

# Fun Memory Exercises for Older Adults: A Caregiver's Creative Toolbox

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Nothing frustrates my grandmother more than reaching for a memory and its living details and coming up short. There's nothing, tangible or intangible, that she can do to bring herself closer. Her wheels are spinning, and eventually, feeling defeated, she gives up hope of finding traction.

I feel a sense of helplessness too because I don't have those memories from the deep past to share with her. Her sisters are no longer with us, so I can't call them to retrieve the name of the neighbor who used to teach them the words and meanings to Polish songs or the secret ingredient in her dad's exceptional pie crust.

I can't find the answers for her but, it turns out I can help her to feel some traction. I can help her feel as if she's moving closer to touching those cherished memories again. With the regular practice of memory exercises, I can help release her from that stuck place and reverse her feelings of hopelessness.

## How Can Exercises Help to Prevent Memory Loss in Old Age?

While the brain is not technically a muscle, we can view it similarly because we can [train the brain](#) to get stronger and build greater cognitive functioning. As we age, our brains become even more vulnerable to neurological damage, so it's [important that we remain](#)

[active](#), so our bodies' and brains' natural and amazing abilities to regenerate don't become idle and out of shape.

One of the most powerful activities for cognitive progress is to learn new things. This can even include accomplishing normal, everyday tasks but in new and unfamiliar ways. So, get creative (a truly brain-healthy way of being) and encourage an aging loved one to try writing or drawing with their non-dominant hand or to finally sign up for a class to [learn a new instrument](#). Our minds are not wired to stay still. If we keep seeking activity and challenges, our minds will wake up to a sense of purpose and adventure.

We can support this brain and memory training by getting plenty of nighttime sleep—[the body's restoration and building period](#)—and by eating lean proteins, high-quality omega fatty acids, whole grains, vitamin-rich fruits, and dark leafy greens that deliver magnesium and B [vitamins that the brain craves](#). On the other hand, sugar and other simple carbohydrates put added stress on the brain by confusing our hormonal balance, so avoid these processed foods to [support your cognitive training](#). Likewise, [regular physical exercise](#) that improves heart health and [stimulates the body's regenerative processes](#) also can strengthen memory and the brain's supply of healthy cells.

## Exercises for Improving Memory in Active Older Adults: How Can You Help?

With [a full night's sleep](#), the gym bag packed with vitamins, fresh water, and brain foods like avocados, walnuts, and a pedometer to inspire a daily walk, let's gear up for some stimulating memory exercises! This kind of a workout is beneficial for everyone, at any age, to prevent memory loss as we grow older. If you're a caregiver for an aging adult, these exercises present a truly fun activity that you can do together and fortify your minds and memory banks at the same time.

In their book, [\*Keep Your Brain Alive: 83 Neurobic Exercises to Help Prevent Memory Loss and Increase Mental Fitness\*](#), Dr. Lawrence Katz, a neurobiology professor and researcher, and Manning Rubin, a writer and creative director, offer a wealth of simple ways to get creative with everyday life—activities that stimulate the brain to grow and evolve. Here are some suggestions inspired by their ideas that you can help an older adult to try out:

- **Get dressed blindly:** If your aging loved one can manage to safely maintain their balance, have them select their clothes for the day with eyes closed, relying on their sense of touch. Encourage them to be open to and embrace the surprise outfit.
- **Take a different route:** Encourage an aging adult to navigate through the house in a different way today. Sure, they could simply walk straight from the couch to the kitchen, or they could take a detour through the dining room and once around the table first. If you tend to walk the same route in the park, try a different trail or direction—and you may notice new sights along the way.
- **Practice brainstorming together:** Sit down with paper and pens to write, draw, or verbally create a brainstorm of associations around a single word or theme. There is no particular way that this has to be done—it works best exactly as you and your aging loved one relate to it. Perhaps you decide on the word “refrigerator” and you each write down words that pop into your head on your sheet of paper. Or, you can call words out loud to write down on a shared paper, or draw what the word inspires in your imagination. It’s great to start by bouncing off of the original word and then continue to bounce off of each other’s ideas and reactions.

- **Share a silent meal:** Wear earplugs or disconnected headphones to the table for a meal. You'll have to rely on body language and eye contact to communicate. And besides hearing, your other senses will be heightened as you eat and experience the meal through an unusual filter.
- **Seek grocery recommendations:** When you visit the market together, rather than sticking to your list and the things you typically purchase, request recommendations from the staff and other shoppers. This activity encourages you to try new things as well as to engage with unfamiliar people around you and their ideas
- **Just drive:** Go out for a drive without a plan. Turn onto roads where you've never been before. Decide whether to turn right or left by having the passenger flip a coin. And follow your gut when you find a new place to stop and explore. Remember, you can always rely on a phone and its GPS to get home if you're lost.

Notice how most of these suggestions take ordinary activities and introduce novelty to the action. It's sort of like taking a deck of cards and just throwing them up into the air rather than shuffling them in a conventional, predictable manner. You can absolutely come up with your own unique activities similar to these by scrambling up the ordinary to create new opportunities and experiences every day.

## Memory Activities with Your Aging Loved One: Stimulating the Mind

Of course, there are also plenty of dedicated activities we can set aside time for that stimulate and exercise the mind in diverse ways. How can you and your aging loved one incorporate these adventures into your time together?

- **Sign up for a class:** Find a local class in cooking, music, foreign language, group fitness, or even a book club. Being creative is a great way to exercise our mental capacity, too, so try out arts and crafts classes or even activities at home.
- **Play games:** Make time for games that your aging loved one enjoys. Checkers and chess are great for challenging cognition, as well as Scrabble, Sudoku, crosswords, and puzzles.
- **Sing songs and play music:** Remembering lyrics and singing along to a tune uses a distinct part of the brain—different from when we’re consciously trying to remember something. My grandma can’t remember the name of the woman who taught her all of those songs in Polish, but she can still sing all of the songs from memory. So, play songs, old and new, sing to them, dance to them, and help reconnect an aging adult to the [memories that are associated with music](#).
- **Meditate and practice presence:** Meditation is itself an exercise for the brain, and there are so many different ways to approach this challenge. Meditation [can involve creative visualization](#). It can also be as simple as sitting and noticing what’s going on around you and noticing the thoughts and feelings that seem to demand your attention or that float through your awareness like clouds.

With so many opportunities to gain traction with the mind, our aging loved ones should always have reason to hope for connection. I never want my grandma to give up, even when her memory feels strained. I’d rather help to turn her attention toward actively engaging with life in new and invigorating ways.

She may not be able to connect to past details and memories in this moment, but I can help her to connect with this moment and to strengthen her presence of mind and purpose at the same time. It's never too late to reawaken the brain's eagerness and resilience, so we're going to start today.

***Are you interested in other activities and resources for mental health and memory? [Reach out to us](#) at [Institute on Aging](#) for inspiration and check out some of our other [blog discussions](#).***



## Institute on Aging

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