

from **Speakers' Spotlight Blog** • July 2013

## The Numbers Game

What's with all the stories in the media about aging brains?

Honestly, the topic seems to be everywhere these days: newspaper headlines, magazine covers, book titles, TV newscasts. It's in infomercials, too. And if you do an online search of 'aging brains', you'll discover plenty of information that will easily keep you occupied for a substantial period of time. I just gave it a quick try myself, and here's just a small sample of the intriguing links I found:

*Seven Anti-Aging Tips to Keep Your Brain Young*  
*Seven Tips for Improving Your Memory As You Age*  
*Seven Anti-Aging Superfoods*  
*Seven Tips to Ward Off Brain Aging*  
*Seven Anti-Aging Benefits of Yoga*  
*Seven Tips to Age Well and Live up to 100 Years*  
*Seven Simple and Natural Anti-Aging Tips*

That's **a lot** of sevens. And there's a reason for that.

Way back in 1956, George A. Miller published his paper, 'The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two', in *Psychological Review*, and it's since been judged the journal's most influential paper of all time. In what has become known as Miller's Law, he famously surmised that only around seven items can be held in a person's short-term memory at any one time.

Recently, however, this notion has been disputed by other researchers, including both Gordon Parker at the University of New South Wales and Nelson Cowan at the University of Missouri, who argue that the magic number may, in fact, be only four.

So here's a thought: ENOUGH WITH THE TOP TEN LISTS!

Seriously. No more Top Ten lists, all right? Maybe Miller is correct that seven is the magic number of memory. Or perhaps it's Parker and Cowan who are right, and it's just four. Either way, I think we can all agree that TEN items are way too many things for our brains to manage.

So let's learn from the masters. Kudos to the authors, for instance, who were smart enough to hit the brakes at just the right time when naming their books: *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*; *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*; *The Seven Laws of A Golf Swing*; *The Seven Keys to Weight-Loss Freedom*; *A Seven-Step Guide to Big, Hairy, Outrageous Sales Growth*. There's even a book about the number itself, called *Seven: The Number for Happiness, Love and Success*.

Props, as well, to the smart folks who came up with all those lists we're oh so familiar with: the Seven Wonders of the World, the Seven Colours of the Rainbow, the Seven Seas, the Group of Seven, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. And good for the theologians who were responsible for stopping at seven when compiling their checklists of Deadly Sins and Virtues, both of which should be doable as a result. But, hey, what about the Ten Commandments? A few too many rules, don't you think?

So are you listening, David Letterman? Time magazine? Consumer Reports? iTunes? And do we *really* need a Top Ten List of Star Trek Languages? Or a Top Ten List of Competitive Eating Achievements NOT to be Tried at Home? Or a Top Ten List of Baffling Works of Justin Bieber Fan Fiction? (I especially wish I was making that last one up — but, sadly, I am not.)

My point is this: Our mental capacity is a tad limited. So, when formulating to-do lists, details in e-mail messages, agenda items for meetings, bullet points on PowerPoint slides, things to do during the summer holidays... you really should consider throwing out the anchor when you get to around four bits of information.

And, whatever you do, definitely stop at seven, OK?