

# Active Minds

*A program to sharpen your mind*

**Active Minds Newsletter**

**Issue 7 - July 2007**



In this issue,  
Dr. Michelon tells you  
about .....

**Aging and the truth-effect: do older adults tend to believe what they are told more easily than young adults?**

**Do you want to stay mentally sharp and/or increase your brain power?**

**Do your residents need mental stimulation?**

**Are your clients interested in a Memory Workshop?**

Contact Dr. Michelon to schedule a group or an individual trial session!

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For more info on mental workouts visit:

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## The truth-effect

### Do you believe in everything you hear?

The truth-effect has been first observed 30 years ago by Hasher and his colleagues (1977).

It is shown experimentally by presenting people with statements about the world (e.g., house mice can run an average of 4 miles per hour). Some of the statements are shown several times (repeated) and others are not. When people are then asked to decide whether the statements seem true or not, they rate repeated statements as probably more true than statements that are not repeated. It seems that repetition induces familiarity and that familiarity in turns influences truth belief.

This type of finding is critical nowadays as people are bombarded with advertisements. All marketing strategies use repetition of claims as a way to increase the appeal of a product to potential customers.

The truth-effect suggests that claims that are repeated will seem more familiar to customers and in turn, will appear more believable than claims that are new or not repeated as much.

### Does it get worse as you age?

Are older adults more vulnerable to the illusion of truth? Some studies suggest that the answer is yes (Dywan & Jacoby, 1990), although other studies have found no age differences (Mutter and colleagues, 1995). A greater vulnerability to the illusion of truth can be explained by the poorer memory performance of older adults. Given that they remember less what they see and where they see it, older adults tend to rely more on familiarity to judge the truth of facts. As a consequence when a fact is repeated, its familiarity increases and older adults tend to believe that it is a true fact.

### Would warning about false claims help?

One may think that the solution to this problem would be to merely warn people that some claims are false while others are true. Skurnik and colleagues (2005) tested this idea. They presented young and older adults with statements (e.g., aspirin destroys tooth enamel) that were explicitly identified as true or false. Some of the statements were repeated whereas others were not repeated.

The results showed that 30mn after presentation of the statements, both young and older adults judged correctly whether a statement was true or false and this was especially true for repeated statements. So when warning about false claims were used, repetition was beneficial. When the participants were tested again 3 days later, the young adults still showed a benefit of repetition. However, older adults seemed to have forgotten most of the warnings and showed a strong truth-effect: the more they were told that a claim was false, the more likely they were to accept it as true !!

### Make sure you process the claims...

What can you do to decrease age differences then? Sharmistha et al. (1998) showed that how you process the claim is crucial. If you take time to imagine what the claim represents, the age difference disappears. That is, both age groups still show the truth-effect (repeated facts are believed to be more true than non-repeated ones) but older adults are not no longer more vulnerable than younger adults. Thus, older adults should take the time to process claims if they don't want to get tricked...