



DYNAMIC AGING

Mindful Exercise

One of the enjoyable parts of writing this article is that I learn something new each time! Once I have come up with a theme, quite a bit of research is necessary to ensure that you are reading information that is science based, and up to date. There's an added benefit for me and for you: when we learn something new, we are exercising our brain.

Recent research supports the theory that the brain becomes stronger and possibly even larger when worked. Dr. David Espino, who studies aging at the University of Texas, San Antonio, tells us "It's just like exercise ... the more you exercise the brain, the larger the 'muscle' will become." A recent poll on the "Attitudes and Awareness of Brain Health" conducted by the American Society of Aging on Aging and funded by MetLife Foundation, reports that with good care, a normal brain can stay healthy and active just as long as the rest of the body. The article goes on to list some of the good news from brain research:

- The discovery of two keys to brain capacity has fundamentally changed our understanding of brain fitness. Neuroplasticity is the capacity of the brain to change in response to the stimulation of learning, and experiences. Neurogenesis is the addition of new brain cells, or neurons, that can expand function, or restore abilities that have been diminished by disease and disuse. To activate these two vital functions, people need enriching environments that include opportunities for socialization, mental stimulation, and physical activity.
- Cross training for the brain should become routine. For example, reading or doing crossword puzzles, though each is good on its own, offers only partial benefits unless it is part of a comprehensive program for long term brain health. Gene Cohen, M.D., recommends "to improve brain fitness, we need to challenge our brains in ways that make us feel as if we are mentally sweating. Frequency, intensity, and a variety of activities are important." He goes on to say that just as we know there are no shortcuts for physical health, we now recognize there are no magic bullets or miracle drugs for brain health. Reading, word games, writing, playing music, singing, and dancing are all good sources for new learning.
- Physical workouts nurture the brain as well as the body, Blood flow is good for the heart, lungs, muscles, and the brain. People reluctant to commit to a regular program of physical activity may become motivated when they understand how it helps them to stay sharp mentally.

"Researchers are virtually unanimous in their agreement that the brain is capable of positive changes throughout life," says Henry Mahncke, PhD and one of the report's commentators.

In summary, good brain health depends on socialization, mental stimulation, and physical activity. As I've mentioned in previous articles, our region is rich in all three.