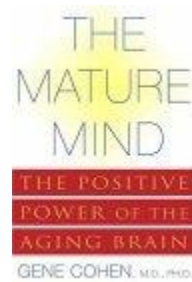


Book Reviews

The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain by Gene D. Cohen



reviewed by Judith Helburn

Cohen, Gene D. *The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain*. Basic Books, 2005. ISBN 0465012043.

Good news for Old Dogs. Life isn't over until it is over. Gene Cohen tells us that our brains do not calcify. They not only can grow new brain cells, but recent studies show that as we age, we can use both sides of our brains in harmony for decision making. The accelerated interest of older adults in **life review** appears to be an example of bilateral involvement of the brain.

Cohen has conducted studies of more than 3,000 older adults using in-depth interviews and questionnaires over a number of years, and has identified four distinct developmental phases of late life: midlife reevaluation, liberation, summing up and encore. *The Mature Mind* brings us the conclusions of his studies along with results of other recent brain research. He introduces the concept of developmental intelligence which, "...is the degree to which a person has manifested his or her unique neurological, emotional, intellectual and psychological capacities." In other words, how well a person has grown up. There is a greater acceptance of life's realities as we age, a greater sense of self, and a long-term perspective. Think of how you reacted emotionally when you were younger. Then, think of how you react now. This is not "just emotional maturity." It is a physical change in how messages go to and from the reptilian brain stem and the cerebral cortex.

We have been around longer than those younger than us; therefore, we have had more time to learn. Learning actually causes physical changes in the brain. When you perceive something, such as the scent of a rose, constellations of neurons in a specific

part of your brain receive a charge. All the associations you have had with "rose" rise up. The more often the perception appears, the more permanent a pattern of connections becomes. The brain is rewiring its dendrites, cell bodies, axons and synapses as it is stimulated. An important issue arises: *that the more complex one's constellations are [the more one is actively learning], the more likely it is to resist degradation*. This sense of mastery boosts the immune system as well.

In his chapter, "Harnessing Developmental Intelligence," Cohen expands his views. "The more we know, the more we realize how much we *don't* know." We are less likely to jump to premature conclusions. What he sees as most common in those in the second half of life is the following:

- being comfortable with oneself,
- having good judgment,
- living life to the fullest,
- telling one's story,
- continuing to discover and change and
- remaining hopeful.

It is a wonder that the brain has no known limit for memory storage. As mentioned before, "memories reside in the patterns of connectivity..." "[e]xperience rearranges the connections between brain cells." Think of several hundred people in a football stadium, each holding either a red or a white card. They can form hundreds of words or designs by following the leader's directions. Multiply that by billions and you have an example of how we remember.

Cohen suggests the following for improving health in retirement

- Play games and do puzzles
- Participate in a dinner and video or book discussion group
- Travel to someplace new, near or far
- Learn about an unfamiliar subject [like the brain]
- Explore the hobby or craft section of a bookstore for new ideas
- Volunteer
- Consider part time work
- Correspond with family and friends
- Develop a journal, dream
- Write or record your memoirs or family history

The study of the aging brain is in its infancy. Cohen writes an easy to read and understand book which is reassuring and affirming.