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Feeding your Brain

Next week is Brain Week and its organisers want us to use it to grow our brains. Sarah Catherall meets some active Wellingtonians who are doing just that.

Jenny Fellows is stretched out in a yoga pose, twisting her spine and pulling her slim legs towards her. No big deal, perhaps, until you realise that Fellows is a yoga instructor and she is 70 years old.

The mother and grandmother could pass for 60, and probably has the brain power of someone a decade younger. Today, she is teaching 10 women who range from their mid-30s to her oldest class member, an 86-year old, who is stretched out in a “child’s pose” on the wooden floor of the Miramar community centre.

On the eve of Brain Awareness Week, Fellows has all the right ingredients in her life to keep her brain healthy. She enjoys challenges, sees the glass as half full rather than half empty, and keeps active and busy.

While we were told as children that we were born with all the brain cells we would ever have, that is not the case according to the Neurological Foundation, which says: “It’s never too late to grow your brain.”

Fellows belongs to three book clubs, is the president of her local University of the Third Age – an international network of study and learning groups pitched at the retired – and is studying to complete a postgraduate course in yoga teaching. She also tends a “huge garden which almost feeds the whole neighbourhood” and eats a light vegetarian diet of mainly raw food. This year, she is painting a canvas in her home-based studio, where she is also a massage therapist, along with taking three weekly yoga classes.

The retired children’s librarian explains: “You have to keep challenging yourself. If your body and mind aren’t as fit as you would like them to be, then everything closes in on you.”

A long-time widow, her memory is pretty good, she says. “Of course I forget things, but I’m busy and that’s what happens. I’ve got lots of energy. I’d probably have been very hard to live with.”

While the brains of people her age are often shrinking Fellows is growing hers – the learning and memory parts, says neuroscientist Maurice Curtis of Auckland University: “Certain areas of the brain are good at regenerating cells, mainly the areas of learning and memory.”

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