

from the field of gerontological social work practice

RECENT RESEARCH ON THE OLDER BRAIN; EXTENDING THE STRENGTHS BASED PERSPECTIVE

Previous issues of SBW Notes discussed the value of a strengths based perspective in work with individual older clients. We emphasized supporting the effective coping strategies older adults have honed over a lifetime. Recent brain research has deepened and extended our understanding of the proven and potential strengths among older adults.

Salient Findings:

1. "Overturning decades of dogma, scientists recently discovered that even into our seventies, our brains continue producing new neurons... unique advantages that form the basis for wisdom... The aging brain is also far more resilient than was previous believed." *The Secret Life of the Brain*, Thirteen/WNET New York, February 12, 2002; 9:00PM.
2. The later years are marked by a widening focus of attention. While taking in seeming irrelevant data may contribute to difficulty remembering specific facts - such as a phone number or a name - it actually contributes to creativity and wisdom. Distractibility adds to the ability to transfer information from one situation to another and so contributes to problem solving. In other words, "a reduced ability to filter and set priorities....could contribute to original thinking." *Older Brain Really May Be A Wiser Brain*. Sara Reistad-Long, New York Times, May 20, 2008
3. Neuroplasticity - the science behind brain fitness - has proven that ability of the brain to continue development and improve memory in the later years can be enhanced by learning new skills. The process of learning something new (such as a language) is more effective than recalling past knowledge (such as a crossword puzzle). *The Brain Fitness Program* - PBS Special - aired on WNET on June 15, 2008

It is an exciting time to be working in the field of aging! Breakthrough information on the brain's capacity to develop in the later years highlights the resilience of older adults as well as their capacities to learn and grow. This information has been matched by knowledge about the brain's conception of "self" that endures even in cases of physical and mental disability. More about that in our summer issue.

As always, we invite your response.

SBW Partners is a fee-for-service firm devoted to advancing social work practice in aging. Services are provided by Dr. Barbara Silverstone and Dr. Ann Burack-Weiss, the firm's founding partners, and a group of associates. For more information, please visit www.sbwpartners.com or call 212.337.2555.

MEET OUR NEW ASSOCIATE

Marie L. McCormick, Ph.D., LCSW has practiced psychotherapy with women survivors of childhood sexual abuse, women in recovery from drug and alcohol abuse, and with midlife and older women struggling with disordered eating for twenty-five years. She is a Langenfeld Dissertation Award recipient, a Hartford Doctoral Fellow in Geriatric Social Work, current Co-Chair of the Practice with Older Adults Committee of the NYS Society for Clinical Social Work and Secretary of the Emerging Scholars Professional Organization of the Gerontological Society of America. Her research interests focus on body image and disordered eating in older women and on PTSD in older women survivors of intimate partner violence. Currently she maintains a private practice in psychotherapy in New York City, is an adjunct faculty member at Fordham University Graduate School of Social Service, and is the founder of WomenAgingWell™, a psychotherapy, training and research organization dedicated to promoting the physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual growth of women in the second half of life.

MEET OUR NEW AFFILIATE

Bob Carpenter is the founder and president of InSight Management Development, a performance improvement firm based in Mount Vernon, NY. The company develops high-achieving leaders and teams and since 1995 has dramatically improved employee engagement, creative thinking, and job commitment at numerous client organizations.

Over the last 20 years, Bob has been recognized for his work in Asia and Europe as well as in the United States, where he typically assists over 500 Fortune 500 managers and technical professionals each year in improving their operational effectiveness. Bob delivers leadership seminars for the American Management Association, the world's leading management development organization, and for ESI International, the recognized leader in project management training and consulting.

He holds an MBA degree from Columbia University and is a former trustee of New York City's Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the largest gothic cathedral in the world. <http://www.insightmgmt.com>

We look forward to your comments and experiences.