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OPINION

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## There are benefits of jigsaw puzzles on mental health



BY DR. WILLIAM MARSH  
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Did you know that puzzles can improve your overall mental health? Working on jigsaw puzzles can be an effective way to enhance your mental speed, improve short-term and working memory, and promote more positive mood states through the production of dopamine — a neurotransmitter that is related to pleasure, motivation, and concentration.

A solitary or collaborative activity, the act of putting the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle together has many rewards that can benefit you and your family's mental wellbeing.

### Puzzles improve memory

Working on jigsaw puzzles and similar tasks can improve your working and short-term memory as you mentally manipulate the pieces to fit together by size, color, and location, in addition to frequently recalling where pieces go and whether they fit together, or not. Over time, this can

enhance your memory as you make puzzling a regular activity.

### Puzzles improve problem-solving skills and concentration

When we are solving puzzles, we are reinforcing synaptic connections in our brain. Puzzles force us to look at different ways to solve a problem, with a lot of trial and error initially involved that evolves to more sophisticated methods. In this process, we improve our capacity to come up with hypotheses, test those hypotheses, and adapt our perspective when it does or does not work out.

This problem-solving skill can be applied to real life situations and help us think more critically. Furthermore, the act of finding the puzzle pieces that fit together can improve our perceptual abilities and concentration as we focus on what works and what doesn't.

### Puzzles reduce stress and anxiety, and promote adaptability

Research indicates that puzzles may be advantageous in delaying symptoms of certain disorders such as Alzheimer's Disease and demen-

tia. Puzzles are said to stimulate regions of the brain that elicit feelings of accomplishment, connection, and comfort to people, as well as provide a sense of control. These benefits are enhanced when puzzle building is paired with interpersonal interactions, thereby promoting social support and connectedness — a known protective factor against most physical and mental health conditions.

Interestingly, custom photo puzzles can also activate memories in those with cognitive conditions (e.g., dementia, brain injuries) and improve their sense of well-being. In addition, solving puzzles encourages mindfulness states, which may be beneficial for those who struggle with anxiety, depression, and related symptoms. As you focus on putting the puzzle pieces together, it can redirect you from the anxious thoughts that might otherwise occupy your mind and allow you to gain a sense of control over your mind and inter-

nal experience.

Simply put, puzzling is a fun and easy way to improve your overall mental wellbeing. Spending time alone with a puzzle is a great way to unwind and reset from a busy day, and working on a puzzle with others can be a great bonding exercise for everyone.

It's important to note that while doing jigsaw puzzles has many benefits, when combined with a healthy support system and consistent care for your diet, exercise and sleep schedule, this brain-stimulating activity is even more effective.

*Dr. William Marsh is a licensed Clinical Psychologist and Clinical Director with Quality Management, overseeing Specialized Training and Population Health Management at Southwest Behavioral & Health Services (SB&H). He also serves as a clinical supervisor for SB&H's APA-accredited doctoral internship training program and an adjunct professor at Midwestern University and Northern Arizona University. For more information and resources, visit sbhservices.org.*

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