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Your Brain – Better with Age!

“Of all the self-fulfilling prophecies in our culture the assumption that aging means decline and poor health is probably the deadliest.” ~ Marilyn Ferguson

Everything you have been told about how your brain changes as you grow older may be wrong.

As more people reach their senior years, researchers have started asking why many people remain highly functional into their late 90s, and the answers they are finding are changing our ideas of aging.

Most studies of how the brain changes look at the early years, from 1 to 25. By age 40, it is assumed that your brain is mature and there won't be much in the way of changes, barring disease or strokes, until you begin losing brain cells and cognitive abilities with age.



Far from declining, it turns out that the brain is far more resilient, adaptable and capable than previously thought. Older brains have had more time to learn more than younger brains. They hold a much larger vocabulary and collection of memories and experiences, know the names of far more people (which may be one reason why we occasionally misfile a name or two), and are physically different from younger minds.

As we learn and create memories, we develop connections between the neurons in our brain that trigger identification and response to different stimuli. The more memories, the denser the networks of neurons and the more intricate the connections within the brain become. While we do lose brain cells as we age, older minds are proving capable for growing new brain cells, storing new memories and continuing to evolve.

Among the interesting changes taking place is that older brains increasingly use both left and right sides of the brain to make decisions and perform tasks. That's a huge change from our younger minds where either the right or left side of the brain dominates responses to outside information. Older minds literally think differently. Researchers believe this change may contribute to being able to see from someone else's point of view, anticipating change, considering multiple possible results, acknowledging uncertainty, and searching for

compromise. Older brains also appear to react less to negative information and remember positive experiences better than negative ones.

Over time, areas of our brains that we use more frequently continually grow and rewire themselves for greater efficiency. Musicians have significantly increased functioning in the areas of the brain that respond to hearing and discrimination of tone and pitch and are noticeably enlarged in those areas. By challenging our brains, we seem to be able to influence neuron connections, stimulate their growth and make new cellular material for thinking.

Some brains clearly go bad. Diseases such as Parkinson's disease and Alzheimers, as well as strokes are clear culprits. But poor physical health and a lack of ongoing stimuli also impact mental health.

Exercise and challenging our minds through games and puzzles as well as new interests and social involvement appear to have the most influence on how well we think, recall past memories and are open to new experiences as we grow older.

Psychologist and aging specialist Gene D. Cohen, M.D., Ph.D., put forward an interesting theory that many people attribute aging and mental decline to what are natural stages of the maturing mind. Just as children and adolescents go through developmental stages, so do older individuals, he explains. Understanding these changes and exploiting them is not only good for our minds, but results in happier lives.

Phase 1 – Mid-life reevaluation typically occurs in one's early 40s to late 50s. Lost your interest in your job? Finding it hard to get enthusiastic about old interests? Dissatisfied with your life? Welcome to phase 1.

Phase 2 – This is the "if not now, when?" phase, where experimentation and innovation take priority. This phase usually occurs in one's late 50s to early 70s and can be characterized by a sense of freedom to speak one's mind, and a desire for novelty.

Phase 3 – Summing up. Late 60s through the 80s is often a time of looking for meaning in life, a desire to share wisdom, and increased capacity for autobiographical expression. It may also be a time of resolving unfinished business or unresolved conflicts.

Phase 4 – Encore! A time of reflection and celebration and the desire to live well to the very end.

The four phases can be very disturbing to people who have lived their lives up to that point with the expectation that they will always have the same goals, the same work ethic, and the same interests. Instead of viewing the change as natural evolution, it is viewed as signs of decreased mental vitality. By losing your interest and your ability to focus, you must be losing your mind. Understanding that your mind itself is changing can be transformational.

For a new, positive outlook on aging, take some time to read Dr. Cohen's book, **The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain**. It may be just what your mind needs!



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