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FIVE BRAIN-HEALTH FACTORS

Five factors are critical for optimizing brain health. These include:

Socialization: People should try to stay connected to their communities and involved with others in a personally meaningful ways. Studies indicate that those who are isolated and segregated have a higher risk for dementia. Recent research also suggests the feeling of loneliness relates to risk of dementia through increased stress and altered blood flow.

Physical Activity: The human brain demands 25% of the blood from each heartbeat. Research has demonstrated the brain-health effects of walking daily, aerobic exercise, dance and other physical activities. These activities enhance cerebrovascular blood flow so necessary for healthy brains.

Mental Stimulation: Beginning in infancy, brains desire mental stimulation. Research indicates the positive effects on brain health of new learning, such as language development (including sign language), increased IQ, reading, writing, puzzle and board-game play, computer-based cognitive exercises and travel. Each person struggles with performing a list of activities. Often these are the activities that present people with the novel and complex challenges associated with stimulating the cortex and building brain reserve.

Nutrition: The field of dietary neurosciences has emerged. Research indicates foods rich in Omega-3 fatty acids, such as certain fish and walnuts, and antioxidants (vitamins A, C and E) promote the health of brains, which contain at least 50% fat. Fruits and vegetables continue to be some of the best brain-health foods. Reducing the intake of processed foods, saturated fats and elimination of trans-fatty acids also is encouraged. Experts also suggest reducing daily calories, and eating 80% of one's usual portions at each meal is a practical goal for achieving this.

Spirituality: Slow down! Research shows that animals exposed to environments that are too stimulating demonstrate slowed brain development. Stress has also proved to adversely affect animal brains, and recent research suggests similar negative outcomes for humans. Daily prayer, regular participation at a formalized place of worship, meditation, and relaxation procedures represent examples of spiritual activities that promote general health and help us to slow down. ❖

—Paul David Nussbaum