



MANAGING BRAIN HEALTH

Your guide to managing brain health during the menopause transition with practical, proven tools for you to try out, shared by our team of specialists

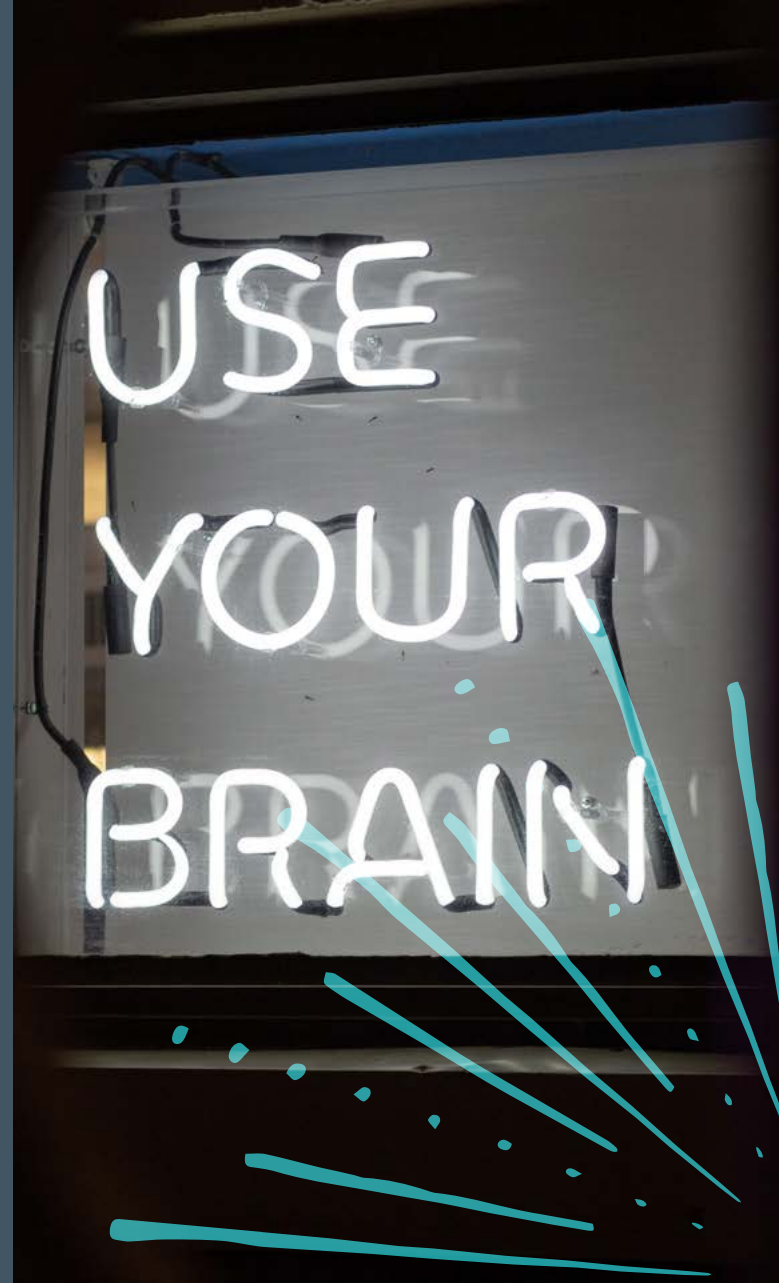


BRAIN FOG

Studies have shown that during perimenopause, up to 60% of women experience changes to their cognitive function, often referred to as brain fog.

These changes may include:

- ✦ Memory lapses
- ✦ Difficulty concentrating on a conversation or task
- ✦ Losing one's train of thought
- ✦ Poor attention to detail
- ✦ Limited vocabulary such as forgetting the names of things

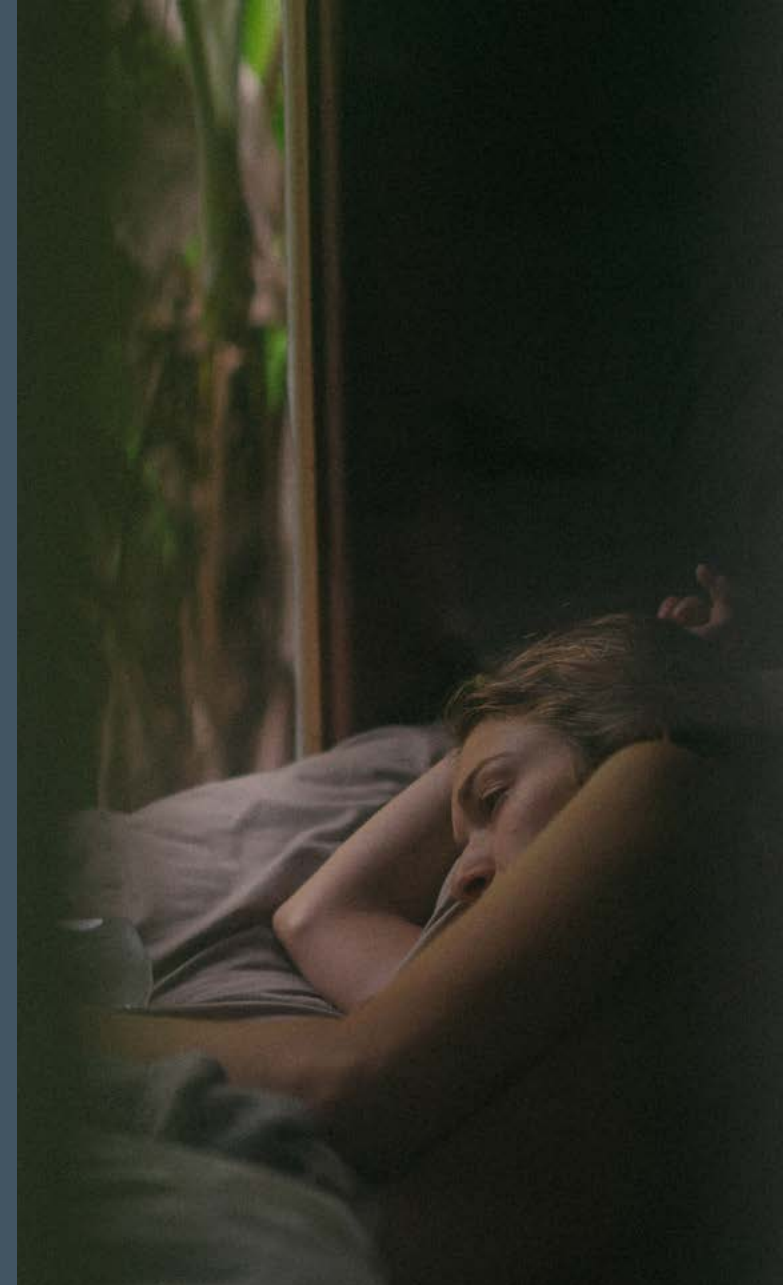


THE SCIENCE

Oestrodiol, our dominant type of oestrogen during our 'reproductive years', helps protect neurones from amyloid plaque, a key risk factor for Alzheimer's.

As oestrogen sources decline and switch to oestrone, the brain's ageing process accelerates. Our brain's metabolism slows down and processing may become more of a challenge.

The good news is that with the right tools in place we can improve our brain health now and in the future.



NON-HORMONAL TRIGGERS

There are various triggers that have an influence on our cognitive ability.

Mental stress

Anxiety, low mood, poor sleep (read our *Managing Stress, Anxiety & Mood* and *Managing Sleep* workbooks).

Body stress

Overeating or undereating, processed food, sugar, simple carbs, smoking, alcohol, low mobility.

Gut health

Our brain is directly connected to our gut through the vagus nerve with bacteria affecting our mood and triggering brain fog, and even neurological disease.

Medical problems

Brain fog may be a side effect of medication or an underactive thyroid, insulin resistance or low testosterone (if concerned, see your clinician).



BRAIN MYTHS

There are various myths around brain health, so it's worth taking note of these to avoid making matters worse ...

Genes determine our brain health outcome.

Environment, lifestyle and hormone health have a much greater influence than genetics on brain health.

If my cognitive function is adversely affected by perimenopause, I have a greater risk of developing Alzheimer's.

Fluctuations in hormones that may disrupt sleep, give rise to daytime fatigue, stimulate sugar cravings or increase stress levels, mostly settle down 2-3 years post menopause, with many people feeling back in their stride.

We have the same brain structure as men.

We are wired differently. For example, women are generally better at finding objects and detecting sound than men. We have a more complex front limbic system than men that is responsible for organisational planning and emotions.



IN CASE YOU'RE WONDERING ...

It's not uncommon for those transitioning through menopause to think they are going 'crazy' or 'losing it'. This simple chart shows the difference between brain fog experiences for some during perimenopause compared with someone with Alzheimer's. If you are concerned, see your clinician.


Perimenopause

- ✦ Forget to do a task
- ✦ Forget to include an ingredient in a recipe
- ✦ Trouble finding the right word
- ✦ Misplace objects
- ✦ Forget the answer to the question

Alzheimer's

- ✦ Forget how to do familiar tasks
- ✦ Unable to follow a recipe
- ✦ Tendency to avoid talking
- ✦ Are fearful of objects
- ✦ Ask the same questions repeatedly





**YOUR POWER
TOOLS**



BRAIN FOOD

Movement and nutrition are menopause power tools, giving our hormones a helping hand for clearer, sharper thinking.

Our body absorbs nutrients best through food rather than supplements. Making considered choices around what we eat will help boost our brain's metabolism and cognitive function.

EAT THE RAINBOW

Studies of people with the greatest longevity show they have a diet that consists of varied, plant-based food. This helps our gut health and in turn boosts our brain's metabolism.

🌟 Challenge

Aim to eat eight portions of vegetables and two of fruit a day. So, what is a portion?

One portion = 80 g

- ✦ Green vegetables = four heaped tablespoons
- ✦ Cooked, tinned or frozen vegetables = three heaped tablespoons
- ✦ Fruit = one whole fruit



OMEGA GOODNESS

Various studies show that omega 3 fatty acids help boost brain function. These are anti-inflammatory, meaning they protect neurones from myelin. This allows the brain to send messages faster and more efficiently.

Some studies show that eating high levels of omega 3 can delay the onset of menopause.

As well as avocado, walnuts, chia and flax seeds, oily fish is a key source and should be eaten 2-3 times a week.

Challenge

Make a meal from our SMASH list:

- ✦ Salmon
- ✦ Mackerel
- ✦ Anchovies
- ✦ Sardines
- ✦ Herring



GO GREEN!

Large-scale studies show the more greens we eat, the less likely we are to experience memory loss or long-term cognitive decline.

Find ways to add Vitamin K to your diet. Include leafy greens such as kale, broccoli and spinach at mealtimes.

Challenge

Blend together:

- ✦ A mixed handful of kale and spinach
- ✦ A few sprigs of flat-leaf parsley
- ✦ 1 inch piece of fresh, peeled ginger
- ✦ 1 Granny Smith apple or 60 ml apple juice
- ✦ 3 celery stalks
- ✦ ¼ cucumber



FEED YOUR MICROBES

The gut is connected to the brain through the vagus nerve. Having the right variety of gut flora and bacteria is critical to protecting long-term brain health and boosting the brain's metabolism.



Tip

Look for foods/drinks that are rich in:

- ✦ Fibre: absorbs toxins and boosts brain mood
- ✦ Prebiotics: cultivate good gut bacteria
- ✦ Probiotics: replenish healthy microbes



GO NUTS!

Nuts may be high in calories, but they are a rich source of monounsaturated fats, a brain buddy, boosting cognitive performance and especially helpful for those with diabetes or pre-diabetes.

Sources include almonds, cashews, hazelnuts, brazil nuts and pistachios. (Please avoid this tip if you have a nut allergy!)



Tip

Avoid nuts coated in sugar and salt. Go natural with the skin on to retain the benefits of fibre.



HYDR8

The brain is made up of 80% water, and even mild dehydration can make us feel foggy, tired, dizzy and slow, triggering headaches and eventually shrinking the brain. To support our brain function, drink eight glasses of water daily.

🌟 Challenge

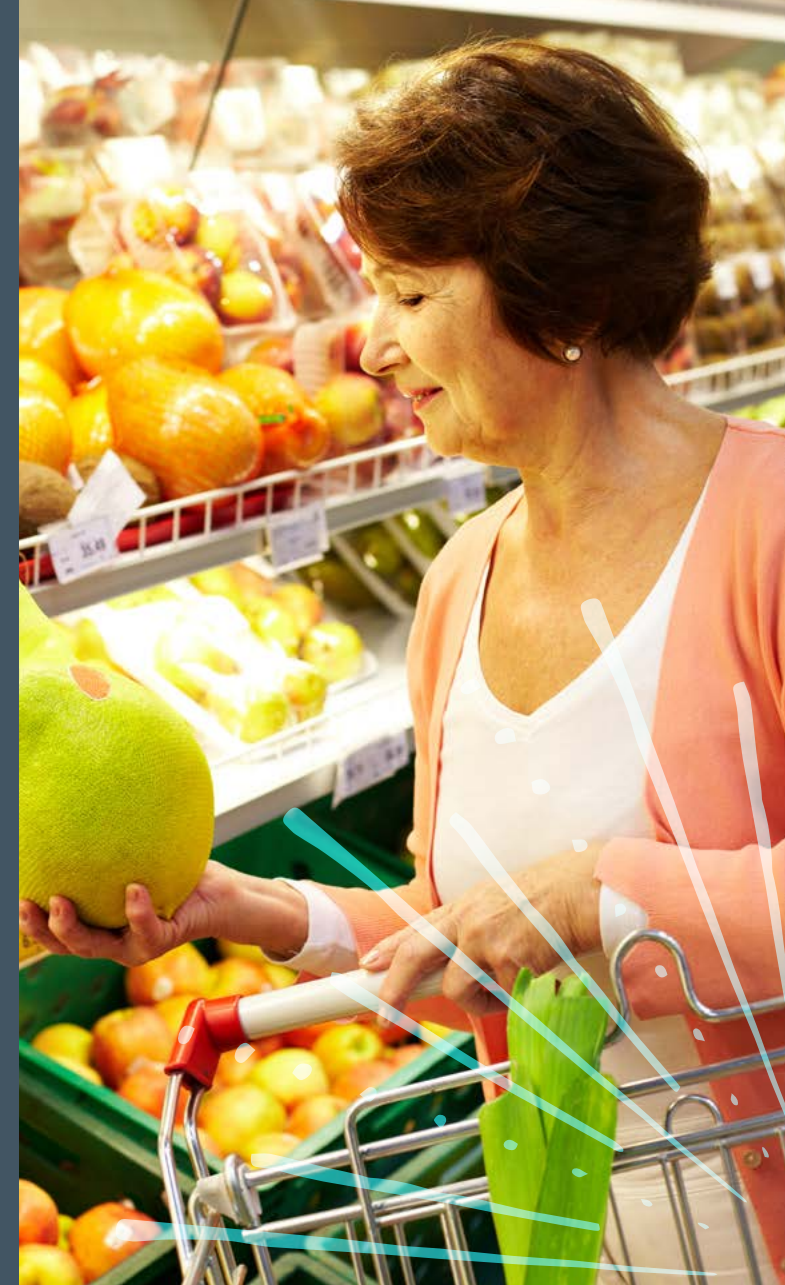
- ✦ Start the day with a warm glass of water and a slice of lemon
- ✦ Drink little and often (leaving a gap of four hours will trigger dehydration)
- ✦ Create a new drink as soon as your glass is empty – use it as a micro-break
- ✦ You can infuse water with mint, ginger, citrus, turmeric, cinnamon, star anise
- ✦ Stop drinking an hour before bedtime to avoid needing the bathroom in the night



ANTIOXIDANTS

The brain suffers from oxidative stress as we age. To protect it, find ways to introduce more antioxidants into your diet:

- ✦ Vitamin C, e.g. citrus fruits, peppers, strawberries
- ✦ Vitamin E, e.g. extra virgin olive oil, flaxseed oil, sunflower seeds
- ✦ Betacarotene, e.g. sweet potato, carrots, spinach
- ✦ Selenium, e.g. brazil nuts, yellowfin tuna, pork
- ✦ Lycopene, e.g. tomatoes, cherries, watermelon
- ✦ Spices, e.g. clove, turmeric and cinnamon
- ✦ Polyphenols and flavonoids, e.g. cocoa, blueberries, gooseberries



B-SMART

Vitamin Bs are crucial for a healthy nervous system and can maintain memory performance and reduce the rate of brain shrinkage.

Dr Lisa Mosconi, author of *The XX Brain*, revealed that B6 and B9 (which affect memory) and B12 (which affects focus) become less easily absorbed as we get older. Increasing our intake of foods rich in these vitamins can help boost brain power.



MAGIC MAGNESIUM

Many studies have found that eating foods high in magnesium, such as pumpkin seeds, almonds, cashews, leafy greens, lentils, brown rice, salmon and mackerel boosts brain health.

☆ Challenge

Try this toasted kale and cashew recipe as a snack or side dish.

Ingredients

- ✦ 65 g unsalted cashews
- ✦ 3 tablespoons of olive oil
- ✦ 1 bunch of kale
- ✦ A wedge of lemon

Method

- ✦ Heat oven on 220°C/200°C (fan assisted)
- ✦ Place kale on a baking tray, drizzle with olive oil and add a pinch of sea salt flakes
- ✦ Place cashews on a separate baking tray
- ✦ Cook both kale and cashews in the oven for around 10 minutes until kale is starting to crisp and cashews are golden
- ✦ Squeeze on a little lemon juice to suit your taste





BRAIN BOOST

Making smart environmental and lifestyle choices today can help support our brain function for both today and in our later years.

GO ORGANIC

Pesticides, insecticides and weedkiller are found on fruit and vegetables and are hormone disruptors – linked to Alzheimer's as well as breast cancer.

In a recent study strawberries topped the list of the 'dirty dozen', having around 20 different pesticides. But it's not just food that contains EDCs (endocrine disruptor compounds).

Here are some things to avoid:

- ✦ Sunscreen: 4-methylbenzylidene camphor
- ✦ Cosmetics: Parabens
- ✦ Nail Polish: Phthalates
- ✦ Cleaning products: Alkylphenol, PCBs



REDUCE ALCOHOL

As we get older, the way our liver detoxifies gets less efficient. This means that for some, drinking alcohol leads to disrupted sleep, hangovers or fatigue the next day.

Challenge

Avoid alcohol midweek (Monday to Thursday) and note down how it makes you feel. What else can you do – or substitute alcohol with – to give you the same reward?

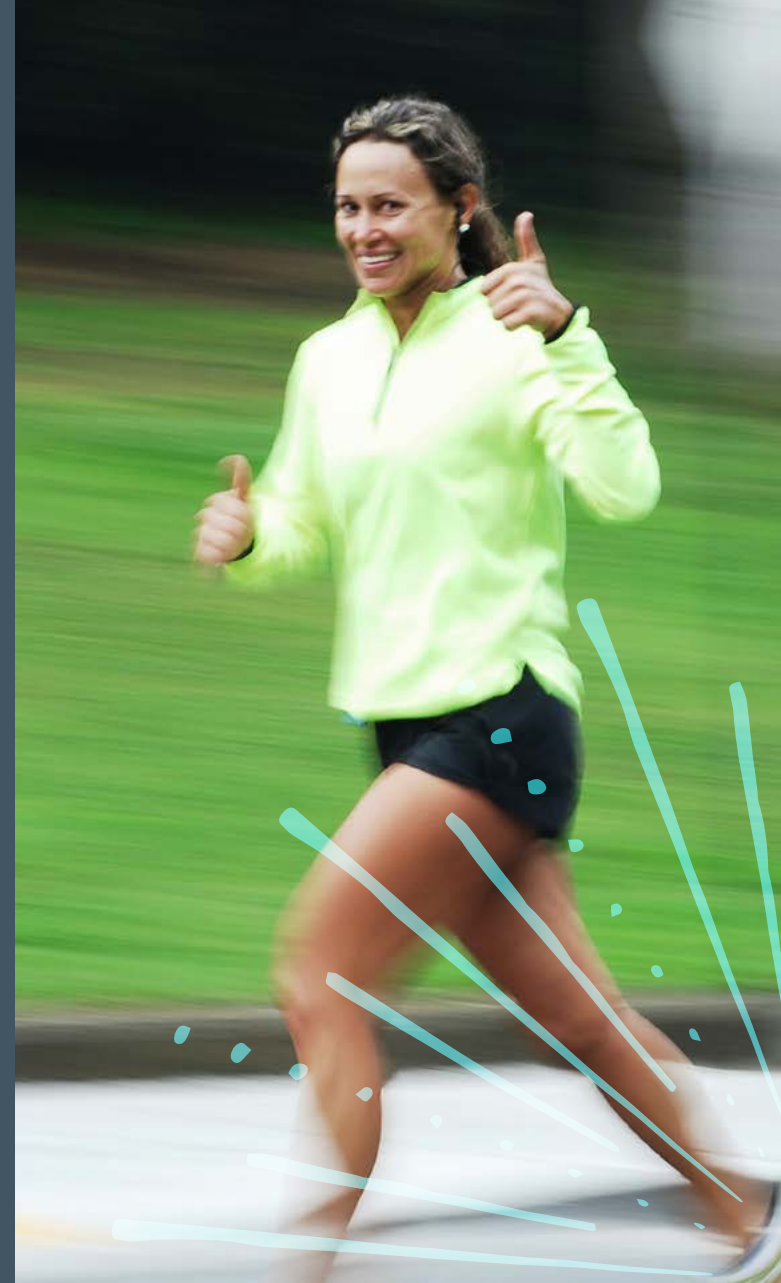


GET MOVING

Aerobic exercise pumps more oxygen and nutrients to the brain to make us feel clear-headed. You should aim for 30 minutes a day.

Movement ideas for you to mix up include:

- ✦ Star jumps
- ✦ Squat jumps
- ✦ Burpees
- ✦ Dancing
- ✦ Skipping
- ✦ Jogging
- ✦ Swimming
- ✦ Aqua aerobics



MICRO-BREAKS

Being on the move or sitting in front of a screen all day is a bit like never switching your computer off – it starts to overheat and malfunction. Make sure you take a break, every hour. This will help reduce fatigue and boost concentration.

Challenge

Take a five-minute brisk walk outside, activating your senses – what catches your eye, what do you hear or smell, how is your body feeling? If you've been on-the-go, be seated and listen to a guided mindfulness meditation.



STATE OF FLOW

These are activities that are intensely immersive, demand our attention, focus and presence, as well as provide a sense of achievement.

Flow activities are creative and are a powerful natural antidepressant.

Here are some ideas for you to try out today:

- ✦ A jigsaw puzzle
- ✦ Colouring, painting or doodling
- ✦ Knitting or crochet
- ✦ Pottery



TRY SOMETHING NEW

The brain thrives on new, challenging and varied experiences which stimulate the brain to problem solve. This builds up new neural pathways and releases dopamine that makes us happy.

Challenge

- ✦ Talk to a stranger
- ✦ Take up a new hobby
- ✦ Learn an instrument
- ✦ Memorise three mobile numbers a day
- ✦ Sign up to an online course



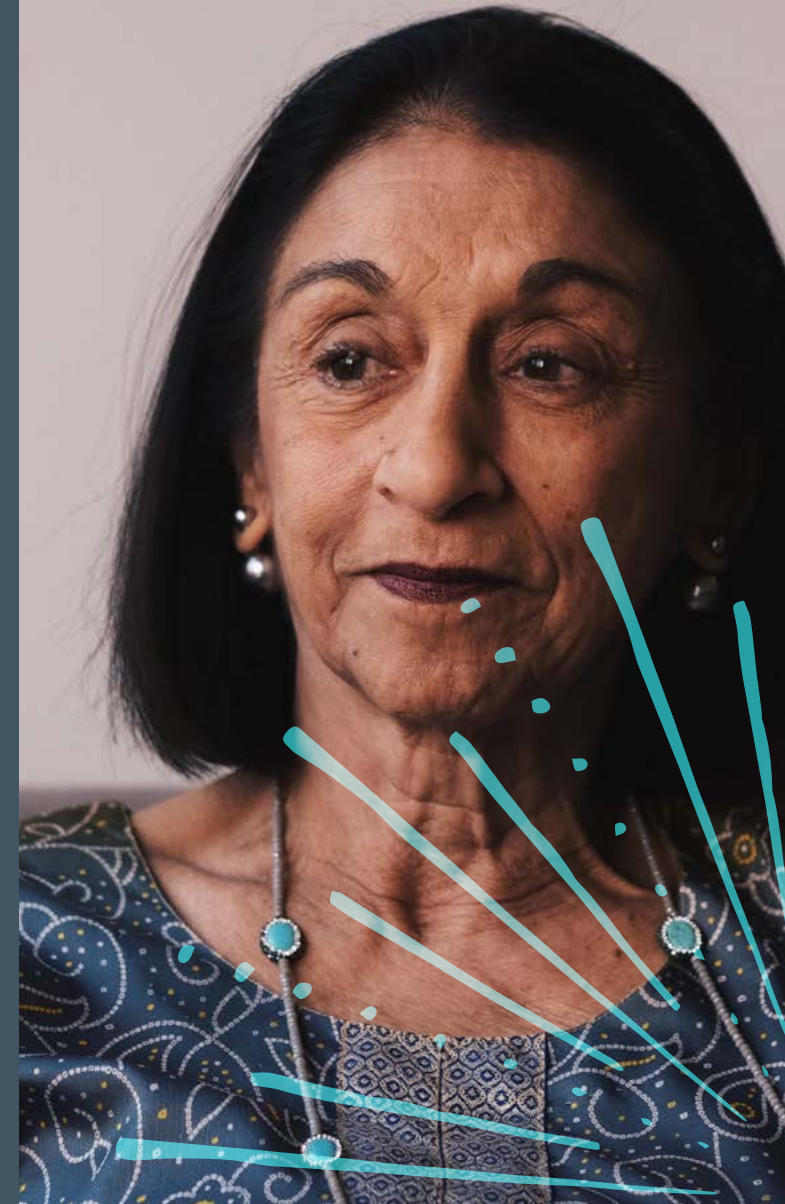
HOOKS FOR RECALL

Ever been in a conversation, only to walk away and forget the key actions or answers to your questions?

Our mind can wander, so find ways to stay focused and remove any background internal noise or thoughts.

Challenge

- ✦ Tune in to the conversation
- ✦ Remember four facts or details
- ✦ Repeat these throughout the day



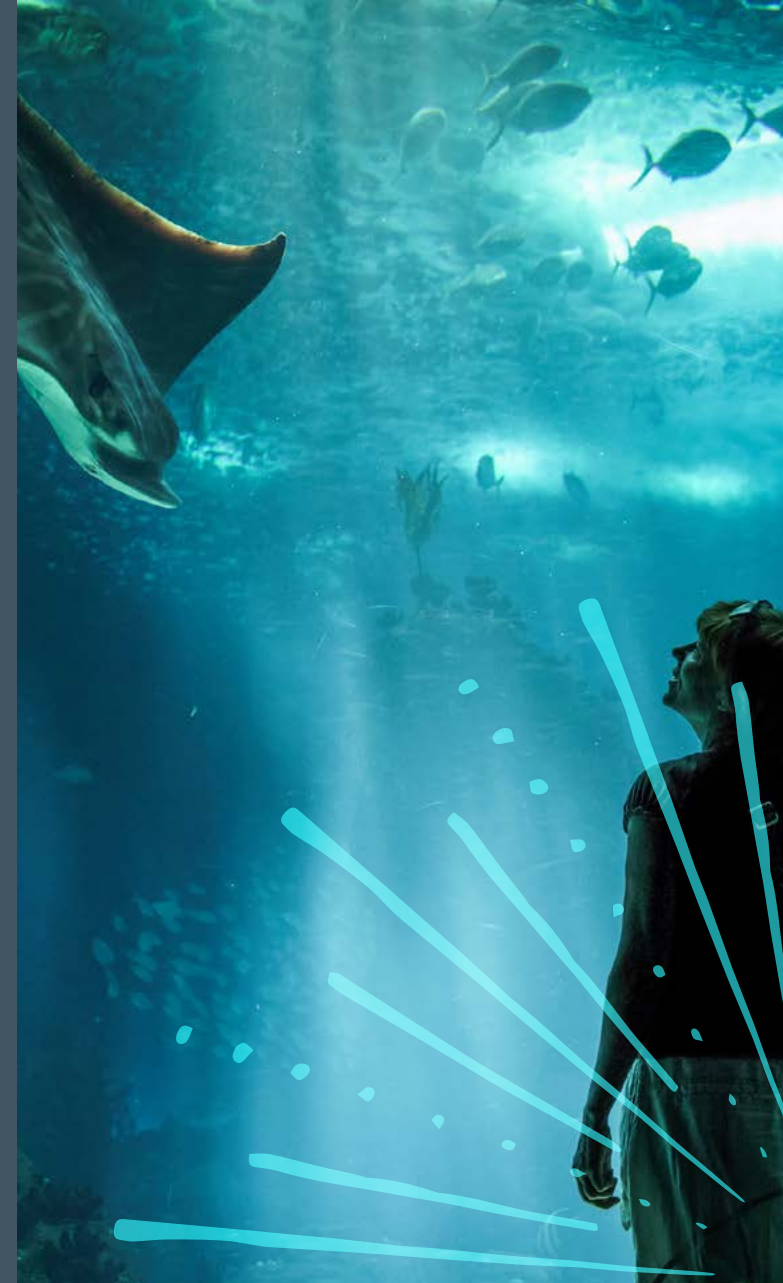
NEUROBICS

Neurobics are exercises that help with memory recall. They work by making the brain focus on automated, mundane tasks. The more we practise, the more we strengthen the brain muscles to become primed for recall and longer periods of concentration.

Challenge

Introduce these neurobics into your week:

- ✦ Eat with your non-dominant hand
- ✦ Mindfully brush your teeth
- ✦ Shower with your eyes closed the whole time
- ✦ Take a different route on a familiar journey
- ✦ Clap to a metronome



ENERGISING ESSENCES

The impact of poor sleep and stress can lead to daytime fatigue and make it hard to focus. Citrus essential oil blends or aromatics are associated with boosting concentration.

Here is a recipe to help boost clarity and attention:

Mix the following essential oils together and place in a 5ml glass bottle:

- ✦ 40 drops lemon
- ✦ 30 drops holy basil
- ✦ 30 drops rosemary





3 ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGIES

Memory lapses are associated with perimenopause, so having strategies in place builds our armoury to make oversights and errors a less common occurrence.

LOST AND FOUND

Forgetfulness is a common lament, especially losing one's keys or mobile. Low oestrogen can make it hard to focus and easy to zone out. The multitasking skills we once prided ourselves on can take a battering.



Tip

Always put the items you most frequently lose back in the same place. Put up a keyring holder and use a desk tidy. Invest in an electronic tag that uses radio technology to detect objects, and make sure the 'Find My Phone' option is switched on!



FORWARD PLANNING

Planning ahead for tasks needed to get done makes us less likely to forget to do them, so invest in a notebook. When we write these down manually, we are more likely to synthesise and remember them the next day.

Challenge

- ✦ Make a list of tasks you'd like to get done tomorrow
- ✦ Are these achievable?
- ✦ Prioritise the tasks into must-dos and nice-to-dos



CLEAR THE CLUTTER

Make sure everything has a home. When our environment is tidy, our mind feels more organised. It also becomes easier to spot mislaid items.



Tip

As soon as you use something, put it back in its place. For example, if you make an online purchase, replace the credit card back to where you normally keep it.



SET REMINDERS

Voice-activated technology and alarms on mobiles can be a useful way of reminding yourself about an important task. Make Post-its your best friend! Use a chalkboard.



Tip

Factor in extra time needed to hit a deadline. For example, if you have an appointment, add in the travel time to get there.



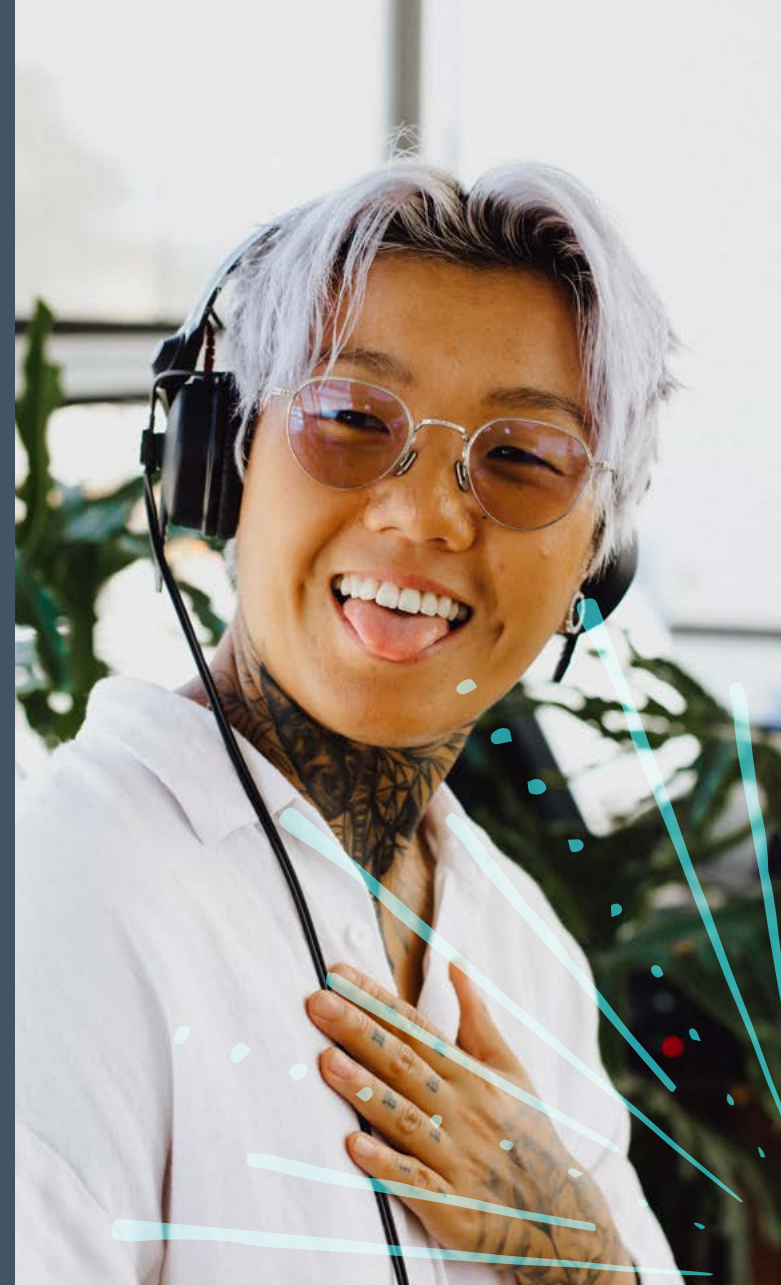
MINIMISE DISRUPTIONS

It can become harder to concentrate during our menopause transition and we can become easily disrupted by background noise or derailed by doing other less urgent tasks.



Tip

Create a do-not-disturb system for times when you require focus. If you work in an open-plan office, try noise cancelling headphones or listen to isochronic tracks to boost concentration. Download the *Be Focused* app that breaks down tasks into small time slots.



ASK FOR HELP

Don't be afraid to ask for help, especially on a task that involves detail.

Ask a friend, colleague or family member to read it over and spot any errors.



SENSITIVE SCHEDULING

Be kind on yourself and flexible with scheduling tasks. If you've had a bad night's sleep or it's just one of those days in the month where energy is low, give yourself a lighter day and save the taxing tasks for when you have better bandwidth.



Tip

Chat to your line manager about introducing more flexible working hours.

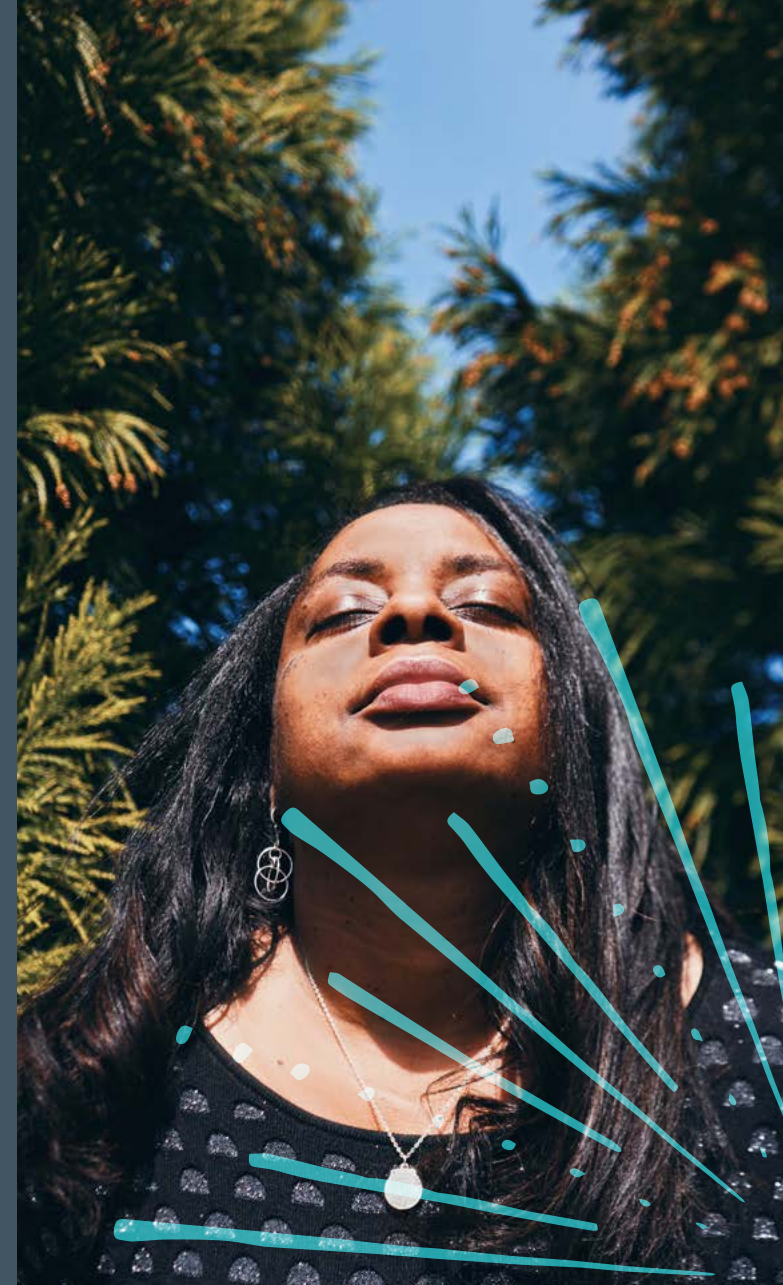


SLOW LIVING

Accept a slower change of pace. As Carl Honoré – author of *In Praise of Slow* – suggests, the best way to improve productivity and sanity is to do less and embrace slow living.

Challenge

Meditate with breathwork each day for ten minutes. If you can't find time to do this, break it up into three-minute sessions to do when you wake up, around lunchtime and at the end of the day.



SUMMARY

- ✦ Eat strategically
- ✦ Move regularly
- ✦ Get adequate rest and breaks in the day
- ✦ Introduce new experiences
- ✦ Implement organisational strategies



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