

STAY HEALTHY: Exercise Your Brain

Dr. Sultan Lakhani, Director of Psychiatry, VCUHS Department of Psychiatry was recently the keynote speaker at the VCU Dept. of Gerontology and School of Social Work Fall Symposium. Dr. Lakhoni's practice includes working with patients with dementia and staging Alzheimer's type dementia. His presentation was on healthy aging. He noted we have moved from aging gracefully to now focusing on aging as healthy as possible.

Dr. Lakhani related that nutrition and maintaining a healthy weight are important factors in healthy aging, as well as understanding the negative effect of alcohol on brain cells. Another component to healthy aging is staying connected to family and friends. Maintaining good physical and mental health is important. While we are all aware of these approaches to healthy aging, reminders like this bring us back to reality. Are we truly practicing healthy aging?

Scientific evidence suggests that the healthy lifestyle choices we make every day to improve our memory also promote physical health. We are more inclined to stay physically fit, enhance our relationships, maintain a healthy diet and follow other healthy lifestyle strategies when our minds are sharp. Dr. Gary Small, Director on the UCLA Center on Aging, has studied how to improve the brain and body fitness by focusing on four essential strategies of the healthy longevity lifestyle program; mental aerobics, physical fitness, stress management and a healthy diet.

Those individuals who practiced the four essential strategies of the healthy lifestyle program experienced improved memory performance and brain efficiency. Those who continued with the program also reported greater relaxation and benefits to their physical health. Many also lost weight and experienced a decline in their blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

Dr. Small points out that when we attempt to solve problems in a new way we may be strengthening the connections between our brain cells. When we exercise dendrites, which pass information from brain cell to brain cell, in new and creative ways their connections remain active. Without use they shrink. Any conscious effort to exercise your brain can potentially form new brain cell connections.

Dr. Small offers the following activities to consider for staying mentally sharp over the years.

- **Travel** – take a trip that involves activity or offers an opportunity to enrich the experience with an informative lecture.
- **Get Creative** – Explore creative pursuits such as oil painting which can stimulate the right, artistic side of the brain, which is especially important if you are the analytical, left-brained type of person.
- **Challenge yourself** – Take on more challenging mental pursuits. Try solving crossword puzzles or jigsaw puzzles that are more difficult.
- **Take on a new hobby** – People who engage in hobbies, new or old, are less likely to experience mental decline as they age than individuals who spend more of their spare time in front of a television.

- **Join a study group or book club** – This type of activity is a popular way to expand your mental horizons and at the same time enjoy the company of like-minded learners. If you are a solitary person, then study something new on your own.
- **Go back to school** – Check with schools of higher education on admission of part-time students of all ages. Intergenerational classes can enrich the experience for both the younger and older generation.
- **Flex the brain** – Mental aerobic exercises (brain teasers, puzzles, etc.) may improve the brain health while being lots of fun. Enjoy mentally challenging games like Scrabble or Trivial Pursuit.

It is never too late to start improving brain health or our physical health since we can boost our abilities at any age. Everyday lifestyle strategies can make a difference.

Article by Donna Gilman, Social Services at The Hermitage