

# TO YOUR HEALTH

Carleton-Willard Village Out-Patient Clinic • 100 Old Billerica Rd., Bedford, MA 01730

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## BRAIN FITNESS

by Barbara Chenoweth, NP

It's a rare person who does not worry about losing their memory, and many people wonder if forgetting names means the beginning of a serious memory problem. Most of us are aware that serious memory problems like the dementias occur with greater frequency as we grow older. However, getting older does not automatically lead to serious memory problems. For this reason, researchers have been very interested in discovering why some people develop serious problems while others do not. As a result, a growing body of research literature focuses on ways that a person can avoid damage to the brain and boost their memory performance.

Since we have no control over our genetic make-up, we can only hope to modify the things that are under our control. It is well-known that long-term stress concerning finances, health, relationships and other adversities increases the risk of physical and mental health problems and is linked to atrophy (shrinking) of the brain regions involved in thinking and memory, (*Mind, Mood & Memory*, Massachusetts General Hospital, (MGH) May 2013).

Experts at MGH believe that developing strategies that build resilience can help protect the brain by allowing a person to react to stressful situations with balance and flexibility. According to Maurizio Fava, MD, Executive Vice Chair of the Department of Psychiatry at MGH, instead of struggling to control external events, learning how to control your internal response to those events can help protect you from overwhelming stress. Developing

resilience, the ability to bounce back from stressful events, requires a flexibility to "sidestep" negative reactions that increase stress. For many people this

does not happen naturally, but it can be learned. Dr. Fava believes that we can restructure our thoughts so that we can become more resilient in the face of challenges and better able to adapt to changing circumstances.

He suggests several attributes that can be nurtured to improve our ability to bounce back from stressful life events:

- **Flexibility:** find new ways to respond, adapt or change expectations. For example, say "no" when you are feeling overwhelmed from multiple demands.
- **Social Connectedness:** develop closer relationships with friends and family, especially positive people.
- **Optimism:** focus on what can be done, rather than what can't; emphasize any positive aspect of a stressful event.
- **Humor:** find humor in challenging situations to help relieve tension and anxiety.
- **Acceptance:** learn to live with uncertainty; rather than resisting change, try to understand that it is inevitable. Make the best of the situation and move on.
- **Realism:** face stressful situations without illusions; respond to reality.
- **A Sense of Purpose:** establish personal goals to give meaning to your life and to help you feel a sense of accomplishment in spite of occasional setbacks.
- **Decisiveness:** try to think things through and take action to avoid feeling helpless.

- **Perspective:** instead of being swept away by immediate circumstances, take a broader view of your situation; reframe stressful situations as opportunities for growth; adopting a spiritual or philosophical view gives perspective and diminishes the negative impact of stressful events.

(*Learn Resilience to Avoid the Consequences of Stress, Mind, Mood & Memory*, MGH, May, 2013)

In addition to developing resilience, mental and physical activity continue to be recommended as ways to enhance and improve the memory. A recent study reported in *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 2013, found improvement in memory when inactive older people participated in mental activity, either computer work or educational DVDs, for one hour, three times a week *and* also participated in physical activity, either aerobic exercise or stretching and toning classes, for one hour, three times a week. There was no difference in outcome between the type of mental or physical activity. All improved. The study suggested that moderate increases in both mental and physical activity, no matter what form the activity takes, can lead to improved performance in memory and thinking, (*Mind, Mood & Memory*, MGH, June 2013).

It is now known that the brain can regenerate and grow new cells. It's not true that we are losing brain cells every day! In fact the brain has been found to be far more flexible than was previously believed. This new knowledge has opened the door for research into ways to increase the brain's capacity. Memory loss no longer has to be hopelessly accepted. We can keep our brain fit by mental stimulation, coping effectively with stress, and physical exercise...all under our control!

# Announcements

## BEDFORD DRUG PICK-UP

The Bedford Police will again pick-up expired and unused medications on Friday, August 9, 2013. You can drop off any prescription or over-the-counter unused/expired medications at the Clinic between 8:30 am and 12 noon on Friday, August 9, 2013. Unfortunately, we can only accept the medicines during these times and on the date of pick-up.

## SATURDAY CLINIC

*The Clinic will be closed on Saturday, August 24. It will be open all other Saturdays in August and on Labor Day, September 2 from 9:00 am to 12:00 pm. Look for updates in BITS.*

