

Reading Fiction - How it Enriches Brain Functioning

The human brain seems to hum along quite nicely, and without too much effort or complaint, thank you, just using established patterns and routine. However, learning expert and bestselling author Dr. Brian E. Walsh suggests that it can easily do so much better with novelty and random activity added to help build neuronal connections. "In school we had to memorize all sorts of stuff, good for training our young minds, but just memorizing poems, formulae, dates and suchlike wasn't alone enough to enable us to appreciate literature, wonder at science, or gain historical perspective."

We are not stuck with a static brain, nor are we necessarily stuck with a deteriorating brain. Neuroscientists have discovered within the past twenty years that an adult brain can regenerate brain cells. Asked about dementia, Walsh says that almost seventy percent of brain ageing is controllable, through mental and physical exercise, along with diet. American neuroscientist Dr. Steven Miller, from the Scientific Learning Corporation said, "The things you do, how much you write, what you do to challenge your brain, actually decrease the chances of age-related memory loss."

In his "Unleashing Your Brilliance" book, Walsh maintains that curiosity is the key to quality learning. To grow, the human brain needs to be challenged. We've discovered most of what we know about how the brain learns in the past decade, including that the pleasure center of the brain responds strongly to the unexpected, and thus, that novelty can be a strategic tool for training the brain.

What does this have to do with reading fiction? Recent research at Baylor College of Medicine and Emory University has helped explain why some people crave the unexpected. Experiments have shown the brain's reward pathways responds more strongly to unexpected than expected stimuli. This may help explain aspects of addictive behavior such as drug-taking and gambling, risky decision-making, participation in extreme sports, and yes, the joy of reading fiction. In learning new material, the brain is challenged. That's a good thing because, of all our organs, the brain is the only one that will continue to grow and develop if properly nourished and stimulated. The more it is used, the better it becomes.

Walsh says that mental stimulations make brain cells generate new extensions, resulting in richer information processing. He explains, "Reading fiction, especially ranging across authors, pushes our boundaries as we vicariously experience fresh scenarios and identify with the characters. No wonder they call them novels." Forcing us to create the scenes, the look of the characters, the smells, and the sounds, and prodding our emotions, reading fiction stimulates all of our senses and tweaks our brain. Reading does this so much more than does simply watching someone else's interpretation on film or in a play.

Asked how this translates into the real world, Walsh says that it shows up in greater creativity, and adds "Smart business today looks for innovative thinkers, who can recognize changes in market patterns, who strive for better processes and procedures. Progressive companies seek leaders, not just followers."

So, what's the secret for keeping that brain active? Walsh's advice? Stay curious, collaborate with others for different perspective, embrace chance opportunities, and push the boundaries.

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About the Author

Bestselling author and international speaker, Brian E. Walsh retired from a 30-year management career to return to formal study. Within four years he achieved his Ph.D. His book, "Unleashing Your Brilliance" is available at <http://www.UnleashingBrilliance.com>