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**Gray Matter(s)**

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Nonetheless, denial can be detrimental. After all, about half of cancer patients do not seek a doctor's diagnosis because they fear they have what has happened to them. Far better results come to those who learn how to cope. Social support helps, of course, as do attempts to address the underlying problem cancer.

Breznitz and Hemingway specify ways to promote "eustress" (the good stress, which is usually associated with sound preparation and a perception that we can manage -- and influence -- the outcome). Not surprisingly, they endorse cognitive fitness software. They emphasize, along with most psychologists and neuro-biologists, the positive impact of physical fitness on cognition, citing studies demonstrating that a regular regimen of weight training and aerobics can reduce the risk of dementia by between twenty and fifty percent. And they warn readers that it's just as dangerous to be "weekend warriors" with our brains as it is with our bodies, recommending, for example, that older folks learn computer skills, speak a new language at home, join a book club, and keep a detailed and thoughtful diary.

Bad stress at work (forty percent of American adults report that their job is very stressful or extremely stressful) can be alleviated, the authors suggest, by beginning the day, not with a meeting, but with breakfast, a brisk walk, and some organizing time at the work-station; disconnecting from employment-related issues at lunch; avoiding addiction to cellphones and emails; dealing with one thing at a time (multi-tasking, they insist, is a "disaster" that actually "promotes the attention span of a dog on meth."); and turning at night to a hobby or something social.

More stimulating and surprising, it seems to me, is the authors' analysis of the role of denial and hope in maximizing brainpower. The brain, they indicate, tends to protect itself from unpleasant ideas, taking longer to process fear-inducing words (like murder) than neutral words. For more neurons survive and thrive, Breznitz and Hemingway, remind us, "the larger our cognitive reserves."

Breznitz and Hemingway do not doubt that people with robust cognitive reserves usually possess some inherent advantage. Insisting, however, that the environment plays a pivotal role in building and increasing brainpower, they are not surprised that London cab drivers, who navigate one of the most convoluted and challenging road systems in the world, have a much larger posterior hippocampus, the region of the brain that houses spatial memories, than their more sedentary peers.

Since our minds are at the center of our existence, many of us are petrified of Alzheimer's disease, strokes, and other maladies that impair the functioning of the brain. Breznitz and Hemingway can deliver no "magic bullet" to prevent dementia. But their book does get you thinking about what you can do to develop and maintain your gray matter, build on the plasticity of the brain, and increase the likelihood that you'll live not just a longer but a fuller life.