

How Reading Changes Your Brain (M)

Reading could help protect against dementia, including its most common form, Alzheimer's.

Reading helps preserve people's memory skills as they age, a study finds.

It boosts both episodic and working memory — two of the most important types.

Episodic memory — memory for events — is probably enhanced by mentally keeping track of events in the book.

Without episodic memory, it would be difficult to keep in mind the previous chapters and overall story arc.

Working memory — sometimes called [short-term memory](#) — is exercised by keeping in mind the previous paragraph and sentences.

While both types of memory tend to fade with age, reading provides continuous practice with these skills.

Professor Liz Stine-Morrow, the study's first author, said:

"There's a pretty robust literature showing that there's a relationship between working memory and both language comprehension and [long-term memory](#).

Working memory seems to decline with age, but there's a lot of variation, especially among older adults."

She continued:

"Leisure reading, the kind that really sucks you in, is good for you, and it helps build the mental abilities on which reading depends."

Changing your brain

For the study, 38 adults aged in their 60s and 70s were given an 8-week program of leisure reading to complete, reading for 90 minutes a day, five days a week.

A comparison group of the same size and age did word puzzles instead.

The results showed that working and episodic memory improved significantly in the group that were reading in comparison to the puzzle group.

The study suggests that reading could help protect against dementia, including its most common form, Alzheimer's.

It also underlines the fact that the brain continues to be 'plastic' with age: capable of change and improvement.

Professor Stine-Morrow said:

"There's more promise in engaging fully in the stimulating things that we already do in our lives.

That's probably the best pathway to maintaining our mental ability and offsetting the effects of Alzheimer's disease."

Other studies on reading have found that:

- [losing yourself in a story](#) can be a powerful way to change your own behaviour.
- reading a [novel boosts brain connectivity](#),
- and [reading fiction is linked to better linguistic skills](#).