NEWS LESSON

What Might Your Brain Miss When You Leave Work?



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. What would you do with a weekday that had no timetable?
2. Which activities keep you interested without feeling like work?
3. Would you enjoy retiring with lots of plans or no plans?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**cohort**	☐	A	in a way that lasts a long time or keeps coming back
2	**complicate**	☐	B	make something harder to understand or deal with
3	**wholly**	☐	C	connected with thinking and understanding
4	**retirees**	☐	D	making or creating something again
5	**preserve**	☐	E	keep something from being lost or changed
6	**reproducing**	☐	F	a group of people born or starting at the same time
7	**cognitive**	☐	G	people who have stopped working because of their age
8	**chronically**	☐	H	completely

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

A policy change in Germany created a natural experiment. It found weaker performance on flexible thinking, alongside genuine gains in health.

1 Retirement removes the commute and the alarm clock, but it can also remove tasks that keep someone learning and solving problems. A German study published in the Journal of Health Economics in July 2026 examined what happens to thinking skills after people leave work. Its findings complicate the idea of retirement as either wholly good or wholly bad for us.

2 The researchers exploited a German policy reform that raised the early retirement age for certain women from sixty to sixty-three. Because eligibility changed according to birth cohort, the reform provided a way to investigate the consequences of additional years spent outside the workforce. The analysis focused on women aged sixty-three to sixty-seven, combining objective cognitive tests with administrative health records. Such a design offers stronger evidence about the effects of retirement than simply comparing people who happened to stop working at different ages.

3 The findings were mixed in a revealing way. More time in retirement was associated with weaker performance on measures of fluid intelligence, the capacity to process unfamiliar information and respond flexibly to new problems. Crystallised intelligence, which reflects knowledge accumulated over a lifetime, appeared less affected. Crucially, additional years in retirement did not raise the rate of diagnosed cognitive disorders. Certain indicators of health, including hypertension, depression and sleep problems, moved in a more favourable direction. Retirement, in other words, appeared to involve both potential cognitive costs and meaningful health benefits.

4 That complexity makes sweeping headlines misleading. The study concerns a particular population affected by a specific German policy, and its estimated effects cannot automatically be applied to men, younger retirees or workers in other countries. Nor does a decline in some test scores amount to evidence that retiring early causes dementia. Employment itself varies enormously: a stimulating, supportive job is not equivalent to physically punishing or chronically stressful work. Advising everyone to remain employed would ignore the circumstances that make retirement necessary or desirable.

5 One interpretation is that professional life repeatedly calls on people to solve problems, adapt to unfamiliar demands and keep up with new information. Once those daily challenges fall away, some cognitive skills may receive less practice. But mental engagement does not have to come from paid employment. Learning a language, volunteering, joining a choir or organising community activities can all introduce novel problems and meaningful relationships. A stimulating retirement might preserve some of the benefits of work without reproducing its deadlines, frustrations or exhaustion.

6 Perhaps the most productive question is therefore not whether to retire early, but what we intend to retire into. A sudden absence of structure may feel liberating at first and empty later, particularly for someone whose identity was closely tied to their job. Others flourish when they finally have time for family, creativity and rest. The study is a reminder that health cannot be reduced to a single score or a single recommendation. A good retirement may involve stepping away from paid work while continuing to seek out fresh experiences, useful challenges and reasons to get up in the morning.

Sources: Journal of Health Economics. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The study's design gives stronger evidence about retirement than comparing people who chose when to stop. T F NG
2. The findings could be applied with confidence to men who retire early. T F NG
3. The authors recommend raising the retirement age across Europe. T F NG
4. The study found weaker scores on some tests alongside improvements in some health indicators. T F NG
5. The study suggests that knowledge built up over a lifetime is the first thing to weaken in retirement. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

crucially	equivalent	exploited	flourish	novel	objective	scarcely	undermine

1. Rival firms quickly _____ the loophole in the regulations before it was closed.
2. To reach a fair verdict, the panel needed _____ evidence rather than personal impressions.
3. Several factors played a role, but _____, the funding never arrived.
4. Given proper support, many small businesses _____ and expand into new markets.
5. The engineers solved the problem with a _____ approach that nobody had tried before.
6. A one-year course is not _____ to a full degree, although it may earn you credit.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. Strict _____ rules meant that only a few applicants qualified. **(ELIGIBLE)**
2. Much of the delay was caused by _____ errors, not by any lack of funding. **(ADMINISTER)**
3. Early signs for the proposed merger were distinctly _____. **(FAVOUR)**
4. Some people struggle to cope with a completely _____ day. **(STRUCTURE)**
5. Her experience made her _____ to the team. **(REPLACE)**

7 Language focus: prepositions

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Some adjectives are followed by one fixed preposition, and the pair often sounds formal or negative. Learn the whole chunk, not just the adjective.

by for in of on to with

1. Telling experienced workers to leave at fifty-five would be tantamount _____ wasting their skills.
2. The move into retirement can be fraught _____ difficulty for people who have no plans.
3. Whether the scheme succeeds is contingent _____ how many people take part.
4. Retirees who feel bereft _____ purpose may find that volunteering helps.
5. Many long-established firms are steeped _____ tradition, which can make change slow.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. What could people keep from working life after they stop working?
2. Should a good retirement include learning something new?
3. How could a community make it easier to stay involved at any age?

9 Role-play: a friend who wants to retire early

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the colleague who wants to retire early

You'll be sixty next year and you'd like to stop working. Tell your friend your plans and why you want to go. Answer their questions and decide whether to change your mind.

Student B · the friend who is not sure

Your colleague wants to retire early. You're worried they'll miss work and have too little to do. Ask questions and suggest ideas, but listen to their reasons.

Useful phrases

I've been thinking about retiring early.
What would you do with all that free time?
I'm worried you'd get bored.
That's a fair point, but I'd rather stop now.
I'd like to learn a language and join a choir.
Why don't you work part-time first?

Afterwards, tell the class: did the friend change their mind, and what was the best idea?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 F · 2 B · 3 H · 4 G · 5 E · 6 D · 7 C · 8 A

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 exploited · 2 objective · 3 crucially · 4 flourish · 5 novel · 6 equivalent

6 Word forms

1 eligibility · 2 administrative · 3 unfavourable · 4 unstructured · 5 irreplaceable

7 Language focus

1 to · 2 with · 3 on · 4 of · 5 in

This lesson is free. If it saved you time, you can support johnplusnews at **ko-fi.com/johnplusenglish**