

BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Early Experiences and Environment Make a Difference to Lifelong Health

In addition to the scientists working around the clock to understand COVID-19 and how to prevent it, other researchers are also diligently trying to understand why certain groups of people are more susceptible to developing the virus and in its most severe form.

Our colleagues in the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard point to research that shows our early experiences and environmental influences can influence our lifelong health, including the health of our brain. And if that is the case, how can we reverse and eliminate those factors that contribute to negative health outcomes? As the Brain Health Initiative works to create brain healthy communities that promote and protect brain health and fight brain illness across the lifespan, these are some of the questions we are pondering.

The fact is that some groups of people respond differently to COVID-19, as well as many other illnesses. Research shows that susceptibility, a common factor of many diseases, is influenced by our early environment. Increasing evidence points to conditions of stress that we experience early in life, such as poor nutrition, exposure to pollutants, and economic or social disadvantages—poverty, racism, family stress—and the effect they have on developing immune and metabolic systems. These early stressors can lead to an increased risk for a variety of chronic physical and brain conditions as adults, such as cardiovascular disease, depression, anxiety, diabetes, and dementia. So yes, racism and other cross-generational traumas that cause chronic stress in many minority communities can result in greater risk of severe cases of COVID-19, as well as numerous other health and well-being concerns.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

The Brain Health Initiative has begun the process of studying and taking action on these and many other critical issues necessary to increase brain health outcomes across the lifespan. To address this global crisis requires a combination of scientific knowledge and real-world experience to generate more effective strategies for dealing with stress and adversity in all neighborhoods, especially our at-risk communities.

There is evidence to support the theory that significant adversity experienced as early as before birth through the first two to three years of life can impact lifelong health. We need to focus more attention on the early life origins of susceptibility to adult diseases.

In a post-COVID-19 world, recognizing and addressing the support necessary to enhance brain health and optimize brain performance across the lifespan for all will be essential. Further, identifying the adverse environmental conditions and structural inequities that make minority communities more susceptible to disease than others will be the ultimate “vaccine” against the many threats to lifelong health and well-being.

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI works collaboratively with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, and the Academy for Brain Health and Performance to build brain healthy communities through education, research, innovation and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention, and performance optimization*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the brain health movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference.***

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