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STUDY: PUBLIC UNDERRATES THE IMPORTANCE OF BRAIN HEALTH

The good news about brain health: Nearly nine in 10 Americans think it is possible to improve brain fitness, and most say people's thinking abilities should be checked routinely.

The bad news: Only one in 10 Americans set brain health at the top or in second place as the most important health issue for people their age.

These are the key findings of a new poll by Harris Interactive of 1,000 people ages 42 and older living in the United States. The survey results, conducted for the American Society on Aging (ASA) and sponsored by MetLife Foundation, were released in Washington, D.C., Sept. 12.

BRAIN CHECKUPS

Titled *Attitudes and Awareness of Brain Health*, the survey found that nine in 10 people interviewed believe it is very important or somewhat important for individuals to have their thinking abilities examined periodically, just as they have physical health checkups. Yet, merely 3% of participants placed brain fitness atop their list of health concerns on which people their age need current information, and 7% selected brain health as their second choice. Leading respondents' primary health concerns were heart disease (31%), cancer (26%) and diabetes (15%). The report noted, "Although few people rate brain health as a relative priority, most of us anticipate that worries about memory are just a few years into the future."

That so few respondents list brain fitness among their highest health concerns "underscores the lack of general awareness and understanding of the human brain and brain health," stated Paul D. Nussbaum, a clinical neuropsychologist specializing in aging and coeditor of the American Psychological Association's 2005 publication "Clinical Neuropsychology: A Pocket Handbook for Assessment."

He emphasized that many scientists now regard the human brain "to be a highly dynamic and constantly reorganizing system capable of being shaped positively across the entire lifespan." This understanding of the brain's plasticity, he said, "contrasts with traditional ideas of the human brain being a fixed and essentially limited system that only degrades with advanced age."

Nussbaum continued, "The human brain should be approached and treated the same way our nation has dealt with cardiac health." The United States, he went on, "has no policy or practice in place that underscores the importance of understanding the basics of our brain." At the same time, little attention is devoted to understanding "this miraculous part of our being," he said, while "there exists a quiet hope that brain disease will not affect us personally. Research on the human brain indicates it is time to become more proactive with lifelong pursuit of brain health."

EDUCATING BOOMERS

Concurring with Nussbaum was Gene D. Cohen, director of the Center on Aging, Health and Humanities at George Washington University, Washington, D.C., and author of *The Mature Mind* (New York City: Basic Books, 2005). "As a society, we need to enhance public education that informs aging baby boomers and older adults alike about what each person can do starting today to have a positive influence on the destiny of their own brain health," said Cohen, who was also the founding chief of the Center on Aging at the National Institute of Mental Health.

Cohen said it's a good sign that 88% of the people in the survey believe their brain fitness can be improved, and that more than half said it can be improved a lot. Furthermore, he was encouraged to see that those surveyed find more value in activities that require mental exercise, such as doing crossword puzzles, than taking supplements, such as hormones, or herbs like Ginkgo biloba.

The study demonstrates that the "majority of people who intentionally seek to keep their brains fit engage in a mix of mentally stimulating activities," Cohen said. Asked to list three activities they perform for brain fitness, for example, most Americans surveyed (84%) reported spending time in activities known to be good for brains. Two-thirds (68%) said they engage in artistic or creative projects. Also, the number who said they read (48%) outstripped those who said they watch television (10%) for their brain's sake.

According to the report, it is very good news that respondents' ideas about the kinds of activities that improve mental fitness correspond to recommendations from the research community. At least 60% of the respondents rated the following seven activities as very useful: avoiding tobacco, eating fresh fruits and vegetables, doing crossword puzzles, reducing stress, limiting alcoholic drinks to one per day or fewer, spending time with family and friends, seeing the doctor regularly and working with numbers.

PHYSICAL, SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

Many of those interviewed are also aware that brain health is linked to physical fitness. Among the respondents, 44% said they are keeping physically active. For slightly less than half (45%) of these active individuals, exercise is a daily commitment. Top choices among physical activities for brain health are walking (57%), exercising at home or in a gym (55%), and swimming, doing aerobics or playing a sport (51%).

Many of the activities recognized as very useful for brain health involve interacting with other people. Nearly six in 10 respondents (58%) identify participating in discussion groups and taking a class or leading a group as very useful. Also highly regarded are working or volunteering (51%) and learning a new language (49%). More than one-third (39%) of those surveyed consider playing board games or singing and acting in a play (also 39%) to be very useful as well.

More than 90% of those polled scored their brain fitness as good or very good; only 3% rated their cognitive fitness as poor. The high level of self-reported brain fitness did not vary among age groups in the study. However, 58% of respondents reported having discussed their memory, mostly with family and friends, but also with medical professionals, clergy or someone at a senior center or program for older adults.

Almost three-quarters (72%) of those interviewed considered medical professionals to be the best source of information and advice for memory-related concerns. The media was second (59%), with computers and the Internet leading the way, followed closely by print media.

The report also revealed that although 74% of survey respondents would advise close friends or family to confer with a health professional, "We do not appear to take our own advice." Slightly more than one-third of the interviewees (37%) have turned to doctors or nurses about brain fitness.

START TODAY

"What we learned from the poll was surprising and encouraging. The data challenge us to consider how we as a nation should approach brain fitness and what every person can do, starting today, to take good care of our own cognitive capacities," observed ASA President and CEO Gloria Cavanaugh.

"This study will help us all in identifying realistic opportunities to lifelong healthy living, separating perception and practice," said MetLife Foundation President Sibyl Jacobson.

Attitudes and Awareness of Brain Health is available in PDF format from the ASA website at www.asaging.org/mindalert. ❖