

from **The Simcoe Reformer**

## **Mind Over Matter?**

*by Elaine Smith, Reformer Features Editor*

PORT DOVER - To hear Brian Thwait's tell it, there are three stages of life: youth, middle age and "I forget what I came in here for."

No need to worry if you can't remember why you entered your kitchen, said Thwait's, who is known as a brain trainer who teaches people to wring more from the enormous potential of their gray matter. Sixty percent of the population can't remember where they put things, he said this week during a keynote speech for the Haldimand-Norfolk Literacy Council's annual meeting. But, there's relief in sight.

"Neurologists say our brains are capable of way more than they do," he told the gathering.

In fact, the current belief is that the conscious brain uses less than a hundredth of a percent of its potential. Even so, it's difficult for humans to retain much of the information with which they are presented unless it's learned in a way that aids us in remembering.

"Most forgetting takes place within an hour of learning something," said Thwait's. "You lose more than 50 percent if you learn it passively, but if you took notes while you were listening, it bumps it back up."

Part of the problem is the speed with which information reaches us, compared to the speed at which our brains operate. The brain runs along at anywhere from 1,000 to 25,000 words a minute. Contrast that with the spoken word (approximately 100 words per minute) or the printed word (200-250 words per minute) and it's easy to see why it's hard to concentrate on speeches and texts. Classical music or meditation can help to calm the brain down, because it learns better when it's relaxed.

A failure to put effort into the learning process is another reason people don't retain information. Thwait's said it's useful to have a strategy when listening.

"People whom we think are smart go to more trouble to use their brains," said Thwait's. "We live in a kind of culture that doesn't want to make that kind of effort."

Lack of interest is another reason people don't retain information. It's the motivator for teachers, and lecturers like Thwait's, to dress the information up with stories, jokes and visual aids. Thwait's comes prepared with bottles of memory drink, replica brains made of NERF and plenty of cartoons to illustrate his points.

"The more senses you use, the better the brain works," he said. "Senses are highly memory-triggering."

To drive home his point, he tells his audience that he'll be asking them to memorize a list of 20 words. The gasp is audible, but soon the crowd is caught up in his visual tale of a pig climbing a tree full of money, carrying a suitcase stuffed to bursting with ripe, red tomatoes that blow away and land on a dressed-up cactus that is swinging a golf club.

"What is the pig climbing?" he asks.

"A tree of money," shouts the audience.

"What is he carrying?" prompts Thwait's.

“A suitcase filled with tomatoes,” they say, and soon they’re amazing themselves by repeating the entire list. “Anything with emotional content sticks,” said Thwaites, who says the list has followed him all over the country.

“I’ve had people shout it to me across parking lots and in bars,” he said. “Sometimes, they say ‘get this damn list out of my head.’”

Once someone learns it, then repeats it more than 30 seconds later, it’s learned. And the more often you repeat it, the more likely it will stay with you forever.

Thwaites says brains don’t stop functioning as people get older, but it’s important to exercise them just like any muscle.

“You must keep using your brain,” he said. “Become an expert on something, take courses, do crossword puzzles, stock your life with rich experiences and play with toys. Adult brains like colors and shapes, too.

And, above all, stay healthy. Twenty percent of the body’s oxygen is used by the brain.”