



Learn Another Language “An Enjoyable Life”



To master a new language requires a focused commitment for an extended period of time. Say you wanted to become fluent in French. It would take years of reading books, attending classes, listening to audio tapes and possibly immersing yourself in the culture for a period of time. Eventually, a new part of your brain would develop that enables you to speak French. This is possible because of the brain's capacity to change by increasing the number of neurons and connections between them, laying down an insulating material called myelin, and changes occurring in the glial cells, which are the supporting cells of the central nervous system. This process is called, “neuroplasticity” and your brain changes every second. (1)

“Not speaking English”

You can't learn French by “not speaking English” or trying to improve it. Of course not. What a ridiculous idea! But what about trying to solve chronic pain by focusing on “not being in pain”? Where's your attention? What is being reinforced? Your brain will develop wherever you place your attention. By constantly (and understandably) seeking a cure or discussing your pain with those around you, you're reinforcing the pain circuits. As they become more deeply embedded in your nervous system, you'll use the creative part of your brain less and the research shows that the brain physically shrinks in the presence of unrelenting pain. Fortunately, it re-expands when you have healed. (2)

“What you resist will persist”

One of the core neuroscience-based concepts of solving chronic pain revolves around the current definition that it “.....is an embedded memory that becomes connected to more and more life experiences, and the memory can't be erased.” (3) Once you've developed chronic pain, the circuits are permanent. The more you fight them, the stronger they'll become. Discussing or pursuing a cure can be compared to putting your hand right into a hornet's nest. So, what do you do?

What is counter-productive are practices that keep your pain in the forefront (trying to learn French while focused on your English). Some examples are:

- Endless quest for a cure – I spent years being an “epiphany addict”.
- Frequently discussing your pain or medical care. That wouldn’t count as quality time with those close to you.
- Complaining
- Gossiping
- Not being willing to learn new ideas or being open to change

“An enjoyable life”

What you can do is to learn a new language, which is “an enjoyable life”. Since anxiety and anger are basic survival responses, that’s where your brain is programmed to go as the default mode. These automatic responses become stronger with age and repetition. To train your brain differently requires a deliberate long-term focused effort.

The first step in any new endeavor is to create a vision of where you want to go. What do you want your life to look like? Do you want to live in this state of affairs indefinitely? You can’t accomplish anything of significance until you know what it looks like and internalize it.

What you’re doing by creating and pursuing what you want is developing a new nervous system within your existing one. It’s like putting a virtual computer on your desktop. As you continue to work on learning the language of “an enjoyable life”, you’ll be paying less attention to the pain circuits and they will atrophy from disuse. At some tipping point your pain and anxiety will diminish dramatically – but not by trying to make it drop. It’s similar to re-directing a river into a different channel. It will be slow at first but as the flow of water is diverted, the force of the water will help create the new channel.



Learning the language

It’s highly doable and the idea is to utilize tools that stimulate your brain to change. The strategies include:

- Reconnecting with the best part of who you are
- Re-learning how to play
- Somatic work – connecting thoughts with physical sensations
 - Expressive writing
- Active meditation – placing your attention on a different sensation
- Re-engaging with familiar art, hobbies, music, dance, sports, etc.

- Spending quality time with family and friends (53% of Americans are socially isolated)
- Forgiveness – you can't move forward while you're hanging on to the past
- Giving back– there are an endless number of possibilities
- Listening – it's more interesting than re-hashing current your own views on life
- Creating your vision in detail of how you want your life to look
- Getting organized so as to be able to execute your vision



Positive thinking is a way of suppressing negativity and it is damaging. However, a positive vision is essential in order to stimulate your brain to form in the direction you choose. Take control of your life. What do you want?

References:

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2. Seminowicz DA, et al. "Effective treatment of chronic low back pain in humans reverses abnormal brain anatomy and function." *The Journal of Neuroscience* (2011); 31: 7540-7550.
3. Baliki MN and A Vania Apkarian. "Nociception, pain, negative moods, and behavior selection." *Neuron* (2015); 87: 474-491.