



News Column for Week of July 20, 2020

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Staying Mentally Sharp

Most older people can remain intellectually sharp late into their lives, but doing so requires two things. First, believe in your ability to maintain mental alertness and remain optimistic and confident that you can. Next, regularly exercise your mental talents just as you need to exercise your body to stay in peak physical condition.

One of the greatest fears of many older people is the loss of mental competence. Although obviously a possibility for some, both middle-agers and elders often worry excessively about this occurring.

Besides being nerve-racking, the worrying can encourage the very behavior we fear: We believe we are becoming forgetful and then point to perfectly natural lapses in memory as proof that senility is setting in. Thus, too often, our fear of mental decline becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, sometimes at a surprisingly early age. Guard against this tendency both in yourself and among your friends and family.

As we grow older, we show some decline in what is called “explicit memory.” For example, you want to remember a name or fact, and try as you might, the memory refuses to come on demand. Also, with advanced age, distractions can be more of a problem, and the speed of processing information slows. Other kinds of memory show little or no decline with age.

Some of this process has to do with the learning processes that work best for us. If we are a visual learner, for example, then those things we see will stick with us better. If our preferred learning style is through auditory processes, then we may have a greater need to hear things to retain them. We need to remember that we have to learn something before we can remember it. When it comes to recalling names, for example, if we have never been good at remembering names, then we shouldn't be hard on ourselves if we don't remember them well in older age.

With frequent use and practice, older persons can significantly improve their cognitive functioning. Activities such as reading, word games and stimulating conversations aid our mental abilities.

Take one day at a time, expect the best, stretch yourself to achieve it, and appreciate the gift of a good mind. Remember that most of us are capable of far more than we realize.

Contact Barbara Stockebrand at the Yates Center Southwind Extension District Office at 620-625-8620 for more resources on keeping your mind sharp.