

Expert: Keep aging brains healthy, active

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Medical knowledge about how the brain changes and adapts with aging has come a long way in 50 years.

What was considered reality may now be considered a myth, said speaker Carol Barnes, director of the Evelyn F. McNight Brain Institute at the University of Arizona.

Barnes was the first speaker in a series of four talks this winter on brain health arranged by the Pima Council on Aging. PCOA expected 50 people; 150 turned up Thursday at the Canoa Ranch Social Center.

Barnes told the audience science has come a long way differentiating myths from reality and the brain needs to be optimized as it ages.

She said in 1936, life expectancy in the United States was 62. Today life expectancy in the U.S. is 78. Some research puts that into the mid-80s.

“AD (Alzheimer’s disease) is not inevitable,” Barnes said. “Some change in memory is expected. Memory does change in the 86 percent of us who do not have Alzheimer’s disease, but memory does change.”

Fifty years ago it was believed there was extensive brain cell loss; now medical science knows there is selective cell loss as we age.

“Cells are healthy but the number of connections (synapses) decrease. There are fewer connections between neurons,” Barnes explained.

In the past 50 years, neurologists and others who study the aging brain have affirmed the brain continually adapts. Fifty years ago the belief was the brain passively deteriorates.

Many complex and interacting genetic factors affect longevity. Cognition and lifestyle factors interact to affect cognitive aging.

Studies show certain lifestyle factors including higher levels of physical fitness are associated with less prominent aging of the brain. This includes walking daily, tai chi and working out in a gym.

Studies also show those who are socially active and altruistic have improved physical health, increased longevity and increased satisfaction with life in general.

“Many lifestyles affect the successful brain and cognitive aging,” Barnes said. “The brain is remarkably adaptable. Nourish it with knowledge, people and a good life.”

PCOA handed out “take-away” cards with similar advice: The aging brain is remarkably adaptable. Nourish it with knowledge, keep learning, keep your synapses active. Nourish it with a good diet, keep your neurons healthy. Nourish it with people, keep meaningful social contacts alive.

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