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Brain Health and Human Civilization: A View into the 22nd Century

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The human brain is the single greatest, most magnificent and complicated system ever designed. This 3-to-4-pound miracle sitting within our skulls is responsible for our every thought, emotion and behavior: Our very identity is the product of our brain. It is both curious and encouraging that the human brain has finally made its way onto the radar screen of the American psyche.

With the realization that the human brain has “plasticity” and can be shaped by environmental input across the lifespan, we may develop our brain from a health perspective. Brain health, though relatively new, has emerged as the hottest healthcare topic in our society. Brain health is built on the foundation of “brain reserve,” a cognitive theoretical term that refers to the brain’s ability to build new neural circuitry that is thought to delay onset of neurodegenerative diseases.

THE BRAIN HEALTH LIFESTYLE

My work focuses on lifestyle, specifically a brain health lifestyle promoted as a proactive, comprehensive and integrated approach that can facilitate brain reserve. This lifestyle begins in the womb and is a lifelong approach that includes five critical domains: physical activity, mental stimulation, socialization, spirituality and nutrition. The brain health lifestyle also includes research-based activities, which are organized into one of these five major domains.

Today, our society is particularly focused on the health benefits of lifestyle. Surveys of baby boomers have consistently found that memory loss is a leading fear and, as more baby boomers become caregivers of loved ones suffering from dementia, there is a growing demand for tangible methods and products to help keep our brains healthy and to delay dementia onset.

Brain health lifestyle provides a tangible approach, and its success is based on three simple principles: people must first learn the basics of the human brain; they must be told why changing their behavior will promote brain health; and the information must be personally relevant.

Regarding the third principle, my brain health lifestyle seeks to not only delay onset of neurodegenerative disease, but to help individuals maintain access to his or her life story, that which needs to be shared with your next great generation of little ones. It does not get any more personal than that!

BRAIN HEALTH AND NEURAL ENERGIES

We know very little about the human brain—and we always underestimate its capacity. The human brain truly represents the next (and perhaps last) great frontier of exploration. I believe that one day we will understand how to use our brains to fix the maladies of our bod-

ies. I believe that the human brain will communicate with other brains without the need for speech. I further believe that with appropriate investment of time, energy and money into learning about the brain, we will discover that most of the answers to our questions lie within the folds and flaps of the human cortex.

We humans still are too primitive to understand this. Our future will be dominated by the power of the human brain: The ability to fully tap into our brain capacity will unleash an entirely new society and way of life. I refer to this awakening of human brain potential as “neural energies.” The intellectual and applied advancements made from unleashing neural energies will redefine civilization and re-cast our fundamental way of life in terms we cannot yet imagine. ❖

An international leader on brain health lifestyle, Dr. Paul D. Nussbaum is a clinical neuropsychologist and adjunct associate professor of neurological surgery at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. His most recent books include Save your Brain (New York, N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 2010) and Your Brain Health Lifestyle (Tarentum, Pa.: Word Association, 2009). In 2007, Nussbaum received ASA’s Gloria Cavanaugh Award for excellence in training and education in the field of aging. For more information about brain health, visit www.paulnussbaum.com or e-mail Dr. Nussbaum at drnuss@zoominternet.net.