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How to Improve your brain quickly

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Holly Richards, The West Australian

Many of us hit the gym to improve our bodies. But what if you could do the same for your brain?

Gruen Transfer co-host Todd Sampson is out to prove we all have the capability of drastically improving our brains – from memory to creative potential – in as little as three months in the ABC1 documentary series Redesign My Brain.

“I went into it with a healthy scepticism,” Sampson says.

“But there’s stuff all of us can do to improve our brains because the one thing the doco says loud and clear is that everyone can improve on the

brain they have.

“Most people believe it would be very difficult to do and that it would take so much time but it’s really not true.

“The premise is the brain is fundamentally lazy and will always work to the least effort and in order for you to continue to develop your brain, you have to push it and it will adapt and continue to adapt.

"The problem is that as we age, we stop pushing our brains and that's when things start shutting down but that can be reversed.

"When I met Michael Merzenich and he said he could double my speed of thinking, I went 'Really?' And I never really believed him but I was amazed at how much my mind changed."

The three-part series will see Sampson experience a brain makeover under the guidance of the world's top neuroscientists.

"It was amazing. They are uber geeks, so for me it was just brilliant. They're really excited about what they're doing because they're right on the edge," he says.

The three-month, scientifically endorsed training program was created in a television first to demonstrate that a brain can be radically improved.

In the first episode Merzenich, a pioneer in the neuroplasticity revolution, mentors Sampson, showing him how to work on his cognition by turbocharging his thinking speed, attention and memory.

"Michael is like this evil genius who was devising these programs for my mind and every time I got good at something he would make it incredibly difficult," Sampson says.

"Every time he found some weakness I had he would just exploit it and force me to the edge of my capability."

Inspired by the achievement of blind rapid chess player Marc Lang, Sampson – who grew up in Canada – visits Merzenich at Posit Science in the US. Working in a special "gym for the brain", Sampson must complete computer-based brain exercises for at least 30 minutes a day.

He learns to juggle with juggler and brain scientist Nic Price, then returns to the US where visual scientists Susana Martinez-Conde and Stephen Macknik, along with magician Magic Tony, reveal how magicians use science to exploit gaps in our attention.

He studies with Australian memory champion Taneli Ali, who teaches him tools that help him prepare to represent Australia at the World Memory Championship in London.

But Sampson says the highlight of his three months was attempting a Houdini-type challenge which saw him chained up, blindfolded and dropped in water with weights at the end of the training.

"I can't swim. I don't even like water. I don't even like taking my kids to the beach and so the ability to be able to control that is very useful stuff," he says.

Sampson's training in biology and genuine interest in science made him the perfect candidate for this experiment.

"I'm a science nerd. I've studied biology and I knew quite a lot about brain plasticity before the show from a scientific point of view but this was going to be the first time on television that someone was going to prove or disprove it," the co-creator of the Earth Hour initiative says.

Even though it's been months since filming for the documentary, Sampson says he is keeping up with his brain training – so much so he's planning on filming another documentary about the brain and its potential.

"I continue to challenge myself with different things. Brushing your teeth with your opposite hand, trying a musical instrument, learning a language – all of these things will work in your favour," he says.

“My kids do it. We don’t let them play electronic games in the house but they’ve been brain training and they think those games are just for entertainment.”

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