

At the time I graduated college in 1990, it was believed that the brain grows continually until our bodies mature and then for the rest of our lives we gradually lose brain cells. It was believed that this loss of brain tissue was responsible for senile dementia, the impaired brain function that many elderly individuals exhibit.

A few years ago, it was discovered that what we thought we knew about the brain was totally wrong. It turns out that the brain is much like a muscle. As I mentioned last week, muscles can continue to develop throughout our lives, even when very elderly. Muscles adapt to their work load. Weight lifters continue to build muscle tissue as long as they are stressing their muscles. If they stop lifting, the muscles will gradually shrink to adapt to their new, reduced, work load.

It seems that the brain responds the same way. If it is exercised regularly, it will grow as well. Studies show that individuals who regularly engage in activities that require memory, critical thinking, or imagination will result in a building of brain tissue, not a loss.

If, however, the brain is not exercised, it will shrink and become less functional. During our first 20 to 30 years of life we are continually learning new things. We go to school and learn there. We enter the work force and learn new skills and new information there as well. We get married and have kids and learn new things from those experiences. Once we are settled into a career and have essentially learned all there is to learn and we know how to raise our kids and live compatibly with our spouse, the amount of new information our brains are presented with drops significantly. We work and do the same things. We come home and eat the same foods and have the same conversations. We watch TV which, for the most part, does not challenge the brain.

As a result, from about 30 on, our brains gradually become less functional, not because of age, but because of lack of use. Those individuals who regularly challenge their brains can remain sharp and functional their entire lives. I suggest that you look at your life and see if your brain is being challenged to learn or create new things and if not, engage in activities that stimulate the brain. Meet new people. Do crossword puzzles or sudoku. Read books that make you think. Take up a hobby or craft that requires creativity. As the saying goes...use it or lose it!

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