

from **Speakers' Spotlight Blog** • July 2015

Brains...For A Change

Most of us have heard many times over that “the only thing constant in life is change.” And we often wish that phrase weren't quite so true, don't we? Because, let's face it, just keeping up with all the seemingly endless reassessments and revisions in our lives can be difficult and exhausting some days, can't it?

In fact, we're frequently in the habit of reacting on a very emotional level (and not in a good way) when we're presented with yet another life/work adjustment to deal with. Many times, we respond with frustration and annoyance and plain old bad humour. In a nutshell, change can make us flat-out cranky.

But you know what? While our hearts may well be sinking at times like these, our brains are usually doing the opposite. Believe it or not, they're actually beginning to soar. You see, it's not just that brains are *capable* of managing change — which you'd think would be good enough news, really — but that brains truly *thrive on* doing things differently. “Hooray!” they say. “It's time to PARTY up here!”

It wasn't that long ago that neuroscientists believed the multitude of connections interacting among the billions of neurons inside our heads were fixed. But current research now tells us that our brains are, in truth, plastic. Not *made of* plastic, of course, but plastic in the sense that they're malleable and able to evolve throughout our lives. That means they're entirely capable of adjusting to novel processes and acquiring fresh skills. Happily, it turns out that brains — even old brains — certainly *can* perform new tricks!

And contemporary research is telling us quite clearly that the best way to help our brains adapt and evolve is to engage in unique learning experiences. Not necessarily big, scary, complicated exploits, mind you. In fact, pretty well anything out of the ordinary will probably do the trick. After all, it's the routine and humdrum stuff that bores our brains and prompts them to float along on automatic pilot. So even an elementary activity done in a slightly unexpected or uncommon manner will send a quick message to our brains that they'd better perk up and pay attention.

A simple example: The left side of the brain controls the right side of the body, and the right side of the brain controls the left side of the body. Most of us have a dominant side of our bodies, and thus a dominant side of our brains. So using our less dominant hand when doing normal day-to-day activities — like throwing a ball to a dog, or using keys to open a door, or holding a toothbrush to clean our teeth — will generate extra neural pathways.

Needless to say, learning something more complex (like a foreign language, for instance) is going to send a much stronger alert to our brains. And that's great. But simply familiarizing ourselves with new processes or skills and eventually becoming somewhat competent at them over time will strengthen the connections among the neurons in our amazingly plastic brains.

So the next time you're told there are more changes heading your way, don't despair, OK? Keep your chin up, take a deep breath, and let your brain know that exciting times are ahead. Because it's party time again.