

Lazy Neurons

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A friend came over for dinner the other night and in the course of conversation, the word 'longetivity' emerged from my mouth.

"You mean longevity," he corrected, laughing. Five minutes later, I did it again with 'astronomist'. And we were only drinking sweet iced tea.

Horrified I'd used words in conversation that don't exist, I got to thinking about all the cool technology that enables us NOT to think. Whenever I throw a word on the computer screen that isn't really a word, spell check not only catches it, but inserts my intended word. And try to do math without a calculator? Fuggetaboutit. I tried dividing 12 into 100 the other day and had to enlist a fifth-grader to help. Even my appliances enable me not to think. The microwave has one-push buttons for popcorn, frozen dinners and baked potatoes. The clothes washer has a dial for whites, colors, and darks. For that matter, my car tells me when to stop for fuel and change its oil.

Even Jack—my portable GPS navigation system—tells me exactly where to go. I can drive from my home to anywhere in the country (and back again) without looking at a road atlas. Jack even gives me turn-by-turn directions to nearby restaurants, shopping outlets and post offices. He's really amazing and doesn't raise his voice if I take a detour or miss a turn. He simply recalculates. I may be falling in love with Jack. But back to my misfiring neurons.

Scared that my brain cells may have become outrageously lazy, I shared my fears with a good friend, Lisa, who is an avid fan of crossword puzzles. She suggested that I start exercising my brain. Just like an early morning walk or a yoga class at the gym, she said, doing a crossword puzzle (or some other type of mental workout) is vital to good health. Working a crossword every morning would kick start my brain, she told me.

I'm quite happy to kick start my cerebrum with a morning cup of java loaded with cream, and I use the organic version to make myself feel better about the calories. But undeterred, Lisa explained that I could do crosswords at lunchtime or at night before bed. It's important to challenge both the mind and the body, she continued, until I changed the subject by challenging her to salt the margarita glasses.

Granted, Lisa is not a medical professional and doesn't have any sort of fancy letters after her name, but she is always perky and I've never heard her utter a word that doesn't exist. She must be doing something right to keep her brain healthy.

I was going to get a comment from one of my hometown's leading neurologists on the matter, but they were too busy to return my phone calls. And making a doctor appointment just to ask a research question, I was told by an uppity receptionist, could be construed as insurance fraud.

Even though I'm not into crossword puzzles, I've decided to listen to my good friend and make it a point to stimulate a neuron or two. Why don't you join me? Try that silly sudoku thing, work a jigsaw puzzle, take a continuing education course or immerse yourself in a fabulous book. Deviate from your normal day-to-day routine. After all, scientists agree that most humans have much more brain capacity than they put to use. I'm just hoping that my brain—once stimulated with mental exercise—will stop inventing words. If not, I'll have to learn how to bluff, like you can do in scrabble... *of course it's a word!*

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