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Exercise boosts the brain

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By Dr. Tedd Mitchell

The active lifestyle, which can strengthen the heart, body and brain, has been the subject of intense study by researchers, including John Ratey, a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard and author of "Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain." He writes about brain-derived neurotrophic factor, or BDNF, a protein that builds and maintains the brain's cell circuitry.



"Exercise can be used as a medicine -- a 'smart pill,' if you will," Ratey says.

And guess what increases BDNF levels in the brain? Exercise.

I recently spoke with Ratey about the exercise/brain connection.

"Researchers have studied how exercise affects things like improved memory, academic performance and executive function at work," he says. "The connection is powerful."

Where will this research lead us? "As our nation ages, we'll be concerned about preventing neurological disorders like Alzheimer's; exercise has a role. As our kids mature, improving their ability to remain focused for learning is critical; exercise has a role. As our schedules create more stress, achieving mental calmness is needed; exercise has a role."

Contributing Editor Tedd Mitchell, M.D., writes HealthSmart every week.

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