Being Bilingual May Protect the Brain and Make You Smarter

Additionally, research has shown that people who play musical instruments, dance, or read regularly may be less likely to suffer brain deterioration. Activities like doing crossword puzzles or playing board games may also help. And, of course, exercise can play an important role in keeping the body and mind in tip-top condition, which will help stem the tide of debilitating maladies as one grows older.

This latest study at York University helps to bolster the theory that language skills have a protective effect. Dr. Ellen Bialystok and colleagues at York University used a wide variety of tests to assess the cognitive skills of all those involved in the study. Vocabulary skills, nonverbal reasoning ability, and reaction time were all tested.

Half of the volunteers were from Canada and spoke only English. The other half came from India and were fluent in both English and Tamil. The volunteers were similar in that they were all educated to the college-degree level and were all middle-class.

During the testing it was determined that the people who were fluent in English and Tamil responded faster than those who were fluent in just English. This applied to all age groups. The researchers also found that the bilingual volunteers were much less likely to suffer from the mental deterioration associated with old age.

“The bilinguals were more efficient at all ages tested and showed a slower rate of decline for some processes with aging. It appears...that bilingualism helps to offset age-related losses,” the researchers said.

In another study done by researchers at University College London in 2004, it was discovered that studying other languages alters gray matter in the brain. It happens the way exercise builds muscles in the body. People who learn a second language early in life build more advanced brain gray matter than those who learn later in life. Gray matter processes information from the sensory organs or from other gray matter regions. It is in the cerebral cortex, the central nervous system’s major component made up of nerve and glial cells, capillaries, and short nerve-cell extensions.

The London researchers made brain scans of three groups of people: those who did not speak a second language, those who learned a second language before age five, and those who learned a second language between age 10 and 15. The density of the left inferior parietal cortex of the brain was greater among bilinguals. And the effects were particularly prominent among those who learned earlier in life. Thus, according to information evidenced by this study, bilinguals are smarter.

Bilingualism has taken root in many parts of the world. Indeed, in Europe most people speak three to four languages. On this side of the Atlantic, however, bilingualism was never of great interest.

New York Times education writer Joseph Berger stated, “The United States, often fiercely chauvinistic and sometimes outright isolationist, has never considered the ability to speak a foreign language an essential talent.”

It was previously assumed by many in the US that the rest of the world was going to learn English and we didn’t have to learn the world’s languages. But now the world is rapidly becoming a different place than it was even 50 years ago.

The Modern Language Association found that college language course enrollments increased 13% between 2002 and 2006. Students of Arabic increased 127%. Changes are also taking place in public education. Fairfax County, Virginia, for instance, a Washington, DC, suburb with 165,000 students, is expanding foreign language instruction to all 137 elementary schools. In 25 of them children might get Spanish, Japanese, Arabic, Chinese, and French for 30 minutes twice a week. Other schools have immersion programs with math, science, and health taught in a foreign language.

Bilingualism may be a great help in protecting the brain from the onslaught of old age and keep your brain sharper...
and, therefore, smarter. It is also, according to Berger, a tremendous strategy for "weaving together communities splintered along class, race, and linguistic lines."

Thirty-one-year-old Sherry Smith, living in Shanghai, came to a stunning conclusion in an interview for Good magazine, enlightening us to the fact that "the number of people learning English in China is larger than the entire population of the United States." Unless we get with it, "there's going to be more English gray matter over there than there is here."