

## *Program 11*

### **Spare a Thought for your Brain**

*How insights from science can help older men not to lose their wits*

How does cognition change as we age? This is the question that permeates this program. First, we hear from an Adelaide legend who at 93 firmly believes that the more you are engaged in physical and mental activities, and remain socially engaged, the better we are able to maintain brain health. With the benefit of current research into neuroplasticity, we then explore some of the changes that happen to the brain over our lifetime, particularly the possible loss of plasticity and what can be done to lessen this in later life. Other questions focus on cognition change in older men compared with older women; and we ask is cognitive decline inevitable? As noted in the program, many stereotypes about ageing can often be heard, for example, that older men and women are not really interested in learning about new technology. Resilience is seen as a key to good brain health, as is diet, exercise and continuing to be socially engaged.

#### **Interviewees**

*Rajiv Chand*

*Dr Lyndsey Collins-Praino*

*Rex Lipman*

#### **Discussion Starter**

Keeping your mind sharp by using it frequently and in challenging ways, is old news. What isn't well known, in fact what is news to most people, is that a healthy mind depends on a healthy brain. The burgeoning knowledge of neuroscience is providing new insights into how our brains function, and how brain health profoundly impacts on not only our cognitive ability – our capacity to remember and think effectively, but also on our mental health.

Turns out we can now take steps to keep our brain healthy, and to reduce the risk of dementia later in life. We know that exercising our brain by exercising our mind is important, but like all other body organs the brain stays healthier if we stay in good physical shape, by exercising regularly, eating healthy food, and taking care of our heart and vascular health. It is also apparently the case, that being sociable and engaging with new challenges and experiences are also really good for brain health. Actually, healthy mind, healthy body, and good mental health are all intertwined, and so when we adopt health lifestyle choices, we achieve some serious gains for mental, physical, and cognitive health.

For older men discouraged by cultural messages of ageing – those of redundancy, inevitable decline and debilitation, this all comes as a timely challenge to prove the doomsayers wrong. It is much more possible than ever we imagined that we can continue to function effectively right into old age – if we get the health maintenance settings right early enough. There is a good chance of not only 'staying with it', but also going on to conquer new frontiers in our own lives and as productive and creative contributors to society.

There is good reason to take on a new hobby, to eat healthy meals, to welcome a mental challenge, to embark on a new adventure, to get physical, and to start a social calendar; because keeping our wits may depend on it.

#### **Questions**

- 1. In what ways do the prevailing assumptions of ageing encourage poor health choices for older men, and thus a greater likelihood of mental decline?*
- 2. What part does gender play in determining opportunities for social interaction and remaining active and healthy in later life?*
- 3. What role does work play in the likelihood of brain health or decline in older men?*

#### **Project Consultant**

Dr John Ashfield