England: Age UK – Freephone 0800 678 1602
Scotland: Age Scotland – Freephone 0800 12 44 222
Northern Ireland: Age NI – Freephone 0808 808 7575
Wales: Age Cymru – 0300 303 44 98 (charged at local rate)

About brain health in later life

It was long thought that our memory and thinking abilities inevitably worsen as we age, but recent research suggests that's not the case. Although some decline in brain capability is considered normal ageing, dementia isn't. And it's even possible for some parts of the brain to grow in later life, albeit less readily than when we were young.

Our genes influence how well our brains age, but the way we live our lives day-to-day also plays a major part. **That's good news, as it allows us all – whatever our age or circumstances – to make changes for better brain health.**

Things that help our brains stay young include regular physical activity, social connection, healthy eating, and hydration. **As these topics are covered in other booklets in this series, the focus here is on keeping your brain stimulated, and well rested.**



How to use the diary

In the blank diary, record what you do to boost your brain health each day for a week. You can also record how you feel through the day. **Many of the things that help keep our brains healthy also improve our mood and mental wellbeing, such as getting absorbed in creative activities.**

At the end of the week, look at your completed diary and identify what, if anything, you would like to change in your routines for better brain health. You can then use the planning template to write a plan that will help you achieve your goal.

When reading your diary, imagine you are doing so as a supportive friend. Don't judge yourself weak if you notice unhealthy choices. Psychologists have found that relying on willpower to reach health goals is a common mistake. This is because motivation comes and goes, and marketing and convenience are constant temptations in our society. The beauty of healthy habits is that, once set, they happen without the need for willpower.

→ **The Age UK network partners offer information and resources complementary to this guide. Call the helplines on page 3 or visit:**

Age UK: www.ageuk.org.uk

Age Scotland: www.agescotland.org.uk

Age NI: www.ageni.org

Age Cymru: www.agecymru.wales

My Brain Health Diary: Monday

Time	What's boosting my brain	How I feel (Tick one)
Early morning		😊 😐 😞
Late morning		😊 😐 😞
Early afternoon		😊 😐 😞
Late afternoon		😊 😐 😞
Evening		😊 😐 😞

★ Suggestion for the day – Try something new

Activities that push you to think and learn help keep your brain healthy. Try something you find challenging and complex, such as learning a language or a musical instrument. Whether you are good or bad at it won't matter, but practising regularly will.

You can also boost the brain benefits by making your learning activity social, and / or physically active.

Call your nation's Age UK helpline on page 3 for help finding opportunities in your area.

My Brain Health Diary: Tuesday

Time	What's boosting my brain	How I feel (Tick one)
Early morning		😊 😐 😞
Late morning		😊 😐 😞
Early afternoon		😊 😐 😞
Late afternoon		😊 😐 😞
Evening		😊 😐 😞

★ Suggestion for the day – Read a good book

Stimulating books are good for health and wellbeing. One study found that people who read for 30 minutes or more a week are more likely to be satisfied with life. Another found that regular reading increases life expectancy.

So, plan a visit to your local library. If getting there's a challenge, ask if they offer a mobile service. You can make it social by joining a book group – ask the library about local ones. They may also be able to help you set up your own book group.

My Brain Health Diary: Wednesday

Time	What's boosting my brain	How I feel (Tick one)
Early morning		😊 😐 😞
Late morning		😊 😐 😞
Early afternoon		😊 😐 😞
Late afternoon		😊 😐 😞
Evening		😊 😐 😞

★ Suggestion for the day – Practice mindfulness

Mindfulness practices such as meditation train your brain to notice thoughts, feelings, and what's around you – in the moment, and without judgment. In many you slow down and change how you breathe, putting you in a more relaxed state. Studies show mindfulness can change the brain, improving areas important for focus and memory, reducing stress and chronic pain.

There are lots of mindfulness books and online aids. To begin with, try this: sit tall, close your eyes, and breathe in through the nose, for four seconds, and out through the mouth, for six seconds. Repeat ten times.

My Brain Health Diary: Thursday

Time	What's boosting my brain	How I feel (Tick one)
Early morning		😊 😐 😞
Late morning		😊 😐 😞
Early afternoon		😊 😐 😞
Late afternoon		😊 😐 😞
Evening		😊 😐 😞

★ Suggestion for the day – Establish a sleep routine

Sleep is key for brain health, but it can be harder to get as we age. We may sleep less deeply and wake more often during the night, or earlier in the morning.

Having a sleep routine can help. Get up at the same time daily. Expose yourself to daylight early in the day to set your body clock. Be physically active. Avoid big meals close to bedtime. Wind down an hour or two before bed; with dim lights, relaxing music, no mobiles or computers, and perhaps a warm bath. Make your bedroom a calm, cool and clutter free environment.

My Brain Health Diary: Friday

Time	What's boosting my brain	How I feel (Tick one)
Early morning		☺ ☹ ☐
Late morning		☺ ☹ ☐
Early afternoon		☺ ☹ ☐
Late afternoon		☺ ☹ ☐
Evening		☺ ☹ ☐

★ Suggestion for the day – Stop smoking and be alcohol aware

Both smoking and excessive amounts of alcohol speed up ageing of the brain. If you smoke, seeking support to quit is one of the best things you can do for brain health. **Ask your doctor about local one-to-one or group support, or treatment that can help you stop.**

UK health advice for adults is to drink no more than 14 units of alcohol per week (about 6 pints of 4% strength beer, or 6 medium glasses of 13% wine). Having a few alcohol-free days each week, and spreading drinking over the other days, is also advised.

My Brain Health Diary: Saturday

Time	What's boosting my brain	How I feel (Tick one)
Early morning		☺ ☹ ☐
Late morning		☺ ☹ ☐
Early afternoon		☺ ☹ ☐
Late afternoon		☺ ☹ ☐
Evening		☺ ☹ ☐

★ Suggestion for the day – Sing

Singing is great for wellbeing, and for brain health as it gives your brain a full work out. Studies suggest that regular singing may slow down ageing of the brain.

Singing can also be a fun social activity. In many areas you can find inclusive community singing groups. These often encourage standing (if possible) and moving while singing, giving extra health benefits. **Call your nation's Age UK network partner helpline on page 3 for help finding singing groups near you.**

My Brain Health Diary: Sunday

Time	What's boosting my brain	How I feel (Tick one)
Early morning		😊 😐 😞
Late morning		😊 😐 😞
Early afternoon		😊 😐 😞
Late afternoon		😊 😐 😞
Evening		😊 😐 😞

★ Suggestion for the day – Connect with nature

Regular contact with nature is good for health and wellbeing, including brain health. In nature we can both relax and be mentally stimulated, a combination that's great for our brains. All exercise is good for brain health but being physically active outdoors may be especially beneficial.






So, if you can, spend time each week in your garden, the local park, or other green spaces. If getting out is difficult, buy some plants and flowers to grow at home.

Now read your completed My Brain Health Diary

Look for patterns in what you are doing (or not doing) for brain health throughout each day. These are likely to be your habits. Identify the habits you think most relevant to your brain health.

For each habit, write down what you notice about it. For example, do you sleep poorly when you eat late? For healthy habits, what has helped you stick with them? Circle the colour that says best what you want to happen with each habit:

To **STOP IT** , to **SWAP IT**  for a healthier habit, or to **STEP UP**  and do more of it. For example:

Habit	I notice that...	What I want (Circle one)
I read a book in bed most nights.	It's relaxing and I fall asleep more easily.	  
I never sit quietly and just breathe.	I sometimes feel a bit anxious through the day.	  
I have a few beers most evenings.	I don't sleep so well when I do this.	  

My brain health habits

Habit	I notice that...	What I want (Circle one)
		! <> +
		! <> +
		! <> +
		! <> +
		! <> +
		! <> +
		! <> +
		! <> +
		! <> +

Write a plan for better brain health

You should now know more about your habits affecting brain health and have an idea of what you might like to change to improve your brain health.

Here are tips based on psychology research that will help you write a plan with a better chance of success.

1. Start small and make it easy

If your change in routine is small and easy to do, you are more likely to stick with it whether your day is going well or not. For instance, you could aim to read for five minutes with your morning coffee.

2. Make use of habits you have

Our habits happen when we notice something, without being fully aware, that triggers us to behave in a certain way. So, for example, when you hear the doorbell, you might find yourself answering the door without having consciously made the decision.

We can use habits we already have as reminders for new ones. For instance, you could aim to sing while the kettle boils for your morning cuppa. Eventually you should find this happening automatically.

3. Look for triggers around you

Your habits can be triggered by items around your home, and in other places you routinely spend time. So, for example, you could remind yourself to go outdoors early in the day by placing your shoes and coat ready by the door the evening before.

4. Make habits harder, or easier

To break a habit, make it harder or less pleasant. For instance, if you often drink more wine than you would like to in an evening, you could buy a small 'one glass' bottle instead of a full sized one.

You can also make healthy habits easier. For example, keep your mobile phone out of your bedroom so you're not tempted to use it in bed, which may disrupt sleep.

5. Make it social

Healthy habits are easier to keep if they are social. If you have supportive family or friends, tell them about your brain health goal and involve them if they are willing. For example, if you have a friend who speaks a language you want to learn, ask them to chat to you for a minute or so in that language when you meet.

6. Make it motivating

Keep a record of every time you succeed in changing your routine. You could use a notebook, calendar or, if you like and use IT, an app. Watching your progress over time can be motivational.

Don't worry if you falter now and then. Studies show that won't matter, as long as you get back to your plan as soon as possible. It will take a month, and possibly longer, for your new habit to become easy and automatic, depending on how ambitious your goal is. But once your habit is set, you won't need to use willpower to keep it up.

My plan for brain health habits

What I will do differently in my routine

When I will do it, where, and for how long

What I will do to help me succeed (e.g., use existing habits, involve friends, or adjust my surroundings)

How I will record each time I successfully change my routine (e.g., with a notebook, calendar, or app)

How I will reward myself for each success



Take Five to Age Well offers small, simple steps to a longer, healthier life. This May, join a UK-wide community making a small change in daily routine for better ageing.

Your commitment will be to choose and keep up a healthy change, or changes, for a month (or three months if you are taking part with others as a group). We'll support you to turn that change into a habit for long-term health and wellbeing.

Why make the commitment?

Ageing is not optional, but we have choices about how we age. From our 30s, we start to lose muscle, our metabolism slows, and our skin begins to line. Despite these unavoidable changes, there are simple habits that can help keep us strong, sharp, independent, and feeling good. **Take Five to Age Well** will empower you to adopt these habits over a month-long period.

There are more than 16 million people in the UK over the age of 60 and rising. By committing to age better you will become a role model for current and future generations. There are five areas in which you can choose to make a change — all evidence-based to give you the opportunity to really take charge of your ageing health.

They are:



Eat: adjusting what, when and how much you eat can boost your health and wellbeing.



Connect: making and maintaining social connections is essential for health and wellbeing.



Drink: hydration, and what you drink, are key to healthy ageing.



Move: exercise boosts body and mind.



Think: using your brain better can help you stay sharp.

Take Five to Age Well is an initiative of the Open University in collaboration with partner organisations across all four UK nations. Participants will be invited to contribute to follow-up research, to help us understand how people create and follow up new routines for health, with the aim of informing future support for healthy ageing.

The initiative's five action areas are based on the Five Pillars for Ageing model that underpins the Open University's Ageing Well Public Talk Series.

Both the model and talks have been developed by Dr Jitka Vseteckova. The talks are designed to be easily accessible to all, with older people involved in their preparation and featuring frequently as co-presenters.

Visit www.open.ac.uk and search for 'ageing well public talks' to find out more.



How helpful was this diary?

We would welcome your feedback:

takefive@open.ac.uk

For more information, please visit:

wels.open.ac.uk/take5

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