Jay Glaser
Body Renewal

Leseprobe

Body Renewal
von Jay Glaser
Herausgeber: Lotus Press

http://www.narayana-verlag.de/b14885

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CHAPTER 27

MAINTAINING BRAIN FITNESS

My rotations as a resident at the Montreal Neurological Institute always seemed too short. Its ornate halls, steep amphitheaters and hidden murals depicting the great figures in the annals of neurology who had passed through its doors were conducive to the study of the human brain. Some of those early pioneers, like Wilder Penfield, who mapped the brain's cortex, still walked its halls. Every Wednesday afternoon the neurology residents would take a break in a lounge where, like the Thanksgiving turkey, a brain was sitting on a wooden carving plate next to a sharp silver carving knife. The brain invariably belonged to a patient who had expired during the past week and whose family wished us to gain whatever information we could from its examination. As we hovered around it trying to peer inside, the chief resident would make vertical slices from front to back. I soon noticed that the older the patient, the more space we would see between the folds of the brain (sulci) or in its ventricles, the clear fluid-filled cavities inside.

With time, your brain risks undergoing the same processes as your aging skin. The plump, white, moist tissue that fills the skull becomes shrunken, dry, fibrous and yellowed and its normally small, fluid-filled ventricles become enlarged to replace the lost mass of the fleshy neurons. In 30-80% of people getting an MRI, the margins of the ventricles, which are composed of the fibers responsible for rapid conduction of thought and movement, become fibrous and degenerated.[183] Sometimes these visible changes are so dramatic when I view a patient's scan that I marvel, 'How can this person act so apparently normal?' The answer is *brain plasticity.* Your brain is endowed with an astounding capacity of self-repair, and can create new neuronal electrical pathways around or through an area of obstruction or slowing. This flexibility is one of the keys to brain fitness.

Preliminary studies suggest that people who make a lifelong habit of doing *neurobics,* lifestyles that promote new connections between brain cells, such as being adventuresome at trying new things, engaging in life-long learning, doing exercise and playing physical games may preserve brain function. Strength training has been shown to improve memory. It is simply not true that you can't teach an old dog new tricks.

It is neither possible nor desirable to maintain your brain in its younger configuration, because the brain, like your bones,[184] is always remodeling itself. Change is inevitable and necessary. Just as you clean out your house, change the walls and replace the belongings, our brain regularly dumps most of its contents, retaining important bits, of course, but probably not in the same anatomical arrangement. Remodeling and change within the brain is the basis of its plasticity and its ability to withstand the ravages of aging, while remaining functionally intact. The Vedic approach to brain fitness aims to maximize the brain's natural flexibility and faculties of self-repair.

Researchers at the Salk Institute in San Diego recently discovered a protein responsible for scavenging and eliminating beta-amyloid residues, the same ones

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that are the main culprit for the multiple, dreaded cognitive problems of Alzheimer's disease, the most common cause of dementia.[185] Everyone accumulates beta-amyloid; it is a part of aging. In Alzheimer patients, however, it builds up as plaque inside the brain neuron cells and clumps on their surfaces. When Andrew Dillin altered a gene that has long been known to determine worm lifespan, worms in the laboratory not only lived longer, but also had a reduced buildup of the toxic amyloid, and fewer neurological problems, the worm-equivalent of dementia. The researchers feel their worms improved because the cellular cleanup mechanisms that dispose of amyloid, or that clump it into non-toxic packages, were spared the usual age-related decline.

This research gives us, as therapeutic optimists, reason to be hopeful despite the nihilism surrounding the constant sobering barrages of news about brain decline. Are you getting used to the idea that, for a Vedic physician, the aging process for all organs is due to plaque, called *ama* in Sanskrit, the residue of inefficient digestion and metabolism? Indeed, gerontologists have confirmed that as we age, all our cells - not only our neurons - accumulate debris that cannot be cleared and which ultimately interferes with function.[186]

Four Ways to Lose your Marbles

From the perspective of a physician who is a wimp about his nervous system growing older ungracefully, there are four likely ways I could lose access to my brain's hard drive and CPU:

1. Treatable causes. The treatable causes of brain dysfunction, while relatively rare, are common enough to be worth ruling out with a few simple tests. Hypothyroidism and other hormonal imbalances, normal pressure hydrocephalus, remote untreated infections, vitamin B12 or folic acid deficiency, medications and drugs, and stress and depression are examples of a few. Doctors are occasionally embarrassed when they miss a treatable cause later diagnosed by the patient's sister-in-law. If you feel your brain is slipping, see your doctor. Sometimes just doing the blood tests, including a scan to see if there is atrophy or other brain changes, is enough to relieve your mind of its chief distraction, the fear of losing your intellect. Few diagnostic tests are as therapeutic!

2. Simple aging. The loss of short-term memory is usually due to aging for no good reason (Amnestic Mild Cognitive Impairment, aMCI). This is the memory loss middle-aged adults and seniors laugh about when they get together and which they fret about in private. aMCI fortunately does not decline into severe dementia, nor is it usually accompanied by other important mental disabilities. For aMCI, you need to follow the simple recommendations in this chapter.

3. Vascular dementias. These are largely preventable brain disorders caused by blockage of vessels or bleeding from vessels deep within the brain, causing mini-strokes. They account for 25% of dementia. They are preventable because they are found in people who have the same risk factors as for heart disease including high blood pressure, diabetes and smoking. To avoid these, follow the advice in the three previous chapters.

4. Alzheimer's disease. This represents 60% of serious dementias. Standard medicine says your main risks are a family history (10% of cases), being female

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and perhaps being mentally idle. Many neurologists still tell you that the main prevention is crossword puzzles and other activities that enhance mental sharpness. Sounds good; don't buy it. Ronald Reagan did not spend his life being mentally idle. Alzheimer's disease is a problem of ama accumulation, as understood from both the western and Vedic perspectives and requires drastic, long-term prevention through lifestyle modification and ama elimination. In this chapter, you will learn an Ayurvedic approach to Alzheimer's prevention that, although it requires some time and effort, is part of a bigger program for general health. This program is for people who have a strong family history of Alzheimer's disease or who feel they are mentally slipping in their thirties or forties and cannot afford to lose a single neuron.

A short list for keeping your spouse as a bridge partner

1. Attend, without distraction, to things that matter.
2. Meditate.
3. Don't worry, be happy.
4. Avoid hypertension and vascular disease.
5. Avoid unnecessary medications.
6. Eat your vegetables.
7. Take your herbs and spices.
8. Eliminate ama.

We should *analyze* these one at a time before your partner dumps you because you can't count trump.

1. Attend, without distraction, to things that matter. In several cultures, well-designed studies that followed older populations prone to mental decline show that some leisure cognitive activities reduce the expected deterioration. Mental activities like reading, and challenging games such as chess, checkers and bridge are helpful, but not enough. One physical activity, dancing, has proven even better, perhaps because it involves more focus. At McGill University, tango lessons were better than an equivalent time spent walking for improving motor coordination as well as cognition. When you dance you have to synchronize your movements with the music, coordinate with your partner and remember the steps. Some more passive activities, however, including watching television, writing[187] and group discussion did not help. [188,189] From the Vedic perspective, the critical ingredient to maintain brain youthfulness is engagement of the whole brain in complex, novel activities requiring an intention. You have to do new things to lay down new nerve pathways. Activities that simultaneously engage the brain's motor areas, emotions and intellect such as playing music, singing or dancing may be the best at this integration. Another study showed that people with rich social networks had a decreased risk of dementia. Participating in engaging activities with friends or family may be the best way to get your daily dose of meaningful cognitive exercise. More importantly to someone with an active healthy brain, however, is to culture the habit, while you are still young, of attending to one thing at a time with involvement of your senses, feelings and intellectual faculties.

2. Meditate. A group of Harvard researchers led by Ellen Langer randomized nursing home residents into groups that learned Transcendental Meditation (TM),

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mindfulness training, progressive muscle relaxation or no treatment at all. At the end of five years, the group practicing TM had improved word fluency, associated learning and cognitive flexibility, and had a higher survival rate.[190] Proper meditation allows intense impressions, which overshadow the mind, to be released. For a Vedic neurologist, forgetting is the critical link to achieving a better memory because dementia is not an issue of poor memory or recall. The issue is registration. Some people are astounded when demented 92-year-old Aunt Ida recounts events from 80 years ago as if it were yesterday, but neurologists see this phenomenon daily. The tougher mental task of registering or imprinting the impression was accomplished when Ida was twelve.

The first ability seniors lose is registration of new memories, like where you put your keys five minutes ago. Registering the new event involves new learning. Proper meditation improves the ability to forget, a critical function that liberates your mind from its preoccupations that prevent new registration. Like rebooting your computer to purge or free occupied RAM memory for new content, proper meditation frees us from useless impressions *(samskaras)* and preoccupations - the useless attention the nervous system devotes to those impressions. Without the natural tendency of the mind to reboot, such as in sleep or dreams, our awareness would soon be hopelessly cluttered. Even before our brains have aged, stresses and preoccupations make us lose the ability to shake off our unneeded impressions. Our brain is not free to register anew. Proper meditation has a physical effect on the brain itself, settling it to its quietest state, even while it remains alert. This state of restful alertness is different from sleeping and dreaming, and allows the brain to throw off or reorganize its impressions - both good and bad - more efficiently. The key to brain orderliness, like maintaining a home or office, involves constantly throwing out the old, and reorganizing the contents. Dreaming and grief help us reorganize, but only correct meditation helps us learn to properly forget. If you are feeling wimpy about one day finding yourself with a brain cluttered with impressions, like the house of a person with compulsive hoarding, learn meditation properly[191] and make it a regular practice.

3. Don't worry, be happy. Since registration of new impressions is the first and most critical cognitive faculty to go, avoid habits that prevent new imprinting. After intoxication and distractions (discussed above in #1 such as multitasking, distracting music, or conversations), the next best way to interfere with registering critical data is by being mentally preoccupied. Anxieties, complicated relationships, obsessions, compulsions, experiences of hopelessness and fears - all these are powerful distractions to our ability to imprint new data. The New England Centenarian Study has suggested that the ability to deal easily with stressors, i.e. getting over a problem and getting back to living, was one quality the oldest old have in common.[192] How do you gain this ability if it is not part of your natural makeup? Throwing off overshadowing impressions (samskaras) is the natural result, and even purpose, of yoga and Vedic medicine. This topic is openly addressed, or hidden like a child's medicine in ice cream, in nearly every chapter of this book.

4. Watch your blood pressure. Be vigilant about your risks for vascular disease. Every other part of your body can withstand considerable blood deprivation and survive just fine, such as when your leg "falls asleep" from a pinched blood flow. Your brain, unlike most other organs, will quickly die without a constant flow of nutrients and oxygen. Its blood flow gets priority over all the other organs including the heart muscle itself. In addition, the brain's delicate arteries and tissues are perfused with

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The Lost Art of Self Repair

284 Seiten, kart.
erschienen 2010

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