Studies Show the Importance of Storytelling in Improving Health

Storytelling is one of the oldest human traditions on earth. Stories are integral aspects of our lives and an important part of how we communicate, learn and grow.

According to an article in *The New York Times*, research is supporting the idea that storytelling is also imperative in improving health. Doctors and patients alike suggest the power of personal narratives to effectively communicate and interpret experiences concerning certain health issues.

A recent study published in *The Annals of Internal Medicine* reported that listening to personal narratives helped control high blood pressure in one group of patients, an outcome that was just as successful as taking additional medications.

“Telling and listening to stories is the way we make sense of our lives,” said Dr. Thomas K. Houston, lead author of the study and a researcher at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester and the Veterans Affairs medical center in Bedford, Mass. “That natural tendency may have the potential to alter behavior and improve health.”

Researchers explain that storytelling counteracts the initial denial a patient experiences when diagnosed. Similarly, patients might distrust the medical system or have difficulty understanding all of the information. However, stories and personal narratives are relatable, and therefore help the patient make sense of their own situation.

Stories are particularly beneficial with the more “silent” chronic diseases, such as diabetes or high blood pressure. They can help the patient realize the importance of addressing a disease that has few obvious symptoms.

“Storytelling is human,” Dr. Houston said. “We learn through stories, and we use them to make sense of our lives. It’s a natural extension to think that we could use stories to improve our health.”

Letter from the Editor:

In celebration of the new season, let us “spring” into action regarding the protection of our most precious asset: Our brainpower! This is important due to the fact that by the year 2050, someone will develop Alzheimer’s disease every 33 seconds. Regardless of age, there is an increasing amount of responsibility on our part to shed poor habits and protect our physical and mental states. I believe the best starting point is making simple lifestyle adjustments, like eating healthier and staying active.

In conjunction with the tips to boost brainpower in this issue, I highlight the value in the oral tradition of storytelling. Research is showing the possibility of improving health and altering behavior through communication and personal narratives. Arguably, who can deny feeling great when listening to and partaking in personal histories and experiences with the people closest to you?

Read more in this issue about what changes you and your loved ones can make (including adopting a pet) to feel great this spring season!
Cats and Dogs: More than Man’s Best Friend

A dog may be more than just a best friend – research is suggesting the importance of a pet as a means for treatment.

According to aarp.com, 62% of Americans own a pet for the companionship, love and affection that these animals afford them. While these benefits are great, numerous studies are reporting actual health benefits associated with owning a furry friend.

Here are a few ways in which pets can improve your health (aarp.com):

• **Pets help recovery from heart attacks** – A study from the National Institutes of Health found that dog owners had a higher survival rate after a heart attack, compared to those who did not own dogs.

• **Pets help reduce stress**...more so than humans do.

• **Pet owners are less obese** – Pet owners are more active, simply because they want their pets to stay active and healthy as well (i.e. more walks).

• **Pet owners have better mobility as they age** – Another National Institutes of Health study found that adults aged 71-82 who regularly walked their dogs were more mobile, compared to those who did not own pets.

• **Pets can help with cholesterol** – The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states that owning a pet can decrease cholesterol, triglycerides and blood pressure.

There are so many different pet options out there for everyone. If you are not a cat or dog person, try getting a fish or other small animal. It will be great for your health and happiness!
Six Lifestyle Changes to Protect Your Brain Power

It is never too early to be concerned for your mental well-being. According to an article in The Huffington Post, by the year 2030, 615,000 people are said to be diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. By 2050, that annual number is expected to be just under 1 million, with someone developing Alzheimer’s every 33 seconds.

Those are very harrowing statistics. Thankfully, there are things that we can do to hopefully decrease those numbers.

Dr. Cindy Haines shares six lifestyle changes to protect your brainpower:

1. **Avoid Other Chronic Conditions** – People with other chronic conditions, like diabetes, are about twice as likely to develop dementia. Obesity, high cholesterol and high blood pressure are all potentially chronic problems that you can control.

2. **Try Mediterranean Food** – The Mediterranean diet is gaining popularity in its ability to help prevent dementia. The diet consists of fruits and vegetables, whole-grain bread and other whole-grain foods, beans, seeds and nuts.

3. **Stay Active** – Regular exercise keeps your blood vessels healthy, which can help prevent vascular dementia and other forms of Alzheimer’s.

4. **Avoid Tobacco Smoke** – Smoking has been proven to increase the risk of Alzheimer’s. Furthermore, new research is suggesting that simply being exposed to tobacco smoke can also increase that risk, so avoiding it altogether is the best bet.

5. **Keep Your Brain Busy and Stay Socially Engaged** – Studies have shown that people who keep their brains active are less likely to develop dementia. Activities like crossword puzzles and reading increase your cognitive reserve.

6. **Keep an Eye on Depression** – Currently, there still needs to be more research involving exactly how depression and dementia are linked, but studies show that there is a strong connection between the two.

As mentioned, it is important to start taking precautions to prevent dementia, no matter your age.
Caregiver of the Month Spotlight: Monica Ramos

Monica Ramos with Home Care Assistance of North Houston has been a professional caregiver for three years. She also spends time caring for her daughter who has muscular dystrophy. She is very experienced when it comes to caring for those with Alzheimer’s, dementia, muscular dystrophy and cancer as well as those who have had a stroke or amputation.

An avid animal lover, Monica enjoys her time being a Home Care Assistance caregiver and a mother of four children.

Monica is an exceptionally fast learner and has quickly mastered the skills required to care for those in need of her help. She always puts her best foot forward when caring for our clients — her cheerful attitude is contagious and she is continues to go the extra mile when it comes to client care. We are so glad that Monica part of our wonderful team.

Thank you for your compassionate care and inspirational attitude, Monica!