

It's Time to Meet Your Brain

The smell of baking bread, dreaming while you sleep, the memory of your first romance, regulating your heart rate, learning how to convert decimals to fractions, the pain of stepping on a nail...all of these are made possible by the three pounds of tissue in our heads...the BRAIN. It is one of the largest and most important organs of the human body as it is the control center of our body. Its complex network of 100 billion or more nerve cells orchestrates every aspect of our thoughts, perceptions, learning, memory, and behavior. More than anything else, our BRAIN defines who we are!

From the day we are born- and likely even before-the brain is primed for learning, ready to capture the experiences of our lives and encode them into its web of nerve connections. Learning organizes, shapes and strengthens the brain's connections. It fine-tunes the brain; preparing us for all that life has to offer, whether mundane or extraordinary. And according to the latest brain research, actively engaging our brains in learning throughout life can have a significant impact on how well we age. Brain researchers are also quick to make the point that learning and memory is not the same thing, though they are intricately linked.

Learning is how you acquire new information about the world, and memory is how you store that information over time. There is no memory without learning, but there is learning without memory because you can learn things and forget them either almost immediately or over time. As a result, not all learning gets laid down into memories that last and often we do not want to remember something for an extended time (for example, we look up a phone number and want to retain it just long enough to dial it).

Despite the myth that older people can't learn new things, brain research has found no evidence to support this in healthy older people. Nor does aging mean that one will lose his or her memory. In fact, research suggests that the more active you keep your brain as you age; the more mentally agile you will remain. It may take some older people longer to learn something new, but they retain what they have learned as well as younger people. Brain researchers have learned more about the workings of the brain in the past ten years than they had in the previous century.

Challenge yourself to continue learning. Learn a new dance step, write down your memories of your childhood and share them with your grandchildren, buy a new digital camera and learn how to share your photos via the computer, watch a documentary on television about something you know nothing about, join the new *50+...Just Like Gold* program at Delta College and you will have the opportunity to learn many new things, make new friends, and enjoy life just a little bit more. "It's Time to Meet Your Brain" is the title of a three part series that will be offered this fall to members who attend its monthly learning luncheons.

Memory decline is inevitable as we age is a myth! There are plenty of people who reach very old age and are still sharp as ever. Genetics clearly plays a role in successful aging, but how we live our lives on a day-to-day basis is just as critical. Physical exercise and challenging and intellectually stimulating mental activity, diet, social connections, how we manage stress, and how we view our world and ourselves are all important factors. Do something for yourself today....think, feel, learn something new...engage your BRAIN!

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