

untitled

By Ruth Ostrow

I'm sitting here in yet another course studying biology. The sweat is pouring from my brow as I try to digest what the teacher is saying. It's so hard, beyond hard. It has fallen into the category of downright intimidating, as the old brain ain't what she used to be.

And that's the point. Recently I wrote a sad tale about forgetfulness, alluding to the fact that I could hardly remember what day it was, let alone what I went to the supermarket for. I got more responses to that column than to any other as Australia reassured me I wasn't the only one floundering in the brain-cell department.

People sent in all sorts of remedies. But the most valuable, found on the prestigious Franklin Institute website, claims that the best way to retain memory and brain cells is to keep learning and pushing the brain beyond its capacity.

Muscles don't grow unless they feel humiliated into doing so. If you keep pushing a muscle beyond its scope, it will think: "I'm too weak to help her, so I'd better get stronger." It's the same with the brain. If you keep forcing synapses to work, keep forcing neuro-pathways to open up by flooding the brain with new information, suddenly there is growth.

"Even in old age [the human brain] can grow new neurons ... Most age-related losses in memory or motor skills simply result from inactivity and a lack of mental exercise and stimulation. In other words, use it or lose it!" says The Franklin Institute Online, which also concludes that increased intellectual activity during adulthood is especially protective against Alzheimer's.

Music, foreign languages, maths and problem-solving are all recommended, as are physical exercises that make the body do new things. I've chosen to learn physiology and anatomy because it ties in with my studies as a yoga teacher. But anything will do.

In this class the knee bone ain't connected to the thigh bone. The patella is connected to the femur, which is connected to the acetabulum. And my poor brain is about to blow a fu-fu valve!

But it's time to get over the shame of having become a mental weakling and dash to the brain gym. If you're sick of being called a "pea head" by your peers, then synaptic push-ups with intellectual weights is the best thing you can do for a saggy mind.

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