

Reframing Ageing: Support Your 'Super Brain'



By Eve Menezes Cunningham



When I was a teenager, I couldn't wait to turn 30. Now 44, I'm no longer wishing my life away but still love every birthday and look forward to each new year. I regularly imagine my inner 90-year-old, happy, healthy and doing all sorts of things I hope to grow into, having overcome whatever challenge I might be living through in 2020.

Apparently, this is a bit odd. A lot of people have some pretty negative attitudes about the time we're fortunate enough to be alive and on the planet for.

Keeping your brain young

"Changing your attitude to ageing can actually change how you age," says Dr Sabina Brennan, author of *100 Days to a Younger Brain* (Orion, 2019). She's on a mission to encourage as many people as possible to take their brain health as seriously as they do their heart health and do whatever they can do to improve and maintain it.

"Ditching ageing stereotypes and adopting a positive attitude to ageing can improve your memory and lengthen your life. Optimists have better health and tend to be more resilient. Don't conform to societal expectations by slowing down, doing less and sitting more. Don't let age stop you from doing things that are essential for brain health. Embrace novelty, enjoy new experiences, keep learning, keep setting goals, keep challenging yourself and keep physically and socially active."

Dr Brennan left school at 16 and was an actor on the Irish soap

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Fair City before going to university. Her son had learning issues and she taught herself to read academic papers in an effort to help him. While she felt daunted by the prospect of returning to education, she went on to get a PhD in neuroscience. Her ongoing research speciality is dementia risk and protective factors.

Minimising stress is important, says Dr Brennan, as "stress plays a key role in brain ageing, so managing stress is critical to maintain a youthful brain." There are lots of practical things we can do to improve the way we age. Dr Brennan says much of what we think of as age-related atrophy is actually lifestyle-related atrophy.

"Growing older is a privilege many don't get to enjoy," says Hannah Martin, a psychotherapist, NLP practitioner and founder of the Talented Ladies Club. "Accept any unchangeable physical limitations, while remaining as fit and healthy as you can. A quick reframe of ageing is simply gaining experience and wisdom. You have a perspective that younger people don't, and with that mindset you can have more gratitude and inner peace. You've

lived through life and are better equipped to deal with the downs, and more grateful for the precious ups.

“Actively seek out new things – meet new people, try new activities, visit new places, learn new things, eat new foods. You don’t need to climb Everest. Walking down a new street in your town or visiting a different cafe can open up a world of new experiences, sights, sounds and smells that keep your brain alive and alert. Stay curious, and question and seek out new things like a child.”

How to keep your brain active

In terms of what we can do to help ourselves, social activity is one of the most important things because it relies on quite sophisticated cognitive function. One of the many heart-breaking issues around Covid19 has been the decline so many people have reported of their loved ones with dementia. While Zoom will never take the place of face to face, it’s been a blessing for much of the world in enabling people to stay socially active (while enjoying – another potential reframe – the technical challenges).

Good sleep is critical for clearing toxins from the brain and helps us learn, concentrate and remember. When we don’t get enough good sleep, it can interfere with neuroplasticity (brain changes that are possible throughout our lives) and lead to impaired cognitive function and weight gain.

Sleep, being physically active, making time for friends and loved ones, and enjoyable new experiences are more than self-care. All can contribute to healthier brains so our (hopefully) longer lives will be healthy, rewarding and fun.

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96-year-old Giuseppe Paternò was featured in the *Guardian* (5/8/20) for having been awarded first-class honours in philosophy from the University of Palermo. He would get up at seven to study, rest in the afternoon then study again until midnight. “My neighbours used to ask, ‘Why all this trouble at your age?’ But they couldn’t understand the importance of reaching a dream, regardless of my age.”

Giuseppe was inadvertently following the neuroscience. He was embracing novelty by keeping his dream alive and going back to university. I don’t imagine it was easy for him but challenges, when not overwhelming, help us grow. He sounds like he enjoyed the new experiences, and is certainly still learning and setting new goals (he’s contemplating a Masters he hopes to complete by the age of 100). Being a student again would have contributed to him staying physically and socially active, too. ■



Brain Fog to Ballet



“I had a vast array of health problems, including brain fog,” says Marilyn Devonish, The NeuroSuccess™ Coach and Flexible Working Implementation Consultant.

“I would read something, or someone could say something to me, and a few minutes later – gone, disappeared, no idea what they said or what I’d read. It was particularly distressing as I was studying to be a chartered accountant at the time.

“With PhotoReading™, I learnt how to activate and use my brain in a completely new and different way and, once I stopped second guessing myself and followed the PhotoReading™ steps, I noticed the beneficial effects almost immediately. The results were so dramatic that I went from worst in class to best in class when doing my NLP Practitioner, Master Practitioner and NLP Trainers Training.”

Marilyn is “52 years young” and says to “focus on what you want and what you can do. Ask ‘Why not?’ if doubt sets in about your age. I took up ballet for the first time aged 47 ½; one might think that was 47 years too late. I asked myself, ‘Why not?’ There was no valid reason, so off I went to the ballet store to get my shoes!”

Eve Menezes Cunningham is an online trauma therapist and the author of *365 Ways to Feel Better: Self-care Ideas for Embodied Wellbeing*. You can access free videos and other resources at selfcarecoaching.net