

Peak performance

The middle-aged brain is in its prime

While I was dining with several girlfriends, one of them asked, “Hey, do you ever wonder where your brain goes when you hit middle age?”

She went on to describe her most recent experience. “Last weekend, I was standing with the refrigerator door open wondering what happened to the eggs I thought I had just bought. I couldn’t find them anywhere. So I hopped back in my car and headed to the grocery store to buy another dozen since I had planned to make cookies for my daughter’s Sunday school class. Two days later my son says to me, ‘Mom, I didn’t know you could freeze eggs in their shells?’ I looked at him perplexed, ‘What are you talking about?’ To which he replied, ‘There are a dozen eggs in the freezer.’ Mystery solved!”

She continued, “I’m a business owner with 35 employees, I’ve bucked the economy, said ‘See ya!’ to my banker and I can’t remember where I put the eggs – go figure!”

An explosion of laughter erupted from the table as we each owned up by contributing our own story.

Curiosity got the best of me shortly after that conversation prompting me to download a bunch of articles and order several books on the latest neuro-scientific data about the middle-aged brain.

After synthesizing this research from the scientific community, I’m pleased to report that our brains don’t shrink with age nor do we “lose” our minds. Information simply gets buried making certain types of data like names, dates and grocery lists harder to access and remember. In fact, contrary to popular belief, peak cognitive performance actually happens between 40- and 60-years young – not in

our 20s as originally thought.

Our middle-aged brain is in fact smart, competent and capable. Barbara Strauch, author of *The Secret Life of the Grown Up Brain*, says, “The great news is that you are smarter than you were in your 20s and 30s, you’re just smarter differently.”

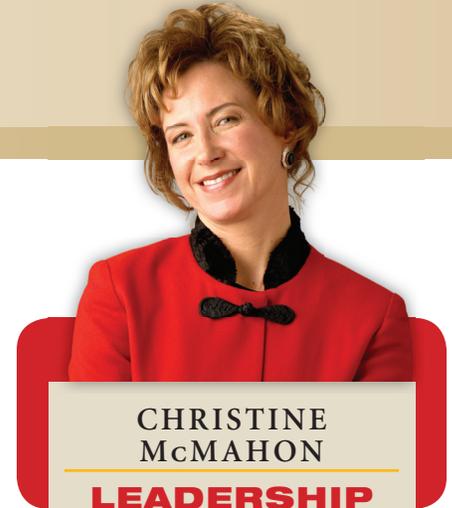
According to Strauch, “Recent findings show how the middle-aged brain – rather than giving up and giving in – adapts. As we age, our brain power expands rather than contracts when solving problems.”

Researchers at Duke University have found that middle-aged people begin to

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use two sides of their brains instead of one – a trick call bilateralization. This adaptability helps us assess a situation more accurately, get to the key point of a discussion faster than younger colleagues, and respond with keen insight.

Strauch’s research included the Seattle Longitudinal Study, a research gold standard because it tracked the same people over time. Conducted by Sherry Willis, a psychologist at Pennsylvania State University and her husband, L. Warner Schaie, they have systematically tracked the mental prowess of 6,000 people for more than 40 years. Their study found that “participants functioned better on cognitive tests in middle age, on average, than they did at any other time they were



tested. In four out of the six categories tested – vocabulary, verbal memory, spatial orientation, and inductive reasoning – people performed best, on average, between the ages of 40 to 65.”

Speed is compromised for performance in middle-age. Research by Dr. Neil Charness at Florida State University shows that peak performance has less to do with inborn genius than the commitment to deliberate practice. “With tasks that required speed, middle-aged people

demonstrated lower performance whereas tasks that required knowledge, middle-aged people scored very well,” he said.

The unflinching tenacity to develop a skill, regardless of age, is what leads to high performance. In fact, research is proving that the more you stretch your brain, the greater your ability to retain learning capability and memory power.

A case in point: Chesley B. “Sully” Sullenberger, a commercial airline pilot with 40 years of experience in the aviation industry, crash-landed the US Airways flight 1549 into the Hudson River in New York last year. With two engines out, Sully minimized damage to the aircraft and its 155 passengers and crew by deciding to land in the river. The traffic

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controller presented him with other options which he assessed to be more dangerous. Passengers describe the impact as “not a whole lot more than a rear-end collision that threw you into the seat in front of you.”

Sully, who was considered a hero for landing the plane safely in the river, demonstrated what researchers call “middle-aged wisdom.”

In his book, “The Other Brain,” R. Douglas Fields indicates that, “We do know our brain circuits are being molded and refined according to the environment. We develop the brain we need.” What that means is a decline in mental capability is

merely an illusion.

This research offers important implications regarding leadership capability. While a middle-aged person may experience an occasional mental hiccup (remembering names or accessing certain words), when it comes to problem-solving, extracting the key points from an argument, making strategic decisions or crafting solutions to almost any problem, the middle-aged leader stands tall when evaluated on intrinsic value. ■

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