

Aging and the Mind



The mind remains one of the most mysterious parts of the human anatomy. It is part of our body—and yet it seems separate. It is where we store all of our memories, thoughts, feelings, abilities and sense of self. Our mind is what makes us who we are, our personality, our sense of humor, our ability to communicate, our values. It is what makes us recognizable to other people.

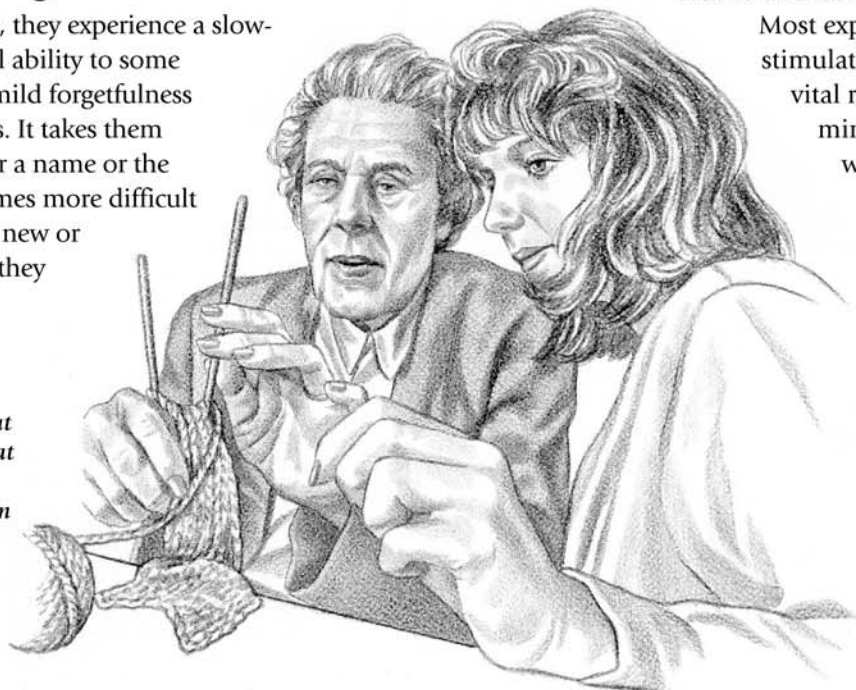
What is the mind? The short answer is, “the brain.” The brain is the primary controller of our central nervous system—the organ that tells our body what to do, that picks up and interprets signals from both in and outside our body. Made up of networks of neurons, the brain is a complex and ever-changing organ, and scientists have only begun to understand its mysteries.

Like our other body systems, the brain undergoes changes as we age—but for some people these changes are much more pronounced than for others. Many people remain mentally alert their entire lives, while others eventually begin to suffer from a variety of mental disorders, including dementia, Alzheimer’s Disease, and depression. Why some people succumb to disorders and others do not is not entirely understood. New studies indicate that our neurons can regenerate, and ways to promote this are being researched.

Degrees of Change

As most people age, they experience a slowing down of mental ability to some degree. They have mild forgetfulness and memory delays. It takes them longer to remember a name or the right word. It becomes more difficult to learn something new or to remember what they once knew. These

The brain undergoes changes as we age, but most experts agree that mental stimulation can play a vital role in keeping our minds alert.



symptoms are all part of the normal aging process and do not constitute a disorder.

For other people, the forgetfulness, memory delays and learning difficulties are more pronounced. The general term for severely declining mental abilities is “dementia”—a term which applies to a range of conditions, including Alzheimer’s Disease. For people with dementia, everyday tasks become increasingly difficult and their minds become increasingly confused. In the latter stages of dementia or Alzheimer’s, they may be completely unable to recognize themselves and others, and also unable to care for themselves.

The mind can also become susceptible with age to a variety of emotional disorders, including depression, aggression, paranoia and other ailments. Often these will accompany dementia, but they may also be experienced by themselves.

Caring for the Mind

Our minds, like our bodies, must be cared for. The mind is not a static organ; it responds to its environment, taking in and responding to stimulus.

Research indicates that the mind-body connection is extremely powerful and that keeping the mind healthy and engaged affects its ability to transmit and accept signals to and from the nervous system.

Most experts agree that mental stimulation as we age plays a vital role in keeping our minds alert. Playing cards with friends, reading books, and even watching movies can help our minds to stay healthy.