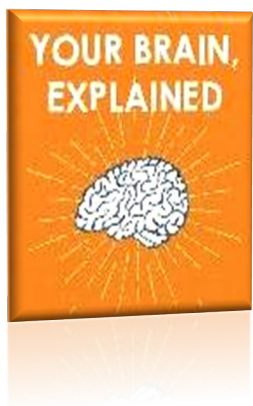


Medical Minute

Our brains really are marvels. They’re incredibly complex and apparently undergo significant changes at four distinct points in our lives. Some people miss those four points entirely, but that’s another issue.

According to the University of Cambridge, this is how our brains age:



The first stage is from birth to about age nine, when the brain is in its childhood phase—growing rapidly in size and efficiency. At birth, the brain is about 25% of adult size, and by age two, it has reached roughly 80% of adult volume. This is also when experiences really matter because they help shape the brain’s architecture, influencing future learning, health, behavior, and life opportunities.

Well... I probably ruined my kids for life during this stage because what did I know about “shaping their brain architecture” when they were three? I was just glad they were potty trained and tried to keep them from killing each other. If they ate something that wasn’t dirt, I considered it a parenting victory.

Next comes brain adolescence, which apparently lasts from age nine until about age 32—or until an individual achieves substantial independence from their caregivers. For some people, this stage lasts considerably longer. I know a few who are still in it. This period is marked by prolonged physical, cognitive, and emotional changes. Ahhh, the emotions of adolescence. What a delightful time. Nothing says “stable human being” like a teenager who is simultaneously convinced that you know absolutely nothing and that you have completely ruined their life because you asked them to take out the trash. Only TNT is more unstable.

Then comes brain adulthood, which apparently lasts until around age 66. During this stage, cognition tends to plateau in areas such as intelligence and personality. In other words, this is when we become officially set in our ways. We’ve spent decades developing opinions, routines, preferences, and strong feelings about things like how the dishwasher should be loaded. At this point, someone can suggest a new way of doing something and our immediate response is, “Why? We’ve been doing it this way since 1967 and nobody has died.” We can still learn new things, of course. It just takes longer to learn them, and even longer to remember why we walked into the room in the first place. Personally, I’ve decided that if I don’t know how to do it by now, I probably don’t need to know.

And then, after age 66, we enter the final stage—roughly 66 to 83 and beyond. This is where things start heading downhill. The brain shrinks, we may lose some cognitive function, and it can become harder to make connections between different regions of the brain. And most of us discover that the hardest connection of all is the one between our brain and our mouth. Our brains are screaming at us, “just don’t say it” but our mouths still open and out come the words! But honestly, by this point, most of us aren’t terribly concerned. We’ve survived adolescence (both our own and our kids’), worked hard and paid the bills, learned how to use a computer and smartphone, and can still carry on a conversation despite a couple glasses of wine. At 66 and beyond, if we forget what we were talking about, we just change the subject, and if someone points it out, we say, “I was just testing you.” And if we can’t remember why we walked into the kitchen, well...clearly there is nothing important in there anyway.

So, there you have it: **Four stages of brain development.**



- Childhood:** Learn everything.
- Adolescence:** Think you know everything.
- Adulthood:** Decide you know everything.
- After 66:** Forget everything—and stop caring.

Honestly, that last stage sounds pretty relaxing...and a relief.