Forbes

Lifestyle Habits That Improve Brain Health, According To Experts

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Published Aug 28, 2026, 02:00pm EDT

Clinique La Prairie in Switzerland, where the Brain Potential program takes a preventative approach to cognitive aging.
CLINIQUE LA PRARIE

I didn't expect brain health to be such a frequent conversation in the group chat with my girlfriends.

"I'm having a hard time focusing."

"I keep opening my phone and forgetting why."

"My brain feels foggier than normal."

We've all felt a bit forgetful after a late night. But this felt like something more. Like we were noticing a real-time shift in attention span, motivation, and clarity.

"This cannot be the same brain I used to read the fourth Harry Potter book in two days," one user posted on X. That's exactly how I've been feeling. I remember being able to focus for hours, lost in a made-up world. I studied for the LSAT and the Bar Exam, meltdowns and all, and got through it. What changed?

Well, our lifestyles.

Blame the Scroll, Not Just the Late Night

Attention spans are shrinking, and researchers tie the decline closely to the rise of smartphone use over the last two decades. Oxford's 2024 Word of the Year was "brain rot," coined for the fog that comes from constant task-switching between apps, tabs, and notifications. It keeps the brain in a shallow, reactive mode, the opposite of the sustained focus that actually builds and strengthens neural connections.

There's a second pattern researchers are tracking too: "digital amnesia." Offload enough memory onto your phone, contact info, directions, plans, and you rehearse and encode less of it yourself. Remember when you knew all your friends' numbers by heart? How many do you know now?

The 3 PM Wall Isn't What You Think

"Every time you jump from an email to Slack to a meeting and back, you're not just losing a few seconds," says Dr. Kathleen Léger, a triple board-certified physician in internal medicine, nephrology, and critical care medicine, and a longevity specialist at Extension Health in New York.Researchers call it attention residue: a piece of your focus stays stuck on the last task while you're supposed to be starting the next one.
"Deep work isn't a switch you flip," Léger says. "It's a muscle you train." A calendar full of thirty-minute meetings and a phone that buzzes every few minutes doesn't just interrupt deep work. It atrophies the muscle."

"We blame the 3 PM wall on lunch or a bad night's sleep, and that plays a role, but most of the afternoon crash is cumulative," Léger says. Every switch all morning, every notification, every half-finished thread adds a little more weight. By 3 PM, your brain is dragging a dozen unfinished loops it never got to close. It didn't change at 3 PM. It's been spending itself since 9.

Corporate America wasn't built with any of this in mind. Back-to-back meetings. Always-on Slack. The expectation of an instant reply. None of it is neutral. It's a lifestyle working against the kind of focus our brains need. We call it burnout and treat it like an emotional problem. It's a cognitive one too.

It's Not Just You, and It's Not Just Aging

"Cognitive decline does not begin at 60," says Olga Donica, Longevity Innovation & Science Director at Clinique La Prairie. "Our cognitive capacities begin with subtle, gentle changes as early as our late 20s. It's not alarming, it's just biology. But it changes everything about when we should start caring for our brain."

Just as important, Donica says, is cognitive reserve: the brain's capacity to withstand the pressures of aging and resist neurodegeneration. That reserve is largely built in the first two decades of life, through learning and physical movement, and staying consistent with both later in life is what keeps it protected.

That matters most for people whose jobs depend on quick thinking: the sharpness that gets you through a negotiation, a pitch, or a room full of people who disagree with you. We tend to write off brain fog as a personality quirk, something to joke about in the group chat. It's actually the first sign that reserve is being drawn down.

The Decade Nobody Warns You About

Dr. Kathleen Léger points to 35 as a real inflexion point: the start of perimenopause, when hormone production shifts, antioxidant defenses can falter, and holding onto muscle mass gets harder. "Combined, these changes can really affect brain health and cognitive function," she says.

Longevity clinics are catching up to that timeline too. Clinique La Prairie's own protocol reflects the shift: guests under 40 receive a different brain MRI approach than guests over 40, an acknowledgement of how early this window actually opens. The daily habits behind the data- sleep, movement, real food- are available to anyone, regardless of what's in their bank account.

Inside the Science

Clinique La Prairie's Brain Potential program was developed over two years with LREN, the Neuroimaging Research Laboratory at CHUV in Lausanne, and published in *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews*. Donica describes it as the first comprehensive longevity program built specifically around brain aging in healthy, high-functioning people, positioned as prevention rather than treatment.

It starts with what CLP calls the Longevity Master Assessment: over 300 health variables, from genetic screening to gut microbiome sequencing to a full cardiovascular workup, feeding into brain MRI and AI-powered volumetric analysis that flags structural changes years before they'd otherwise be caught. Vascular health, it turns out, is one of the strongest predictors of cognitive decline. As Donica puts it, "a healthy heart, a thriving brain."

That vascular link is also why the program looks past exercise itself and into the conditions around it. Where you exercise, Donica notes, matters almost as much as whether you do. Pollution has been shown to suppress BDNF, the same neurochemical exercise relies on to protect and build new brain connections, which means a run along a busy road can cancel out some of the benefit a run in cleaner air would give you.

So, What Actually Works?

Strip away the MRIs and the biomarker panels, and both women land on the same short list.

Get a real baseline. Not just a standard blood panel, but a fuller picture of inflammatory status, metabolic health, sleep architecture, gut microbiome composition, and cognitive function. As Donica puts it, you cannot optimize what you haven't measured.

Treat sleep like medicine, not a maybe. It's when the brain clears waste and consolidates memory, not a lifestyle preference to skip on a busy week.

Protect blocks of deep work like you would a meeting with your boss. Turn off notifications, close the extra tabs, and resist the urge to multitask. Every switch has a cost, and stacking fewer of them each day is one of the simplest ways to rebuild the focus this piece started with.

Move with intention. Not just whether you exercise, but where and how, challenging body and mind together rather than defaulting to the treadmill and a podcast.

Léger's advice cuts through the rest: skip the trends, keep the boring stuff. "These interventions are meant to enhance health that is already in good standing, not replace it," she says.

Which is, in its own way, a relief. Fixing your attention span doesn't necessarily require you to add something else on your to-do list – it might actually look like doing less, sleeping more, moving with intention, and putting that phone down.