



## Staying Mentally Sharp

*Most older people can remain intellectually sharp late into their lives, but doing so requires two things. First, you need to believe in your ability to maintain mental alertness and remain optimistic and confident. Next, you need to regularly exercise your mental talents just as you need to exercise your body to stay in peak physical condition. In fact, certain types of memory can be improved in old age.*

One of the greatest fears of many older people is the loss of mental competence. Although obviously a possibility for some, both middle-agers and elders often worry excessively about this occurring.

Besides being nerve-racking, the worrying can encourage the very behavior we fear: We believe we are becoming forgetful and then point to perfectly natural lapses in memory as proof that senility is setting in. Thus, far too often, our fear of mental decline becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, sometimes at a surprisingly early age. Guard against this tendency both in yourself and among your friends and family.

---

*That older men and women can prevent or even regain some of the cognitive losses that are usually and mistakenly considered as an inevitable part of aging is tremendously encouraging.* —J. Rowe & R. Kahn

---

As we grow older, we show some decline in what is called “explicit memory.” For example, you want to remember a name or fact, and try as



INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF  
◆ OLDER PERSONS ◆

you might, the memory refuses to come on demand. Also, with advanced age, distractions can be more of a problem and the speed of processing information slows. Other kinds of memory show little or no decline with age.

With frequent use and practice, older persons can significantly improve their cognitive functioning. Activities such as reading, word games and stimulating conversation aid our mental abilities.

Take one day at a time, expect the best, stretch yourself to achieve it, and appreciate the gift of a good mind. Remember that most of us are capable of far more than we realize.

Name as many enjoyable activities as possible that can promote mental sharpness in later life.



Reference: **Successful Aging** by Rowe & Kahn, 1998.

Prepared by **Sam Quick**, Human Development & Family Relations Specialist, University of Kentucky.

Copyright © 1999 University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, Assistant Director for Family and Consumer Sciences, 206 Scovell Hall, Lexington, KY 40546-0064. Although this publication is copyrighted, you are free to reproduce it in its entirety for non-profit, educational purposes. *Educational programs of the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service serve all people regardless of race, color, age, sex, religion, disability, or national origin.*