

When it comes to exercising, don't forget your brain – set yourself a challenge on a daily basis

Taking a blow to the head wasn't the way I would have chosen to have a wake-up call. But that blow certainly stopped me in my tracks, took a few teeth – I haven't seen my front one since – and changed my direction in life.

That was 10 years ago. My life was busy, busy, busy. All very well. Trouble is, at some point, some sort of divine intervention steps in. For me it was a hedge cutting, and with a wallop I stopped. It wasn't just my cycle helmet that got broken.

Going through life at a sprint, as I did, makes it impossible to actually pay proper attention. I now enjoy taking in the view. Regrettable as it was to lose teeth and be left with a thick top lip, it gave me a good understanding of how it feels to be knocked senseless and to only be able to remember a period of time through a bit of a fog.

I have been fascinated to learn what I think will be a little known fact: brain cells consume as much energy as heart muscle. Simon Laughlin, a professor of neurobiology at Cambridge University, has demonstrated that the brain accounts for just 2 per cent of the body's weight and yet consumes 20 per cent of its energy. What's more, small increases in brainpower cause a sharp increase in energy demand.

The mind can sometimes be at odds – mine needs a challenge. I believe many people find it very difficult to self-motivate when others can barely put the brakes on. Looking after your health and exercising isn't just physically demanding, it is – and should be – mentally demanding too.

So, as children go back to school, how about us grown-ups educate our minds with exercise? Complex as it is, to clear the mind involves putting it to use. Pushing yourself through that last minute of a training programme, co-ordinating your next step in a dance class or being asked to

feel your body move through a range of movement all require a thought process. It is that very thought process that keeps us sharp, relaxes the mind and unwinds your thoughts at the end of a day.

Mindful movement is a challenge. I am very aware that our wiring can sometimes short-circuit. You may not even notice if your mind is sluggish while performing your day to day routine but putting yourself into more challenging situations, in the form of exercise, is a perfect way to educate your mind and re-awaken your motor skills – the skills we all developed as children.

We accept that thinking requires effort, and being able to process information and act upon it can be exhausting and frustrating. But isn't it often the case that when it comes to exercise we give up when something appears too challenging, when, with practice, it can become perfectly achievable? Preventing decline is something, if asked, most people will admit they dread but the human brain is able to continually adapt and rewire itself. Even as we age, it grows. Inactivity and a lack of mental exercise and stimulation will slow you down when all it takes is a little effort to be jump-started and refreshed. Research tells us that it is not the case that you lose your mind function as you get older. In other words, it is not inevitable.

The basal ganglia area of the brain coordinates commands to move muscles. It requires stimulation and, research indicates that exercise will improve this area and positively affect memory and physical coordination.

Add to that 35g of dark chocolate – it has to be dark – eaten every day and you will increase blood flow to your brain and eyes and improve your ability to focus on objects, speed up your reaction times and enhance your memory. A perfect recipe to ensure you don't forget your new 'back to school' timetable. Class dismissed. **CL**



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