

Our Brains...Our Memories

In order to have a memory three rather complex things must happen. First, you must have the experience; second, your senses must record the experience and send multiple messages to your brain; third, your brain must work properly so it can store the details of the experience and then later be able to retrieve it as a “memory”. Some memories are based on intellectual abilities and learning, some are from observations you make, and some are laced with emotions. Sophia Loren said “I’ve never tried to block out memories of the past, even though some are painful. I don’t understand people who hide from their past. Everything you live through helps to make you the person you are now.”

The brain is extremely complex, part of your central nervous system and there are many things we must do to maintain a healthy brain. The fundamentals of health brain practices include: physical activity; mental stimulation that includes all of your senses as well as some new learning; social interactions; a brain-friendly diet; adequate sleep; and stress management. Of course no doctor can guarantee brain fitness for life even if you do all the healthy practices suggested but the odds are certainly better if you do.

Although our brains are so important, very few of us know even the basic facts such as:

- The average brain weighs about 3 pounds and includes 100 billion or more nerve cells.
- Our brain is about 2% of our body weight but use 20-25% of our oxygen.
- Each nerve cell forms as many as 100,000 connections with other nerve cells and can send messages to other cells in our body at a rate of 200 mph.
- The frontal cortex of the human brain is very different from other primates. It is where higher order functions are centralized including thinking, reasoning, believing, planning and social consciousness.
- What people call “gray matter” is actually pink because of blood flow. It is gray after a person dies.
- Your brain has no pain receptors.
- More than 60 million/20% of Americans are affected with one or more of the estimated 1,000 brain disorders.

Brain researchers have learned more in the last ten years than in the previous 100 years and there is no evidence that older, healthy people can’t continue to learn new things.

What scientists do know is that, as we get older, our ability to retain new memories may be affected making it more difficult to learn new things as rapidly as we did in our earlier years. It is not so much that we forget more easily, but that we may take longer to learn the information in the first place. In practical terms, this means that as we get older, we may have to pay closer attention to new information that we want to retain or use some strategies to improve learning and trigger memory formation. These are a few of the most common suggestions:

- FOCUS...try to reduce distractions and minimize interferences when learning or concentrating
- ORGANIZE...keep important items in a designated place that is visible and easily accessed
- REPEAT IT... repetition improves recall; use it when meeting new people and learning new things
- VISUALIZE IT...associate a visual image with something you want to remember or recall
- RELAX...tension and stress are associated with memory lapses, and managing stress will also improve your memory
- WRITE IT DOWN...carry a notepad and calendar, and write down important things and dates

Would you like to learn more about your brain? Would you like to learn what you can do to maintain your personal memories and overall brain health? Would you like to understand some of the basics of dementia and how to make decisions for your loved ones that have a form of dementia? The Delta College *50+...Just Like Gold Program* is sponsoring two events related to brain health. The first will be Friday, January 21. Every month the *50+...Just Like Gold Program* has a monthly meeting called "Bits and Bites" (a bite to eat at 11:30 am and then a bit of information with a guest speaker from 12:00 noon to 1:00 pm). The January 21' 2011 meeting will focus on recognizing dementia/memory problems and helping families cope with making the necessary decisions. The second is a full day interactive program titled "Brain Booster Camp" scheduled for Friday, February 25th from 9:00 to 3:00 pm (includes lunch also). You will learn about brain functioning, involve yourself in doing neurobics (brain sharpening exercises which create new brain pathways), learn strategies to boost your brain functions, and have a lot of fun using a variety of games and interactive activities that focus on brain fitness. Advance registration is required. To register for one or both of these programs call the Delta College LifeLong Learning office @ (989) 686-9444.

You will have more brain to use if you use your brain more! Join us as we learn together.

Sue Montesi
 Dean of Learning Centers & Innovative Programs
 Delta College