

Keep the creative juices flowing

By Bill Shaw

The Facts

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October is comeback month. I am back on the road recovering from a hamstring injury and making 15 miles a week. The dark blue funk is fading. As my mileage goes up, so does my mental health. A running regimen keeps a runner healthy and stimulates the brain.

I am not referring to the euphoric psychological “runner’s high” stimulated by the release of endorphins. I am referring to the high that stimulates creativity and regenerates brain cells.

On Aug. 11, the American Psychological Association released a review of studies on the effect of exercise on the brain that suggests physical activity might slow the effects of aging and improve mental processes.

“Our review of the last 40 years of research does offer evidence that physical exercise can have a positive influence on cognitive and brain functions in older ... subjects,” said the authors, who were scheduled to present their study to the 114th annual American Psychological Convention (mentalhealth.org.uk).

The study found a “significant relationship” between physical activity and a decreased occurrence of dementia. Men and women older than 65 who exercised for at least 15 to 30

minutes three times a week were “less likely to develop Alzheimer’s disease, even if they were genetically predisposed to the disease.”

The study also found a relationship “between fitness training and improved cognition, more efficient brain function and retained brain volume in older people,” said Arthur F. Kramer, chief author of the study.

A four-year study of the relationship between physical activity on cognition and brain function in 62- to 70-year-olds showed “those who continued to work and retirees who exercised showed sustained levels of cerebral blood flow and superior performance on general measures of cognition as compared to the group of inactive retirees.”

Exercise benefits not only old geezers like me; it also helps school-age youngsters and “sets the stage for learning,” according to a story by reporter Patricia Neighmond broadcast on National Public Radio’s “Morning Edition” on Aug. 31.

“Kids pay better attention to their subjects when they’ve been active,” Dr. Antronette Yancey, director of the Center to Eliminate Health Disparities, told Neighmond. “Kids are less likely to be disruptive in terms of their classroom behavior when they’re active. Kids feel better about themselves, have higher self-esteem, less depression, less anxiety — all of those things can impair academic performance and attentiveness.”

Yancey also commented

on a recent study that divided elementary school kids into three groups. The groups that exercised every day performed best in the classroom.

“They took time away from academic subjects for physical education ... and found that, across the board, that (physical education) did not hurt the kid’s performance on the academic tests,” Yancey said. In fact, when “trained teachers provided the physical education, the children actually did better on language, reading and the basic battery of tests.”

So much for eliminating physical education classes from the curricula.

Sometimes I am most creative after a good, reflective run. As my regular readers know, I “write on the run” in my head. For the past month and a half because of my injury, I’ve missed those solitary, creative sessions to write in my head. Having been pressed into teaching a freshman composition class and an American literature class at Brazosport College, I also use my running time to plan lessons and reflect on the assigned literature.

The creative juices are flowing again.

Exercise keeps you mentally healthy no matter what your age. Hit the road and get physically and mentally fit.

Perhaps I shall get my students on the college running trail before we discuss Edgar Allan Poe.