

# Back to school...for elders

*Pete & Shelley Aarssen - September 2022*

*"The man who asks a question is a fool for a minute, the man who does not ask is a fool for life." - Confucius*

As our young people head back to class this month, we're reminded of what is at the heart of learning... curiosity! Have you ever spent time with 4-6 year olds? We have grandchildren in that age range and they are constantly asking "why". That youthful humble spirit seems to fade as we age and think we know it all or at least are too proud to ask, "why". The person who asks many questions is a curious person and one who, every day will learn at least one new thing. Pete and I were sitting at the table the other day and a random question just popped into my head. A common ingredient I use in many recipes is vinegar. Where does it come from? We soon googled the answer and I was enlightened after so many years of not knowing. Of course, there are many more important questions to ask as we journey through this life and some of them will require more than Google. Wisdom can be gained by thoughtful and reflective conversations with others as well. As we age, we need to make time for those conversations to both share what we have learned through our experience and to learn or deepen our understanding of things through others.

While aging does cause us to be slower in finding words and decreases our attention span, it also brings positive cognitive changes. According to the National Institute on Aging, "...older adults have more extensive vocabularies and greater knowledge of the depth of meaning of words than younger adults." The article goes on to say that accumulated knowledge of older adults and how the brain changes as a result is an area of active research. Learning new skills, forming new memories and improving vocabulary and language skills are still very possible as we age. Patience is a virtue and it is something we can often exercise with others better than ourselves. Learning new skills like picking up a new language or learning to play piano are still very possible but with the aging brain we have to be prepared that it will just take us a bit longer than our younger counterparts. If you're concerned about changes in your thinking skills, it would be worth a trip to your doctor for a consultation. There are many things that can improve cognitive health from improving your diet, exercise and even taking some supplements to keep as healthy as possible as you age. The National Institute on Aging has a resource center online ([niaic@nia.nih.gov](mailto:niaic@nia.nih.gov)) and at 1-800-222-2225 for more information on this topic.

Here are just a few examples of foods linked to better brainpower: green leafy vegetables, fatty fish like salmon, berries, tea, coffee and walnuts.

Regular exercise regardless of the intensity can improve brain health, so make it a part of your routine to go for that walk or even lift some light weights while you're watching TV. One year for their birthdays, we bought our moms a stationary peddler. It sits on the ground to exercise the legs or on the table to exercise the arms. This can be done by even those who have mobility issues and greatly improves cognition.

So don't pass off those questions that come to mind throughout the day....look it up or look up a knowledgeable friend to have a good conversation with. You will be pleasantly surprised at what a difference just a few of these suggestions can make in your brainpower and your happiness!