

By Nancy K. Schlossberg

Keep learning, activate your brain, meet new people, learn new skills and continue your intellectual curiosity. That's what it's all about.

- Mildred, a retired woman in her 80s, was becoming isolated until someone connected her to a local university that offered courses for seniors. Now, Mildred attends at least two classes a semester and looks forward to seeing her new friends.
- Larry, a retired roofer, wants to get an associate's degree. He is exploring the local community college.
- Natalie worked all her adult life and never had time for fun and games. Now retired, she wants to learn to play bridge and have fun.
- Al, a retired doctor, attends a lifelong learning program that focuses on current events and international issues.

We see that people engage in lifelong learning for multiple reasons, in a variety of settings. According to a Pew Research survey, adult learning is big business. But no matter what the reason for learning or where it takes place, an underlying benefit is that it will maintain and increase your brain functioning, often referred to as your "brain reserve."

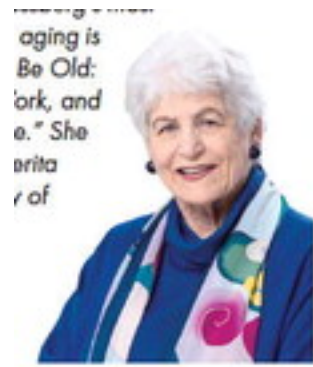
According to the Encyclopedia of Clinical Neuropsychology, brain reserve is "the brain's ability to effectively manage the increasing changes in normal aging." As I understand it, we need to keep our brain flexible so that as we age we maintain our intellectual capacity. We can do that in a number of ways – tackle crossword puzzles, play bridge, dance or volunteer. It is all about keeping active and engaged!.

What You Can Do

1. Take seriously the information about maintaining and increasing your brain reserve. Most recommendations include a nutritious diet (often the Mediterranean diet), regular exercise and intellectual challenges.
2. Structure your own lifelong learning program. For some, it includes taking courses, for others building skills, for others setting up a personal project like reading all of a particular author's work. The specifics are less important than having a lifelong learning goal and being consistent as you structure your experience.

In Southwest Florida, we are indeed fortunate to have the Friendship Centers, which provides opportunities to have fun as you learn.

Nancy K. Schlossberg's most recent book on aging is "Too Young To Be Old: Love, Learn, Work, and Play as You Age." She is professor emerita at the University of Maryland.



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