

# LifeTimes



*A quarterly publication to enhance the quality of life of individuals, families, and communities*

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*Housing & Environmental Design Specialist*  
[BlockerR@missouri.edu](mailto:BlockerR@missouri.edu)

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Mary Schroeffer, MED  
*Nutrition & Health Education Specialist*  
[SchroefferM@missouri.edu](mailto:SchroefferM@missouri.edu)

Web: [extension.missouri.edu/ecregion/lifetimes/](http://extension.missouri.edu/ecregion/lifetimes/)

E-mail version contact:  
[MaddoxKa@missouri.edu](mailto:MaddoxKa@missouri.edu)

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## The aging brain: Separating myth from reality

Rosilee Trotta, LCSW  
*Urban Youth and Family Specialist*  
[TrottaR@missouri.edu](mailto:TrottaR@missouri.edu)

**G**ood news! Sigmund Freud was wrong! His statement that people over age 50 are no longer educable is not a credible theory.

I'm guessing that most of you over age 50 didn't buy the premise anyway. With the fastest growing population in the United States being 85 and older, 50 just doesn't seem that old anymore. In fact, today people over 65 enjoy better health, have fewer disabilities, are better educated and are less likely to live in poverty than their predecessors, says the National Institutes of Health (2006). I'm thinking very few of us feel we belong on the front porch soaking up rays and exercising gently in a rocking chair.

While it's true we lose brain cells as we age, the myth that we lose thousands that cannot be replaced is simply that—a myth. Studies by Gerald Fischbach have demonstrated that we have large excess reserve in brain function, so that even a 10 percent decrease in brain weight will probably not impair our mental or physical ability. No matter our age, there are plenty of neurons not being utilized.

Dr. Gene Cohen, Director of the Center on Aging, Health and Humanities at George Washington University Medical Center, has shown that an old brain is every bit as capable as a young brain at making connections between nerve cells.



## The reality is that aging is an attitude.

These connections, called *dendrites*, are microscopic fibers that enable the neurons to communicate with one another. While the neurons themselves may lose some processing speed with age, they become ever more richly intertwined.

As a result, older adults tend to use both sides of their brains far more than younger people. This more balanced brain use results in greater stability between thoughts and feelings. That may be why we “mellow” with age. Indeed, imaging studies determine that older adults show less evidence of fear, anger and hatred than younger adults. They also tend to be less impulsive and not as likely to dwell on negative feelings (Cohen, 2006). The wisdom of later life, then, may be due to the combined forces of experience and this improved use of both sides of our brain.

While short-term and remote memories are usually not affected by aging, recent memory may be. Almost everyone over 50 has had episodes of forgetting where she put the keys, or the last name of the person he met yesterday, or just why she entered a room. Ah, those “senior moments”! Aging may indeed

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# If you hear it – you're in danger!

Rebecca Blocker, MS

Housing & Environmental Design Specialist

Blockerr@missouri.edu



If you hear thunder, lightning is near. Recently I heard the faint rumble of distant thunder from my window and suddenly, out of a blue sky...Kaboom! My house was hit by lightning! My ears rang, hair stood on end, circuit breakers tripped, but the only victims of the strike were the TVs. A surge protector is no match for a lightning strike!

If you hear thunder, you are in danger—even though it's not raining. Most people are struck by lightning before or after the thunderstorm. Lightning kills more people in the U.S. than tornadoes and hurricanes combined.

Outdoor sports have the fastest rising lightning casualty rate! The National Weather Service of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) reports top activities for lightning deaths take place in open fields, under trees, participating in water-related activities, while golfing, in open vehicles, using telephone and radio equipment. To reduce your risk of injury or death, follow the 30/30 Rule and use the Flash-to-Bang Calculator.

## 30/30 Rule:

**If you hear thunder within 30 seconds after seeing the flash, move indoors quickly and stay inside until 30 minutes after the last thunder.**

### The Flash-to-Bang Lightning

**Distance Calculator:** If you see lightning, count the seconds until you hear thunder. Divide by 5. This is the distance in miles the lightning is away. Any distance less than 10 miles puts you in danger. Seek shelter immediately.

Where should you go? There is no place outside that is safe in or near a thunderstorm!

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**Picnic shelters/  
pavilions, baseball  
dugouts, carports,  
porches and buildings  
with exposed openings  
ARE NOT SAFE  
(even if grounded)!**

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**The safest shelter is inside a building with wiring and plumbing.**

- You can be injured inside your house. Stay away from windows, doors, plumbing, appliances, electronics or anything that conducts electricity.
- Use cell phones or cordless phones. Most people injured by lightning are talking on a corded phone.
- Do not take a shower, bath or get in a hot tub if you hear thunder. Stay out for 30 minutes after hearing thunder.
- Unplug computers and electronics. Don't rely on surge protectors. Lightning rods will not prevent getting hit, but should direct current to the ground along a preferred path.

**An enclosed vehicle with metal roof and sides (automobile, van or school bus) is the next best alternative if no safe building is available.**

- Roll up the windows and avoid contact with the radio, CB, ignition.
- Convertibles (even with the top up), golf carts, mowers, vehicles with open cabs ARE NOT SAFE.

**If you are caught outside and you feel your hair stand on end, squat down, tuck your head as low as you can, and cover your ears.**

- DO NOT LIE FLAT ON THE GROUND! When lightning strikes the earth, it can be fatal up to 100 feet away. Minimize height AND contact with the ground.
- Stay away from tall trees, poles, wire fences, clotheslines, metal pipes. Lightning does not always strike the tallest object, only the tallest object in a particular area.

Understanding lightning can help you make safer decisions when storms threaten.

**For more information, contact University of Missouri Extension, or visit NOAA's National Weather Service lightning safety web site: <http://www.lightningsafety.noaa.gov>**

# Family meals provide more than food for children and parents

Mary Schroeffer, MED

Nutrition & Health Education Specialist

SchroefferM@missouri.edu



**W**hen families eat together, children benefit in more ways than just providing nourishment for their bodies.

Family meals provide stability and routine in children's hectic lives. They can bring families closer together, teach children healthy eating habits and improve the diet quality of the whole family. Research shows that families who eat together consume more fruit, vegetables and fiber and less saturated fat, soda and fried foods.

To model good eating habits, parents should eat and prepare food with the children on a regular basis. Family meals are the ideal opportunity to demonstrate healthy eating behaviors and to reinforce good habits. Pleasant memories of making meals and sharing them at home are the start of family traditions that children will carry through life.

When adults and children eat together, children do better in school; have fewer behavior problems; develop the feeling of being needed and of belonging; learn table manners, social skills, family values, a sense of community and basic cooking skills; and understand family values and traditions.

When family meal times are a custom, teenagers are less apt to use alcohol or drugs. Children and teens say they like having time to talk to the adults in their lives. Communication improves between children and adults. Food and meals also provide the opportunity to create family traditions.

Try these easy tips to make family meals a pleasant part your family's day:

- **Set a regular family mealtime and make it a priority in your day.**

Show your children that family meals are an important family time by turning off the TV and not answering the phone during meals.

## **Eat with your children whenever possible, even if it isn't every day.**

- **Be creative and flexible about when and where you eat.**

Family meals can be shared at home, at a restaurant, in a park, or near the playing field.

- **Eat with your children whenever possible, even if it isn't every day.**

Aim for four or more meals a week.

- **Eat around a table.**

It is easier to talk when you can see each other.

- **Enjoy conversation.**

Include all members of the family, and try to avoid nagging and complaining. Keep a sense of humor and laugh a lot.

- **Actively involve children in the meal.**

Cook, shop, and grow veggies together. Helping with family meals makes children feel important. Ask your children to help set and clear the table, fold napkins,

help with meal preparation, or plan menus.

Parents decide **what** will be eaten and **when** it will be eaten. Parents have the opportunity to offer healthy food for meals and snacks.

Children decide **how much food** to eat and **whether** to eat or not. Don't worry if a child does not eat well at a meal. a child is not snacking, he/she eat if hungry. Have the child sit at the table anyway to show mealtimes are important to the family.

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# The aging brain: Separating myth from reality

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affect memory by changing the way our brains store information. But this is a normal phenomenon and not usually a big deal in healthy people.

Another myth that has lost credibility with recent studies is that older people are no longer capable of creativity. Not true, say researchers. People such as Einstein, Bach, da Vinci, Grandma Moses and many others remained creative until death, some in their 90s. Even our beginning pessimist, Freud, did much of his important work past age 65. In fact, later life may give us the time and opportunity to explore creative passions in

more depth than in our earlier years. If we try, we may achieve greater mastery of a skill or tap the potential of talents that lay dormant while we dealt with everyday issues like jobs and family.

Pablo Casals, the great cellist, was once asked why he continued to practice four to five hours a day when he was in his eighties. "Because," he replied, "I have a notion that I am making some progress."

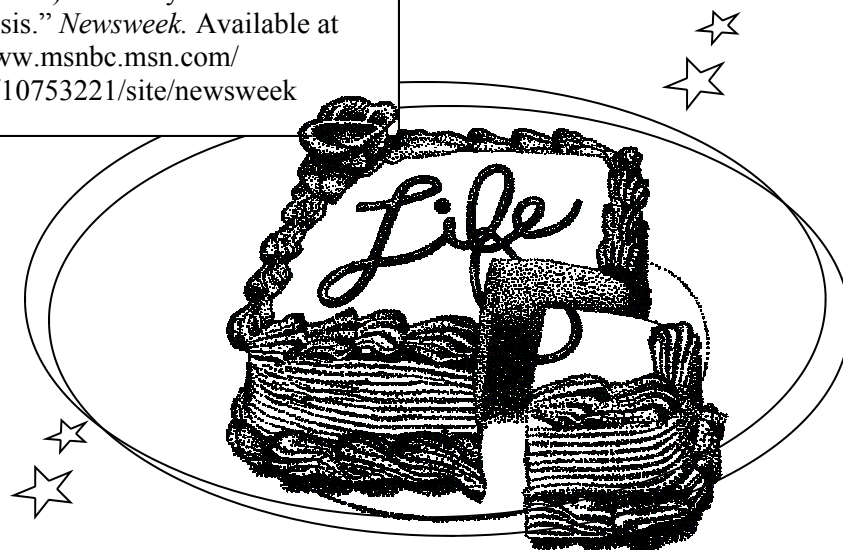
People who do best with the aging process are those who exercise physically; challenge themselves mentally; pick leisure activities that stimulate the whole persona, such as dancing, playing musical instruments, doing crossword puzzles or reading; achieve mastery on anything ranging from embroidery to poetry to learning a new language; and establish strong social networks.

The reality is that *aging is an attitude*. If you strive for your potential in youth and middle-age, you probably will do the same in later life. But you have to keep working at it. It is true: If you don't use it, you lose it!

George Burns, at age 100, may have nailed the concept best when he said: "You can't help growing older...but you can help growing old."

## Source:

Cohen, Gene, MD, PhD. (2006, Jan. 16). "The myth of the midlife crisis." *Newsweek*. Available at [www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10753221/site/newsweek](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10753221/site/newsweek)



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## Editor

*Roxanne T. Miller*

**Roxanne T. Miller**

Civic Communications Specialist  
St. Louis County Extension Center  
121 S. Meramec, Suite 501  
St. Louis, MO 63105  
314-615-7607  
E-mail: MillerRT@missouri.edu

## Contributing Writers

### Family Financial Education

Sherron Hancock, 636-797-5391  
Sandra McKinnon, 636-583-5141  
Suzanne Gellman, 636-970-3000

### Horticulture

Timothy W. Horton, 573-438-2671

### Housing & Environmental Design

Rebecca Blocker, 573-756-4539  
Sharon Laux, 314-516-5240

### Human Development

Maudie Kelly, 573-438-2671  
Teresa Mareschal, 636-970-3000  
Elizabeth Reinsch, 314-615-7605

### Nutrition & Health Education

Cynthia Fauser, 314-615-2911  
Damaris Karanja, 314-615-2911  
Linda Rellergert, 636-970-3000  
Mary Schroeffer, 636-583-5141

### Urban Youth & Family

Rosilee Trotta, 314-615-7637

**Design:** Kathy Maddox

**Web:** [extension.missouri.edu/ecregion/lifetimes/](http://extension.missouri.edu/ecregion/lifetimes/)

### Subscription Information:

E-mail version:  
MaddoxKa@missouri.edu  
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