Plastic Brains

In the same University of Georgia Graduate School magazine I talked about on Thursday, there was another article about the adult brain that said we know some of the limits of the brain in relation to learning languages, math, music, and other skills. What get’s overlooked is that our brains can continue to function at high levels throughout our life. The concept is called neuroplasticity.

How does it work? One important concept is that you use it or lose it. The brain needs constant stimulation. Reading is better than watching television. My father-in-law is a voracious reader; he’ll be 90 in a few weeks. Whatever engages your brain will help it stay young. My mother-in-law did crossword puzzles every day for decades and now she has shifted to doing art projects; for those of you in West Michigan, she even took part in a project for ArtPrize. Of course, you’re not five anymore, so maybe learning a new language or playing the piano is more difficult, but it’s definitely not impossible for your brain.

What does that mean? We’ve learned frustration and to stop doing what frustrates us. Five-year-olds aren’t that jaded—they certainly get frustrated and they may whine and complain, but they don’t quit until they get it right. Remember learning how to ride a bike? They have that type of determination to learn.

Are there other things that can help keep a brain vital and learning? The article was inset in the review of Dr. Sciolino’s work on exercise and the brain. Exercise is essential for keeping your brain vital and in a learning mode. Diet, too? You bet: more vegetables and fruit and less refined carbohydrates and fried foods. But the critical factor is still challenging your brain every day in a way that suits you. Keeping your brain plastic and malleable is the best reason I can think of to use it or lose it.

In my DVD called Preventing Alzheimer’s Disease, I give you specific lifestyle choices that can keep your brain younger and recommendations about diet, exercise, and other things you can do to keep your brain in the game based on the most recent research. Get a copy, watch it, and follow the recommendations. No matter your age, your brain still has a lot of work ahead of it—let’s meet those challenges with the best brain possible.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

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