

# How to Have a Healthy Brain

## 7 brain-healthy tips to be smarter and feel better



Your brain is the most important organ of your body and directs everything you think, say, or do. It makes you who you are! If your brain works well, you're happier and more successful. If it doesn't, you'll have a hard time in life. So follow these tips to have a healthy, happy brain!

### 1. Protect your brain

from neurotoxic chemicals like **alcohol**, **drugs** (even marijuana), **nicotine**, excessive **caffeine**, and breathing toxic fumes, which can damage brain function.

Protect your brain from falls, injuries, big bumps: Always wear a seat belt; use a helmet when you blade, board, bike, or do contact sports. Your brain is like soft butter; your skull has hard ridges.

### 4. Engage in aerobic exercise

that gets your heart pumping (sports, dance, brisk walks, etc.) at least 5 times a week. It improves learning and memory by increasing blood flow to the brain, and it generates an essential brain growth hormone called BDNF in the hippocampus. Exercise helps protect brain cells against stress and increases feel-good chemicals that improves mood. For a quick mental boost, stand and rise quickly up and down on your toes 20 times.

### 6. Use Mindfulness

to correct the Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANTs) that put your brain at risk for anxiety, depression, relationship problems, etc. (See Intro handout #7.) When you feel angry, sad, or anxious, write down the thoughts going through your head. If they are negative, question and replace them with a more hopeful way of thinking.\*

### 2. Eat brain-healthy food

like **whole grains**, including oats; **fruits and vegetables** such as dark green lettuces, berries (especially blueberries), broccoli, apples, oranges, bananas, pumpkin, spinach, and tomatoes; **nuts and legumes** such as walnuts, almonds, peanut butter, black beans, and soy bean products; and **healthy, low-fat protein** found in food like Greek yogurt, non-fat cottage cheese, eggs, fish, and poultry.

**Avoid** junk food, sugary drinks and cereals, drinks with caffeine, highly processed foods with artificial ingredients, foods high in sugars and syrups, and foods that have hydrogenated oils. Begin each day with a glass of water to hydrate your brain, a healthy breakfast with low-fat protein, and a multi-vitamin. Studies show children learn better when they take multi-vitamins.

*For more information on healthy eating, visit [ChooseMyPlate.gov](http://ChooseMyPlate.gov)*

### 3. Get enough sleep

each night. Getting less than seven hours of sleep at night decreases blood flow to the brain. It also contributes to depression and suicidal thoughts. In one study, teens who slept five hours or less a night were 71 percent more likely to suffer depression and 48 percent more at risk of becoming suicidal.

### 5. De-stress your brain.

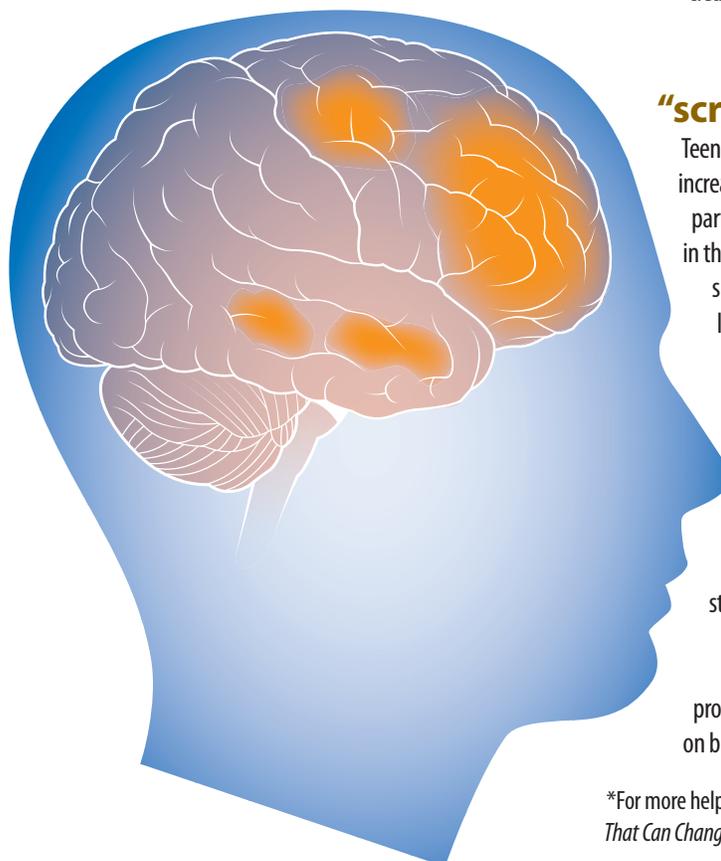
Chronic stress reduces brain cell growth, affecting memory and mood.

Take a few moments several times a day to breathe slowly and deeply through your nose, tense and relax your muscles, and clear your mind with a peaceful thought.

### 7. Avoid too much "screen time"

and junk culture. Teens who play violent video games show increased activity in the emotional arousal part of the brain and decreased response in the area governing self-control. Studies show multitasking on the Internet can limit your ability to read human emotions. Students who spent ten hours a day online developed less gray matter in the thinking part of the brain, compared to those who spent less than two hours a day online. Be mindful about what you watch on TV. Choose programs that stimulate thought and learning, which causes new connections in the brain.

Too many hours watching mindless programming can have a negative effect on brain function and pro-social behavior.



\*For more help, read *"Loving What Is— Four Questions That Can Change Your Life"* by Byron Katie.