EXECUTIVE HEALTH

Put your right brain to work, too

BY N.H. ATTHREYA, PH.D.

If you've ever wanted to boost your brain power, it's easier than you might think. Physiological research shows that each of us has two brains, for the right and left hemispheres have distinct functions. Behavioral studies further indicate that to think most effectively, we need to use the whole brain. Most of us—especially educated urban folks —use the left brain more than the right.

Productivity experts say that in a rapidly changing world the great breakthroughs are seldom achieved by purely logical, quantitative, analytical means. Truly new ideas demand leaps of imagination as well. The ability to generate "cutting edge" accomplishments is considered relatively rare, something few are born with. New ideas are, therefore, viewed as the province of geniuses, artists, poets, and other "creative types."

For all our fascination with creativity, it is still fundamentally a mystery. And so it will continue. But as creativity is born of the mind, the more we know about the brain, the better we can use it to be creative.

In 1981, Dr. Roger Sperry, a neurosurgeon, was awarded the Nobel Prize in physiology and medicine for his proof of "the split-brain theory." Though his headline news brought two-brain research to the attention of the general public, the discovery of brain duality was actually made long before.

Intuitively, artists, poets, and philosophers have long referred to the dual nature of the human brain. In 1910, the British poet Rudyard Kipling wrote in "Kim":

Something I owe to the
soil that grew—
More to the life that fed—
But most to Allah, who
gave me two
Separate sides to my head.

Centuries ago, Indian seers intuitively noted there are two distinctive halves of the brain: the left and right midbrains. Further, that one should consciously and deliberately cultivate the right midbrain for advancement in yoga.

As for modern science, the discovery of brain duality really began in 1844, with the observations of an English physician, A.L. Wigan. While performing an autopsy on a long-time patient, he discovered only one cerebral hemisphere. Yet, the person's behaviour had been normal in most respects. Dr. Wigan speculated that if only one hemisphere can constitute a mind, since nature has given us two hemispheres, we may be in possession of two "minds."

In 1861, Paul Broca, a French surgeon and neuroanatomist, discovered a circumscribed area of damage within the left hemisphere had led to a man's inability to speak. The patient understood what was said to him, but could in turn communicate only by hand gestures and facial expressions.

The neurosurgeon W.P. Van Wagenen found, in the 1940's, that some patients with incurable epileptic seizures died because of the transfer of seizures across the corpus callosum, a pencil-shaped bundle of nearly 200 million nerve fibres. In a desperate effort to save such patients, Dr. Van Wagenen cut the corpus callosum. To his surprise, the formerly untreatable seizures stopped and were confined to one hemisphere, where they could be controlled and treated. Nor did the surgery result in any detectable impaired mental function.

Does this mean the many millions of nerve fibres connecting the brain's two hemispheres have no purpose? No, according to Dr. Roger Sperry and his colleagues, who demonstrated that the corpus callosum integrates information from the two sides of the brain, enabling us to build a complete and composite picture. They concluded that the two cerebral hemispheres process information differently. Recently, the PET scan, which measures cerebral metabolism, confirms that the two hemispheres have distinct talents.

The left brain puts things in sequential or logical order, forms thoughts into words, and enables speaking, reading, and computing. Its skills are quantitative, logical and analytical, in efforts to keep life sensible, organized, and on schedule.

The right hemisphere of the brain has other, equally important and welcome talents. It is host to motor skills, intuition and emotion, music and cadence, and the ability to look at the "big picture." It also triggers leaps of imagination.

Successful executives and entrepreneurs have learned how and when to use both sides of the brains, combining detail and logic with a sense of overview and invention. Partly due to genetic inheritance and largely because of our early training, most of us prefer to use one side of the brain more than the other, usually the left.

We all begin with an active right brain. For practicality and convenience, however, our homes, schools, and workplaces induce a left hemisphere bias, almost to the point of imbalance.

To solve the problems of life and work, we need logic, discipline, and attention to details. These are necessary, but alone are not sufficient. We also need intuition, a sense of vision and free-spirited invention. The latter is possible only when we use the right side of the brain, the home of intuition and inspiration. We need both sides to be able to *shift* according to needs.

Professor Robert Ornstein of the University of California, U.S.A., believes that when we activate the right side of the brain, thereby letting it work in conjunction with the already developed left side, the result is often five to 10 times more mental effectiveness.

Energizing the brain's right side is easy. It is just a matter of reviving the power we all had when we were children. All it takes is awareness, understanding, application—and the willingness to "play."

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