

Aging Lifestyles: Exercising the brain improves memory

by Joe Volz and Katie Bird

When she was a girl her father used to say regularly, "Rachel, you'd lose your head if it weren't attached to your neck." She was 12 when he first said it. When returning by train from visiting aunts in Ann Arbor, Mich., Rachel remembered that she didn't have her purse and panicked.

Now 70, Rachel has found a silver lining in her bad habit of losing items. Whenever she misplaces something - glasses, a leather jacket or umbrellas - she consoles herself that it can't be Alzheimer's or dementia, since she's been "losing things forever."

Yet, Rachel's experience got us wondering about what we could do to stimulate our brain cells - just in case our brain cells are dying more than a little.

The experts tell us that areas of our brains shrink as we grow older. The older we become, the faster the areas decline. By age 85, one in five of us will experience declining memory and reasoning skills.

But there's some good news. There's something we can do to postpone mental decline. The research to date, though encouraging, will take many years to prove one way or another.

One study, conducted by the University of Florida, put middle-aged and older people through a series of online exercises to stimulate their brains. When the same groups were tested five years later, their scores were unchanged.

People who took the online training had more confidence in their ability to solve everyday problems and to handle the activities of daily life, which are important to anyone hoping to live independently in their own homes as they age. They include personal grooming, dressing and preparing meals.

For anyone with a family history of dementia, another study at the University of California at Irvine had encouraging news. It states that even a modest amount of brain stimulation may help postpone the ravages of Alzheimer's disease.

There are no guarantees, but we are vowing to build brain-stimulating exercises into our lives. Maybe, follow the philosopher who said he didn't know whether God existed or not, so he was choosing to believe, just in case. If there wasn't a God, his belief did him no harm. If there was, he'd made the right choice.

STIMULATE THE BRAIN

Most online courses require people to buy computer programs. Clicking www.brain.com brings up a number of online courses - most carry a price but one or two are free to try out. Over time, more brain exercises will be available at less expensive prices.

Posit Science (www.positscience.com), for instance, is a four-year-old software company that has produced a Brain Fitness Program for people over the age of 60. It was used by Humana Insurance Co. in its effort to keep its clients healthy. It was also used in the Florida study.

HOME WORK

In its January newsletter, "Mind, Mood and Memory," the Massachusetts General Hospital recommends the following:

- Practice remembering numbers. Make a list starting with four numbers initially and then move up to 15.

- Memorize a phone number every day. Then try to remember it 15 minutes later, an hour later and a day later.

- Remember visual details. Study a picture of many people grouped together, like at a market, and then cover the picture and make a list of as many details as you can remember.

- Commit your grocery list and other lists to memory.

- Practice remembering facts and events, such as what you were doing when Kennedy was assassinated.

In addition, it's important to brain health to do something new or something familiar in a new way. So, if you phone people using your right hand, try switching to your left. Invite a friend to go fishing or to join you at a ball game.

As for us, we're starting our brain games tomorrow. Joe is going to practice remembering how much Kate spends at the store.

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