

Variety Strengthens the Aging Brain

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When the West Auckland Old Farts soccer team takes the field, you might assume from their name they're not that serious about winning. But you'd be wrong. The members of that northern Australian football club have effectively cleared out the cobwebs (they actually trounced the rival Glenfield Cobwebs twice one season) that can come from sitting around and not doing much of anything.

If you want to clear out the cobwebs from *your* playing field, here's how: Put yourself in situations where you have to deal with

complex, new situations (the ever-changing demands of playing soccer certainly qualifies). That's what researchers from Johns Hopkins discovered when they examined the brains of participants in Baltimore's Experience Corps -- a program that brings retired people (65+) into public schools to serve as mentors to young children.

The scientists used MRI's to track what happened to the memory centers in the volunteers' brains. They were surprised that the brain volume of the participants stayed the same or grew (up to 1.6% over 24 months). That's contrary to what happens to the aging brain if it's not stimulated with changing situations and challenges; it loses from 0.4 to 2% of its volume annually.

The takeaway? Your enduring **brain health** is given a real boost when you challenge yourself by learning new things in new situations. Volunteers -- and soccer players -- meet different people in different situations every day. (One more tip: Eat 6 to 12 walnut halves daily. Studies show that regularly eating **walnuts** can protect you from dementia!)