

State of the Brain Union

For years, neuroscientists were seriously bah-humbug about the brain. They pretty much thought it was a static lump that just declined over time. But recently (as in, the past 30 years—a blink of an eye in the research world), they realized they had it wrong. Really effing wrong. Here's what the latest, most exciting science reveals: The brain is malleable, like a muscle, able to continuously grow cells and make brand-new connections.

"We now know that you can change the machinery in the brain to refine how it operates, boost its reliability, and continuously get sharper, speedier, and just plain better at everything you do," says Michael Merzenich, PhD, a professor at the University of California at San Francisco and founder of the Brain Plasticity Institute. Um, *yes, please!*

But here's the key: You have to take a peek under the hood and learn a little about the inner workings—something many of us neglect to do, says Merzenich. Don't feel bad—it's not just you, he assures. "Brain health is an almost entirely ignored area of human health," he says. "We pay almost no attention to it until it crashes and becomes dysfunctional in some way."

Where we're devoting the *least* attention to learning more? Women's brain health, sadly. And new stats are sounding the alarm bells: We're more than twice as likely as men to have an autoimmune disorder that affects the brain (like multiple sclerosis), three times more likely to get migraine headaches, and much more at risk for stroke or a "brain attack" (one in five of us will have one).

Experts have also started using the "E" word when talking about Alzheimer's disease, calling it an epidemic among women because we account for two out of every three people diagnosed with the cognitive disorder. Another drag: Despite research clearly illuminating the fact that brain health issues affect more women than men, there's a scary gender gap when it comes to funding for studies solely on the female brain, says Lisa Mosconi, PhD, director of the Women's Brain Initiative at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York City.

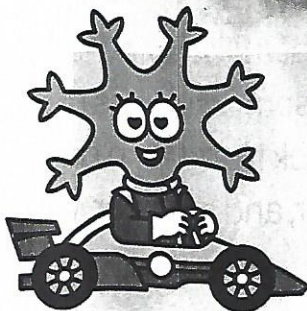
The upside—promise, we're getting to it!—is that what neuroscientists *are* able to gather about the brain is downright badass. You can constantly fine-tune it to perform more efficiently, across the board. So take a few seconds and think about yours right now (how's that for meta?): Does it feel like an F1 racer—high-speed, firing on all cylinders? Or is it more like a pair of burned-out wheels with creaky gears? Because you *can* refurbish it for a new whip, and once we all think differently about approaching (and supporting) brain health, we're in for a smoother ride. Consider this the guide to your souped-up self.

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TUNE-UP

Make Quick Decisions

Want to be less ambivalent about what to order for lunch? (Don't we all?) The secret: Force yourself to choose faster, even if it means changing your mind later, says Jessica Caldwell, PhD, a neuroscientist focused on sex-based brain research at the Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health at Cleveland Clinic.

In other words, don't waffle—just go for it. "You'll create stronger links between neurons," she says.



MIND BLOWN Life Is a Highway

(Or at least your noggin def is!) Some 86 billion specialized cells—neurons—call your head home and transmit info to other cells. This is how they operate and make you you: