



You Can Teach AN OLD DOG NEW TRICKS

BY BETH JOHNSON

Earlier this year, *Science Daily* reported that researchers showed for the first time that healthy older men and women can generate just as many new brain cells as younger people.² Related research says, "White matter in the older brain is more plastic than in the younger brain."¹

Until the 1960s, we thought that patterns in the brain were pretty fixed and unable to create new pathways," says Heather Donald, MS, CCC/SLP, Director of Rehabilitation Services at Oakwood

Village. Neuroscientists have long believed that older people have less of the neural flexibility, or plasticity, required to learn new things.

"Now we are learning that we can change the pathways and be the architects and builders to our brain into our 90s and beyond.

"For many, many years, we were oblivious to our tremendous creative capabilities. We had no idea that our brains were changing in response to our actions and attitudes every day of our lives. We unconsciously

and randomly shaped our brains and, thus, our future because we believed we had an immutable brain that was primarily genetically determined.

"The implications of neuroplasticity are extremely significant—we have the capability to keep our brain sharp, effective, and capable of learning new skills if we protect it from damage and provide it with stimulation and beneficial fuel."

What are some ways to induce neuroplasticity in our daily lives?

Fortunately, there are several. According to Heather, research looked at how we can continue to change our brains and keep them strong. There are six evidence-based strategies or practices that we can incorporate into our daily living: attitude, learning, exercise, diet, socializing, and rest.

ATTITUDE

Being grateful can reprogram your brain to begin to look for things to be grateful for.

LEARNING

As we age, choosing what we want to learn instead of what we have to learn can ignite the brain.

EXERCISE

Research shows that exercise increases blood flow to your brain and induces the growth of new brain cells.



DIET

Most people know that their dietary choices affect the health of their body. Heather points out that the brain consumes about 20 percent of the nutrients we ingest. What we eat has a significant impact on our neurotransmitters, the chemicals that carry messages between neurons across synapses.

SOCIALIZING

Making meaningful connections with others is not only helpful to our brains, but vital.

REST

Learning to still the mind is as important as stimulating the mind. Evidence now shows that practicing mindfulness and meditation decreases cortisol, helps to control blood sugar levels, regulates metabolism, reduces inflammation, and helps to maintain a strong memory for information.

The overall health of your brain is determined by many factors. Some we can control and others we cannot. Heather says, "Research shows that brain fitness and neuroplasticity can

positively impact our ability to fight disease and our ability to adapt and continue to alter our actual brain structure."

¹ Brown University. (2014, November 19). Many older brains have plasticity, but in a different place. *ScienceDaily*. sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/11/141119084947.htm

² Cell Press. (2018, April 5). Older adults grow just as many new brain cells as young people. *ScienceDaily*. sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/04/180405223413.htm

*Photographs provided by
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