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**Enhancing Your Brain As You Age**

**By Susan Dunn**

**Enhancing Your Brain As You Age by Susan Dunn, MA, Emotional Intelligence Coach & Consultant**

"The juvenile sea squirt wanders through the sea searching for a suitable rock or hunk of coral to cling to and make its home for life. For this task, it has a rudimentary nervous system. When it finds its spot and takes root, it doesn't need its brain any more so it eats it! It's rather like getting tenure."

~David Dennett, "Consciousness Explained"

And true to form, I have a client who's a tenured college professor, head of the department, who is "going out of his mind." He came to me for coaching because he's deeply dissatisfied with his life, and wants to change careers.

Without violating confidentiality, I can say this client is desperate for new experiences, for meaning and purpose, and for something new in his life. He is "hamstrung" by a high salary and a less-than-30-hour week with long vacations, but is beginning to see the "price" is not worth it.

Though this gentleman happens to actually be a tenured professor, he is representative of many clients I have who are 50 or older.

As more Baby Boomers "come of age," the studies about aging continue to pump in lots of new information to counteract former stereotypes. Science is discovering that "old" rats given new toys and new playmates start growing new brain cells, and better brain cells. Imagine!

And, poignantly, this is what the professor laments the most - the fact that he isn't encouraged, or allowed, to innovate within the department; and that there's no camaraderie.

Let's take a look at some myths about aging and the brain, to encourage you to keep learning, and to keep acquiring new toys, and new playmates. And, oh yes, get toys that give you a good workout, both physically and mentally. That's one of the keys to resilience as you age!

## Enhancing Your Brain As You Age

MYTH No. 1: Once you're born, all you can look forward to is a long and steady loss of brain cells (aka neurons).

REALITY: "Stem" cells in the human brain can create new neurons indefinitely, and relatively idle neurons will extend their branches to carry signals to and from other neurons indefinitely, under the proper circumstances.

MYTH No. 2: We can't get smarter as we age.

REALITY: Mice (are we like mice ... you be the judge) in an enriched environment, with interesting toys and playmates, showed an increase in 4000 new neurons in the hippocampus (crucial to memory and learning) compared to 2400 in the control group with no toys or playmates. And older mice's brains also got bigger and better! And quickly! (Diamond and Rosenzweig, Elizabeth Gould, Princeton)

MYTH No. 3: Creativity diminishes with age.

REALITY: According to Ralph Warner, author of "Get a Life: You Don't Need a million to Retire Well," "older artists often do well, commonly experiencing a sustained burst of exciting creativity after 65."

MYTH No. 4: There isn't much you can do to avoid Alzheimer's.

REALITY: According to David Snowden, Ph.D., "Aging with Grace," hardworking brains (the ones that get used in learning new things all during life) do well because their stimulated cells branch frequently, resulting in millions of new connections (synapses) so the brain actually becomes larger and...evidence continues to accumulate that a larger brain can cope with the effects of brain diseases, like Alzheimer's and strokes. Theoretically because a larger brain has more active tissue, and therefore a greater number of ways to work around diseased or damaged areas.

MYTH No. 5: What you've got, is all you'll ever get.

REALITY: According to Paul Tallal, Rutgers University neuroscientist, "You create your brain from the input you get." By this, she means intellectual stimulation strengthens the brain because in the normal course of living, our brains constantly reorganize themselves, which is called "neuroplasticity." And neuroplasticity speeds up with the amount and complexity of the new information our brains receive.

MYTH No. 6: As you age, it's too hard to learn new things, so stick with what you already know.

REALITY: According to Arnold Scheibel, head of UCLA's Brain Research Institute, the brain's axons and dendrites (which send and receive messages) grow fastest with new material. "The important thing is to be actively involved in areas unfamiliar to you," say Golden and Tsiras, in "Building a Better Brain." "Anything that is intellectually challenging can probably serve as a kind of stimulus for dendritic growth, which means it adds to the computational reserves in your brain." Sounds to me like building new hard drive, yes?

MYTH No. 7: Watching the Discovery Channel suffices for stimulation.

**REALITY:** Dr. Robert Friedland reports that adults over age 70 with brain–stimulating hobbies were two and a half times less likely to suffer from the effects of Alzheimer's later in life than were those whose main leisure activity was watching TV.

**MYTH No. 8:** In order to stimulate and grow the brain, you must engage in formal schooling.

**REALITY:** According to Warner, traditional academic subjects aren't the only answer. The key is to find something both new and challenging to you. "Thus a Latin professor," writes Warner, "might do better to learn how to prune fruit trees, line her car's brakes or even solve difficult jigsaw puzzles than to write a scholarly essay parsing Cicero's rhetoric."

**MYTH No. 9:** I can ignore it for a while and it will still be there when I get back.

**REALITY:** Not! According to neurologist Oliver Sacks, the brain uses a lot of energy and blood, something we can't "afford" to no purpose. If neurons dedicated to perform a given skill are not being used, they'll either atrophy or be co–opted to some other function.

**Myth No. 10:** Intellectual stimulation is enough.

**REALITY:** According to Marion Diamond, aerobic exercise, such as swimming and jogging, may be especially beneficial to brain function in aging people, because it tends to keep blood vessels in better shape. And according to the Salk Institute study, mice that exercised regularly on a running wheel grew twice as many new brain cells (again, in the hippocampus) as other mice.

So there you have it! Jog on out for those new toys and new playmates and get a better brain and a better life! And it's never too late unless you don't start now.

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### **Supplements That Can Help Boost Brain Power**

**By Gary Ruplinger**

Would it not be great if you could just pop a pill and remember everything for an exam? Realistically, there are no supplements that can boost your brain power to such astounding levels. But, studies have shown that regular intake of certain supplements increases the ability to memorize. There are many herbs, supplements and foods that can improve your brain; the effect of which can mean improvement of memory, learning, concentration, attention, reasoning, social skills, decision making, and focus. If you can combine these `brain foods' with sufficient rest and exercise, you will have boosted your brainpower in no time.

## Enhancing Your Brain As You Age

The brain requires a variety of nutrients to produce neurotransmitters - these are substances that control mood, behavior, and mind. Studies have proved beyond doubt that nutritional supplements increase IQ and enhance learning ability. `Smart nutrients' (cognitive enhancing supplements) are natural substances that improve human intelligence.

**Ginkgo Biloba:** This substance has been used for thousands of years in Eastern cultures and is perhaps the most well-known of all memory enhancing herbs. It works by diluting the blood vessels in the brain and enhancing blood flow to the brain; thus supplying lots of oxygen to the brain. It also gets rid of harmful free radicals that damage brain cells. However, the results are not immediate. Taking the supplement continuously for a few weeks will start yielding results.

**Green Tea and Black Tea:** Recent research has shown that these common constituents of the kitchen are very effective in combating the dreaded Alzheimer's disease. The most significant result seems to be that these prevent the breakdown of acetylcholine. This is a key chemical involved with memory and is lacking in Alzheimer's patients. The effect of green tea is more lasting than that of black tea, which lasts only for a day.

**Sage and Rosemary:** A recent study shows that students who took sage performed better at a memory recall test. Scientists believe that sage contains substances that may increase levels of a chemical that transmits messages to the brain. Rosemary also helps stimulate the memory and alleviate mental fatigue. It also strengthens mental clarity. How exactly these substances help the brain remains ambiguous.

**Vitamin B Supplements:** A healthy diet should provide you with all the vitamins that are needed by the body. But at times of stress and fatigue, the body gets depleted of Vitamin B. This deficiency prevents the functioning of acetylcholine. Vitamin B also helps carry oxygen to the brain and this does away with harmful free radicals. Some natural foods like liver, eggs, soybeans, lentils, and green beans are rich in Vitamin B. Vitamin B Supplements also help to boost the level of these vital vitamins in the body.

**Iron deficiency:** The most common deficiency in most parts of the world is linked to iron deficiency. Poor concentration, diminished intelligence, and a short attention span are all attributed to iron deficiency. Iron helps carry oxygen to the blood and its deficiency leaves the brain sadly lacking in oxygen. Iron deficiency can be detected by a simple blood test. Iron-rich food like lean meat, beans, iron-fortified cereals, and iron supplements help raise the levels of iron. But absorption of iron becomes possible only in the presence of vitamin C. Garnishing iron-rich food with lime juice is one of the most effective and natural ways to ingest Vitamin C with iron.

Water is an often overlooked but important necessity of the brain. The brain is 70% water, and a dehydrated brain works at a slower pace. Therefore it is necessary to keep the brain hydrated with plenty of water.

Gary Ruplinger is a featured writer for RareGenius. For more ways to boost your brain power, visit us at:

and



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