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Improve your memory: Calm down

FARMERS GET WISE ADVICE AT ANNUAL CONFERENCE

by Peter Epp, Sun Media

RIDGETOWN - There's no magic bullet to improving or retaining your memory. But for Brian Thwait's, it's following several principles -- and if you follow them, the Hamilton man promises that you'll not only think better and make better decisions, but you'll be more comfortable with the decisions you make.

Thwait's, author of the book, *The Big Learn: Smart Ways to Use Your Brain*, was the keynote speaker yesterday at the Southwest Agricultural Conference at Ridgertown.

He told an estimated 1100 farmers that if they're having problems with their memory, they're not alone; most Canadians admit to forgetting everything from where they left their car keys, to a phone number they read just moments earlier in the phone book.

Thwait's said those memory lapses don't necessarily mean the onset of old age or disease. In fact, if Canadians better understood how their brain functions, they would begin to understand why they're unable to retain some information.

Thwait's said part of the reason why some of us are unable to retain as much information as we think we should, is because our brains are too active.

Most people's brains process as many as 25,000 words a minute, but are so overwhelmed by the information that much of it slips away before it can be grasped and stored.

Thwait's said a better processing speed is about 1,000 words a minute, a speed that can be achieved if we relax and calm down.

As well, scientists have found that our brains are still developing by the time we're in our mid-20s. In fact, the frontal lobe, which takes care of the decision-making process, isn't developed until that time. Until recently, scientists believed that most people's brains were fully developed by the middle of the teenage years.

"That would explain a few things," Thwait's joked.

Despite all that brain power, Thwait's said 83 per cent say they forget names, while 60 per cent say they forget where they've placed things, such as their car keys. Fifty-seven per cent say they routinely forget phone numbers, even while reaching for the phone after finding the number's listing.

Thwait's said there's a reason why some information doesn't always stick.

He said a lack of interest in the subject is a prime culprit.

"If we ever had a chance to look into our brain, we'd see that it's more like a party in there. There's a lot of activity going on. It's very busy. And so if you have some important information to share with someone, make sure you make it interesting and compelling."

But there are other challenges, as well, to improving our memory. One of them is our reading skills. Thwait's said most of us became "passive readers" after we finished our education, so most everything we read as adults isn't scanned with the same intensity.

Our listening skills are usually poor, as well. And if we aren't completely listening to a presentation, or to someone's conversation, we're not likely to retain the information that's provided.

A third problem is a lack of effort. Despite all of that innate brain power, Thwait's said we have to "work to remember information, and that requires having to learn how to learn, and sometimes, how to relearn new information."

Thwait's listed seven principles to help leverage your brain's enormous capacity to retain information.

The first one is motivation. You have to have a sincere desire to learn.

The second one is practice. The third is using an emotional hook. He said his elderly grandmother is unlikely to remember the contents of a meal she just ate, but is able to precisely recall the moment when she first met her husband.

"And that memory includes the music in the background, what she was wearing, and the dance she attended. It's amazing."

Thwait's also recommends that you make an "association" with information that you want to retain. "Put that information together with another fact or event, and you'll be surprised at how well you can remember, for example, someone's name."

You also need to understand the meaning behind the information you've just digested, and it will help if you can visualize the information in pictures, rather than in word.