

MENTAL NOTES

A mind expanding e-newsletter from Mark Zust, *The Perceptionist*



Grow Your Brain – Part 1

March, 2009

“Feed your head.” *Grace Slick, Rock Diva, Jefferson Airplane/Jefferson Starship*

In the Sixties, “feeding your head” had a very different meaning which usually required munching on various illicit substances. Fortunately, the LSD-fueled era of Dr. Timothy Leary and novelist Tom Wolfe have been replaced with a healthier approach to expanding our consciousness through nutrition and smart living. There are dozens of books currently on the market that tout the latest in brain-altering diets in combination with physical and mental exercises. Search “brain health” on Google or Amazon.com and the number of books and articles are dizzying. Aging Boomers now understand that a fit body isn’t worth much without a healthy, strong mind. The books I recommend to all my clients, friends and family are *The Brain Trust Program* by Dr. Larry McCleary and *Making A Good Brain Great* by Dr. Daniel Amen. Both are brain surgeons with a knack for translating complex research on



brain functioning into real-world advice anyone can use. See below for useful tips from the good doctors. Both books state that important components of brain health are aerobic exercise and minimizing the daily intake of refined sugar and caffeine. Given that many Americans substitute sodas or “power drinks” for more sensible snacks, both docs worry that Alzheimer’s and Diabetes will be on the rise for generations to come. In his book *Keep Your Brain Alive*, Dr. Lawrence Katz promotes daily “neurobic” exercises that stimulate all the senses to help prevent memory loss and increase mental fitness. One tip: Keep a vial of orange or vanilla oil next to your night stand. Take a whiff before going to bed and upon waking. The benefit? Activating new neural pathways and conditioning your brain to no longer associate the smell of (and craving for) coffee as part of your morning ritual. It seems that we can teach our old brain new tricks after all.

Four easy ways to feed your brain :

- 1. Get enough sleep.** Even if you’re in great shape your body needs a minimum of 6 1/2 to 7 hours of uninterrupted sleep each night for your brain to function at maximum capacity. If you’re over 40, doctors advise you to sleep 7 to 8 hours. Start by sleeping 30 minutes longer for a week (not just on the weekend) and record how you feel. Chances are you’ll feel more refreshed, energetic and relaxed, which translates into being more alert and focused at work. Strive to go to bed at the same time each night and not vary your bedtime by more than a half hour.
- 2. Go fish.** You’ve probably read about the many heart benefits of Omega 3 fatty acids. Salmon, particularly Atlantic wild and Chinook salmon, are excellent sources. Omega 3s are also great for your brain, supplying highly unsaturated fat molecules that give the cell membranes in your brain and throughout your body the flexibility to function properly.
- 3. Go green.** While we know that spinach is the pick-me-up in a can that Popeye needed to be “strong to the finish”, the brain-building powers of spinach have only recently come to light. Like many other dark green leafy vegetables (kale, chard) and “colorful” fruits like strawberries and blueberries, spinach contains the antioxidant power to whip dangerous oxygen free radicals like Popeye whipped Bluto. Spinach contains compounds to improve memory, slow brain aging and even improve manual dexterity. Talk about a super food!
- 4. Get moving (but gently).** Just 15 to 20 minutes of aerobic exercise like brisk walking or climbing stairs three times a week will improve your heart as well as increase your brain’s capacity to absorb more oxygen, which is essential to growing new neurons. That’s right, your brain can physically grow and improve at any age. But go easy on the running. Although it’s terrific for cardio fitness, some tests have shown that the constant pounding on pavement or a running track bounces the brain against the skull and over time can be as devastating as a severe blow to the head. Consider aerobic alternatives such as swimming, biking, rowing or even ballroom dancing.

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