Reduce the Risk of Dementia
By Stephen Andriko

Are you concerned that one day, soon, you or a loved one will be featured on the Silver Alert Missing Elderly billboard? There have been several studies that either identify people who had Alzheimer’s disease but did not exhibit symptoms, or those who demonstrated measurable cognitive improvement because of specific actions. Let’s find out what these people had in common.

Of the clinical studies that have been conducted, the Nun Study, by Dr. David Snowden, et.al., a study of nearly 700 Catholic Nuns to examine the development of Alzheimer’s disease and its related dementia, is the most powerful. There was no intervention in the lives or activities of participants throughout this multi-decade study of cognitive evaluation, which began in 1986. All participants agreed to a brain autopsy upon death. Some participants displayed Alzheimer’s disease during autopsy but did not exhibit DEMENTIA SYMPTOMS!

Other clinical studies have also examined the relationship between physical and mental stimulation and cognitive capacity, arriving at very similar conclusions, notably, the FINGER research project conducted in Finland.

First, one must understand the difference between Alzheimer’s and dementia. Alzheimer’s is a degenerative disease that kills brain cells. When enough brain cells are killed, memory and cognitive function are affected. Dementia occurs when that condition progresses to the point where one cannot function without assistance. Dementia is an umbrella term of which Alzheimer’s is the most common cause. While, currently, there is no prevention, treatment, or cure for Alzheimer’s disease, there is hope to avoid its dementia. These studies discovered 3 regions of focus for each individual:

- **Physical** - Increased blood flow to the brain
- **Mental** - Intellectual Density/Cognitive Reserve: The creation of alternate brain pathways
- **Emotional** - Optimism: Maintain a positive attitude about life

First let’s examine the physical aspects. The most effective way to increase blood flow to the brain is exercise. The FINGER study quantified the amount necessary for brain health - 20 minutes of walking daily. The walking pace is not specified as brisk or even consecutive minutes. Adding caffeinated beverage to your diet will also increase the blood to the brain. Other conditions and substances also help: sleep (7-8 hours), a healthy diet (everybody has heard that before), dark chocolate, and even 1-2 alcoholic beverages per day. Yes, I now classify vodka martinis as brain health food.

The mental condition identified as Intellectual Density involves expanding brain pathways, not mental IQ. We think like we drive - on superhighways. Therefore, we use only a fraction of our brain. When pathways are blocked by disease, it is advantageous to have established alternate routes. The most effective method of achieving this is socialization. This is why retirement communities with their built-in socialization are a good option for seniors. You can also create new pathways by games and puzzles. Opt for a variety of puzzle options to expand different areas of brain activity. Other activities such as group exercise following a leader, dance lessons, learning a foreign language, and even brushing your teeth using your non-dominant hand expand pathways. Adding music to the routine daily activity creates its own supplemental access to various stored memories and cognitive abilities. Variety is the key element to the entire Cognitive Reserve expansion.

Finally, one needs to maintain optimism. If you are not naturally optimistic, you can fool your brain by faking a smile. After 5 seconds it becomes a real smile, and you cannot have a bad attitude when smiling.
There is no guarantee that these techniques will work flawlessly for you. All people are different. However, I know of a group of people who had Alzheimer’s disease in their brains but experienced no symptoms. I’ll do what they did!