Mind Matters Podcast Transcript Summary Modifiable Risk Factors for Cognitive Change and Dementia

Hi everyone, and welcome to another episode of the Mind Matters podcast where we talk about brain health, dementia care, and many topics in between.
My name is Katie Reilly and I am joined by Christina Sanders and Marisa Romanini, and together we comprise the Acts Memory Services team.

We are thrilled to have you joining us again. We have a great topic for today, which is modifiable risk factors for cognitive change and dementia. It's really kind of an interesting one because it's actually a lot that we can do in our daily lives that can help prevent cognitive change over time that might impact us significantly later in life.

The Alzheimer's Disease International Group says that there are up to 14 modifiable risk factors that we can control in our daily life. It can be easy things from movement and activity to social engagement, all topics that we'll touch on today.

Unfortunately, we can't change our genes or our age. But the good news is, no matter what age you are, you can still have that ability to increase your brain health. It's never too late to impact your well-being and your brain health.
Research indicates that up to 40% of dementia diagnosis may be related to risk factors that are modifiable. So, there are things that we can do to lower our risk of dementia and to help our brain and improve our quality of life.

These small changes in our daily routine can make a huge difference in our brain health.

Exercise: Christina

I'm going to go ahead and jump right in and kick us off with exercise. It's not one of my favorite topics as it takes a lot of work for me to consistently exercise. But movement is one of the most powerful ways to decrease our risk of dementia. There are so many benefits to exercise that affect our overall cardiovascular health. We're going to get more into the health benefits of exercise, but the benefits to the brain are increased blood flow. It's all about getting oxygenated and nutrient rich blood to the brain.

So how can we get more blood to the brain? Exercise is the number one way. Have you ever noticed that when you're sitting for a while, your brain feels cloudy or not as sharp as usual? Often when I'm working from home, I need to run around, jump on my trampoline, get that blood flowing—it helps me think clearer and sharper. That afternoon slump that hits around 2:00 or 3:00 PM after lunch? Instead of reaching for coffee, take a quick walk.

Exercise also helps with inflammation. In the last podcast, Marisa talked about inflammation and all the great research showing its impact on dementia in the brain. Exercise decreases inflammation not just for your brain, but everywhere else as well. I know when I sit, I get stiff; when I drive, those muscles are just achy. Walking and moving lubricates those muscles and keep them healthy. Exercise also improves cardiovascular health. When your heart is strong, it helps protect brain function. We often forget that the heart is a muscle that requires constant attention to stay strong, feeding our muscles, organs, and brain.

There's no need to hit the gym hard—you want to be able to walk the next day. Take it gradually with baby steps and achievable goals. Research recommends 20 to 30 minutes of

movement about five days a week, totaling roughly 150 minutes. There are easy ways to get those steps in: break it up with a morning walk and an afternoon walk, park farther away, or take the stairs. Just like it's never too late to improve your brain health, it's never too late to start exercising.

Another key factor is enjoyment. Trust me, if you hate it, you're not going to do it. Find something you love. Do you enjoy dancing? Put on music while cooking dinner and dance! I went to a community and thought chair yoga would be easy—it was a workout. My heart was beating, I was sweating, and I was exhausted afterward. And it was something new for my brain too. Exercise doesn't just involve physical activity; doing something in a way you've never done before challenges your brain. The best form of exercise is the one you will actually do. Find something you love, and you will stick with it. There are so many ways to get movement in—keep your body moving, enjoy it, and stay consistent.

At Acts, we had a team step challenge, which really got me engaged and accountable. Sometimes you need a friend or an accountability partner to help you stay consistent. Personally, I love "walk and talk" time. When I walk alone, 10 minutes feels like an hour, but with a friend, it goes by so fast. Socializing is great for you, too. Listening to a podcast, music, or enjoying different scenery can also make exercise more enjoyable while stimulating your brain.

Social Engagement: Marisa

The social aspect of exercise connects naturally to the second topic: social engagement and how beneficial it is for your brain. Many studies show that loneliness and isolation significantly increase the risk of developing dementia or cognitive impairment later in life—loneliness by up to 31%, and isolation by up to 27%. That is nearly one-third increase in risk purely from a lack of social interaction. Staying socially engaged is a little like exercise for your brain. We don't always think about the cognitive aspects involved in social connection, but being in a group—tracking the conversation, shifting your attention when someone interjects, responding to others—challenges the brain in new and different ways. It requires flexibility, quick thinking, and the ability to stay mentally nimble. Outside of these social moments, much of life is task-oriented: we focus on one thing, complete it, and move on. Social engagement, especially in a group setting, provides the brain with a wider range of activity, stimulation, and mental demands.

Active listening is another important cognitive task. It's not just paying attention to words but noticing body cues—nodding, shaking heads, eye expressions, or signs of confusion. Being attentive to all of this gives the brain work to do and strengthens situational awareness, which is essential for participating in a complex social environment. Many residents in Acts communities naturally benefit from this, as community life offers built-in opportunities for social connection. Recommendations often include getting involved in volunteer activities—visiting other residents, supporting community events, or helping with performances. Joining clubs is also valuable. Book clubs are particularly good for cognitive engagement, but any type of social group or outing provides opportunities for conversation, shared experiences, and connection. Visiting museums, going on trips, or simply talking about what you've seen stimulates the brain through reflection and discussion.

Religious or spiritual involvement can also play a significant role in maintaining social connectedness and supporting mental health. Even staying connected with family through

regular phone calls, FaceTime, or text messages helps maintain those social ties. Many people communicate more through technology now than through traditional phone conversations, but the connection is still present and meaningful. These relationships strengthen the social component of brain health.

Intergenerational interactions offer an additional layer of benefit. Spending time with younger people exposes you to unfamiliar language, technology, and experiences. This challenges the brain to adapt and learn in new ways while also building meaningful relationships. Even simple moments—like nieces and nephews teaching new slang or showing how to use a new device—engage the brain differently. Over time, you can feel your brain working to understand these new contexts. These interactions also strengthen emotional bonds and give both generations valuable connection. They can even help reduce ageism by fostering mutual understanding.

Cognitive Stimulation: Katie

Beyond being enjoyable, staying socially connected is deeply beneficial for memory, cognitive functioning, and overall brain health. While people often focus first on things like brain games or diet, the social component is just as crucial. Social engagement ties directly into cognitive stimulation, a major factor in enhancing brain health. Cognitive stimulation involves keeping the brain active, engaged, and challenged with new and different activities. Challenge is the key word. When we challenge the brain, we create new pathways and strengthen cognitive reserve—the brain's ability to remain resilient or resistant to damage, illness, and age-related changes. This reserve helps the brain stay nimble, flexible, and adaptable over time.

Building cognitive reserve is essential because it creates resilience and helps us sustain healthy cognitive functioning. When our cognitive reserve is strong, the brain becomes more nimble, flexible, and agile in dealing with changes that come our way. We build this reserve by engaging in new, different, and challenging activities—anything that encourages the brain to form new pathways. This can include trying new things, learning new skills, exploring a new language, or picking up a musical instrument. All of these experiences challenge the brain in meaningful ways.

Managing Health Conditions: Christina

This idea also connects closely with exercise. It's funny to be the one talking about exercise but even discussing it inspires me to get back into it. Certain medical conditions directly impact brain health, and the good news is that four out of five of these conditions can be positively improved through regular physical activity. Exercise plays a major role in lowering dementia risk and supporting overall brain function.

High blood pressure is one example. When the heart is working too hard and pressure builds, it damages blood vessels—including the vessels that supply the brain. Managing blood pressure is essential, especially if hypertension has been long-term, because those vessels can sustain significant damage. High cholesterol is another factor, closely tied to blood pressure and overall cardiovascular health. Obesity also fits into this cluster; obesity, high cholesterol, and hypertension often appear together, and exercise can help improve all three, ultimately supporting brain health.

Diabetes is another major factor. Excess sugar damages blood vessels, including those that feed the brain, so managing blood sugar through diet and exercise is critical. All of these issues—obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and high cholesterol—are deeply interconnected.

Exercise and appropriate medication can significantly improve how these conditions affect long-term brain health.

Finally, hearing loss plays a major role as well. Hearing impairment can lead to isolation, which reduces cognitive stimulation because you're no longer engaging socially at the same level. When you aren't connecting with people or fully participating in conversations, your brain receives less input and less activity. That lack of stimulation can contribute to cognitive decline over time, which is why addressing hearing loss is so important for overall brain health.

Isolation impacts so much in a person's life, which is why it's so important to address hearing loss early. Get your hearing checked regularly and use hearing aids if you need them. It's an easy fix, and today's technology is incredible. Some hearing aids can even translate languages in real time. Supporting your hearing means you can travel, engage socially, and stay connected to the world around you.

All these factors—medication, exercise, diet, and activity are manageable. Making those brain connections, choosing healthy habits, and taking charge of your health all tie back to lifestyle choices. And they don't have to be big, overwhelming changes. Small changes can make a meaningful difference.

You also don't have to wait until you're older to start building cognitive reserve. In fact, beginning these lifestyle habits when you're young is ideal. Focusing on exercise, keeping blood pressure and cholesterol regulated, and creating healthy routines early on sets a strong foundation for preventing chronic disease later in life.

Lifestyle Factors: Marisa

A few key lifestyle factors play a significant role here. One major one is smoking. Smoking increases dementia risk by up to 40%, largely because it contributes to inflammation, restricts blood flow, and damages blood vessels. Quitting smoking at any age—20s, 40s, 80s—will positively impact overall health and significantly lower the risk of cognitive decline, especially vascular dementia. This type of dementia is closely tied to blood vessel health, making smoking a very preventable risk factor.

Another factor is alcohol. It can be a social connector, and we're not saying you must eliminate alcohol entirely. Moderation is key. If you enjoy a drink with dinner, aim for no more than one drink per day or up to seven per week. There are also great mocktail options now that offer the experience without alcohol. Moderation supports overall health and limits inflammation.

Sleep is another lifestyle factor that's highly controllable. Ideally, we should aim for 7–8 hours of sleep each night, though quality matters more than quantity. Even 5–6 hours of good, restorative sleep is better than 8 hours of tossing and turning. Sleep is when the brain goes through a cleansing process—clearing out waste and preparing for the next day. Poor sleep can lead to buildup in the brain that contributes to cognitive decline.

Healthy sleep hygiene can make a significant difference. Keep your bedroom cool, put screens away 30–60 minutes before bed, and consider sleeping with your phone in another

room. Create a consistent nighttime routine—maybe a cup of tea, reading, brushing your teeth—so your brain learns these cues and prepares for rest.

A helpful morning routine can support sleep too. Within the first 10–15 minutes after waking, try getting outside for a little sunlight—even if it's overcast. Natural light helps reset the body's circadian rhythm and sets you up for better sleep later. Even standing outside for a few minutes can make a difference.

Diet is another important, manageable lifestyle factor. Conditions like high cholesterol or high blood pressure may run in families, but diet can greatly influence them. The Mediterranean diet and DASH diet are both excellent options. They emphasize whole grains, fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts, seeds, lean meats, and healthy fats like olive oil, avocados, and walnuts. These fats are beneficial for the brain, despite diet culture often warning against "fatty foods." Omega-3 and Omega-6 fatty acids are especially protective.

You don't have to follow these diets perfectly. You can still enjoy treats like fries—maybe choose baked or sweet potato fries as a healthier option. Small modifications add up and help protect brain health over time. The key message is that healthy choices don't have to be all or nothing. Every positive step you take supports brain health.

Mental Health & Purpose: Katie

Mental and emotional health are also essential for cognitive well-being. Depression, anxiety, stress, and lack of purpose can all increase cognitive risk. Building a "mental health toolbox" is important—whether through mindfulness, meditation, spiritual practices, or stress management techniques. Support can also come from counseling and support groups, many of which are available in Acts communities.

Self-care, in whatever form is meaningful to you—running, reading, creative hobbies—is equally important. And having a sense of purpose plays a major role in mental well-being. Purpose gives us a reason to get out of bed. It might come from a hobby, volunteering, caregiving, spiritual involvement, or simply making a difference in someone's life.

Sometimes purpose comes from noticing who in your community might be isolated. If you haven't seen a neighbor in a while, taking a moment to reach out, invite them to dinner, or encourage them to join a club can make a huge difference. Isolation can creep in slowly, and community connection helps prevent that.

We've covered a lot today about modifiable risks—exercise, medication management, controlling health conditions, avoiding smoking, moderating alcohol, improving sleep and nutrition, and caring for mental health. These are all achievable goals. It can seem like a lot, but you don't have to tackle everything at once. Start small.

Acts offers an incredible range of programs to support brain health, especially as part of the Acts Well-Being experience such as fitness, nutrition and culinary services, engagement opportunities, spiritual life programming, and strong clinical and wellness services. There are so many ways residents can take advantage of the resources available.

And remember it is never too late to start. Small, consistent steps matter.

So here is our challenge to you: try something new this week. Be intentional. Write it down. Think about what gives you purpose and what will benefit your brain and body.

We hope today's discussion has inspired you to take the next step toward a healthier brain. Thank you for joining us. We look forward to seeing you again on the Mind Matters podcast.

Until next time, stay active, stay engaged, and stay mindful of the strategies that enhance cognitive health.