

Use it or Lose it – Part II

When my great aunt, Florence, died at 93 her body was frail but she was still very much “with it” mentally. Born in 1894, she lived through both world wars and saw numerous technological advances: the telephone, television, computers, bank machines. I was always very impressed with Florence. She was quite skilled with her hands; knitting, crochet, and needlepoint were just some of the handicrafts she did. She was an avid hockey fan, and watched the playoffs every year. She did crosswords, kept up with the news and would happily start a conversation (in either official language) with a complete stranger if she thought they had something to talk about. In short she stayed active mentally, physically, and emotionally all her life.

To keep the mind fit we need to exercise the memory, language, logic and reasoning centres of the brain. Let's start with some basics.

If you don't already, try working on puzzles (crosswords for language and Sudoku for logic). Take up model-making or knitting. Both make use of detailed instructions that you will need to decipher and there's quite a bit of math in knitting. If you know more than one language get ongoing exposure to the one you hear least (try internet radio or on-line foreign newspapers). Another excellent option for keeping mentally fit is taking up a musical instrument. Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) studies have shown that no other activity uses more areas of the brain simultaneously. Musicians must read notes from the page, convert them into physical movement to play the instrument, listen to the resulting sounds and make adjustments to the sound quality as they go, a feedback loop requiring many skills.

To exercise memory we need to stop letting machines remember everything for us. Modern technology allows us to store phone numbers and passwords. We rely on spell check and calculators and we let calendaring software keep track of birthdays for us. It's no wonder our memories go to mush. Try memorize the ten phone numbers you use the most and then take them out of speed dial. Make a note of those words that always seem to come up when you do a spell check and learn to spell them correctly.

Lastly, consider learning to meditate. Meditation brings a host of benefits to both the body and mind. It has been widely studied and it's positive effects are so great that it really should be practiced by everyone. Meditation has been shown to improve cardiovascular function, increase serotonin production, boost the immune system, and reduce anxiety and stress. It also improves focus and concentration. One study has even credited meditation with helping long-time practitioners live as much as ten years longer than non-meditators. Best of all, meditation is free, can be done anywhere, and needs no special equipment. Meditation is easy to learn and some studies indicate that it can be effective with as little as ten minutes of practice daily. There are a number of meditative techniques you can try; everything from reciting a mantra (or special phrase) to quiet mind or “mindfulness” meditation. An abundance of resources are available on line for learning meditation and most major cities have several organizations that offer free meditation courses.

Keeping the mind fit will help you stay active and connected to those you love and the world around you.

Enjoy your practice.