Prime time rules

A People were not that long ago considered as entering their prime at 40. This was the age at which the peak of their wisdom and power was likely to be reached. Not any more. For an increasing number of people, it is now much later, between 50 and 65, which is effectively when people are thinking of retiring. And so, far from being the major problem that has been exercising politicians and individuals in recent years, the increasing numbers of active over fifties with a later and longer prime should be seen as assets to society, economically and socially. Provided, that is, that they are allowed to contribute to the community.



B Anxiety about funding 'older people' in general is based on a view of the over fifties and sixties living a life of decrepitude with costly nursing home care, and being a drain on the country's wealth. Stereotypical images of senior citizens haunt the general population. Perception tests in studies have shown that people who expect the so-called age-related illnesses like deafness and mental decline to happen in their old age conform to the stereotype and fulfil the prophecy. Thus, it is not surprising that negative images permeate society. More positive images of people in their prime or older in the media, etc would be a good start. There are encouraging signs that the boundaries of this stereotype are already being challenged. There are already TV programmes, for example, about people in their seventies and eighties involved in sports like sky-diving more often associated with the young. Some adverts are pushing the boundaries further by using older models to target beauty products at older sections of the population. After all, who has the accumulated wealth?

C Before looking at what, if anything, can be done to make sure that people can enjoy their prime and feel they can make a contribution to society, we should look at the causes of longevity. Technological advances primarily in medical science are often held up as the principal cause. However, education, wealth and the wide range of leisure pursuits available, along with a host of other factors, have led to a marked improvement in living standards throughout the world. People are, as a result, arriving at the threshold of retirement more active, physically and mentally, than any previous generations and in greater numbers, challenging the view that being 50 or even 60 is old.

D And the magic recipe to enhance our prime? It's all very basic stuff and not really magic at all. It does not need government committees or armies of bureaucrats to devise training packages. People are enhancing their 'prime' time without unnecessary interference. Government and planners should seek to inform themselves of what is happening rather than imposing some clumsy 'innovation'. Research has shown that physical exercise causes changes in the structure of the brain. MRI scans on a cohort of patients aged 58 to 77 have shown increases in the substance of the brain itself are brought about by exercise. There is evidence that the areas of the brain involved in memory and attention benefit from exercise – the areas that show the greatest age-related decline in humans.

LIVEWORKSHEETS

Scan the previous passage and match phrases 1–5 to paragraphs A–D.

1 the fact that skydiving is more often seen as a pursuit for the young
2 a reference to research on exercise and brain function
3 the belief that being elderly means being infirm
4 the reasons why people live longer
5 the idea that the over fifties can be of use to society

Paragraphs E–G below in note form are a continuation of the reading passage on page 71.
Match phrases 1–5 below with the relevant paragraph E–G.

E The benefits of diet – as well as exercise – healthy diet – avoiding junk perhaps also staves off mental decline – studies in children learning difficulties – so-called Durham trial – fish oil beneficial – effective on sizeable proportion of children – improves attention, etc, so not old wives' tale – sale of foods/ supplements containing Omega 3 increased intelligence attention span – not sure if benefit adults.

F How people can keep mentally active – greater interest now in mental stimulus to combat/slow down dementia – exercises – 'brain food' puzzles like sudoku, chess, crossword puzzles, mental arithmetic, subtracting backwards seven at a time from 1,000 to zero, showering with your eyes closed – some connection with left brain function as opposed to right brain – latter concerned with the creative side. Maybe more research needed: how opening up use of right brain might enhance mental ability.

G A conclusion – irony – general population 30 per cent obese – young people especially – older people now more active – interest in third age long may it continue – older people show young people the way.

1 various methods to improve mental ability
2 the fact that fish oil supplements may not benefit adults
3 a comparison between older people and less active young people
4 how diet helps improve mental activity in children
5 a recommendation that research into right-brain function should be carried out

LIVEWORKSHEETS