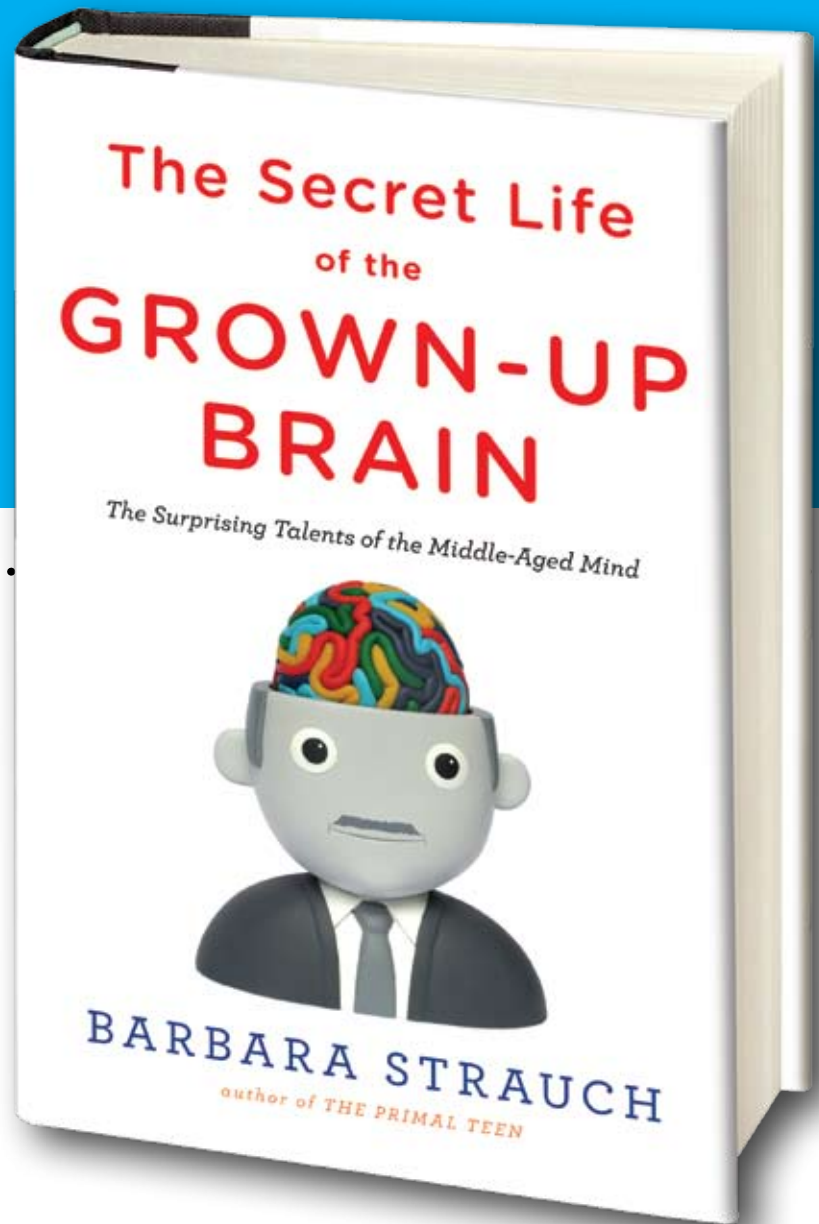


THE BRAIN'S CAPACITY ACTUALLY REACHES ITS PEAK IN MIDDLE AGE

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Most of what we think we know about middle age is wrong. Cultural myths such as the midlife crisis and empty-nest syndrome just don't hold up under scrutiny. Long-held assumptions that our brains are in a state of gradual decline from a youthful peak have been proven untrue. Fears that memory lapses, names forgotten, and distracted thoughts are the beginnings of more serious dementia are unfounded. In fact, what we have learned from studying the time we call "middle age" is that the changes that take place as we age give us the best brains of our lives, at their strongest in a whole range of cognitive areas.



APRIL 2010

978-0-670-02071-3
\$26.95 (\$33.50 CAN)

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THE SECRET STRENGTHS OF THE GROWN-UP BRAIN

We get happier

Youth is the key to happiness, right? *Wrong*. Neuroscientists and psychologists are discovering that we are actually happiest in middle age. Even with all the life stresses, we become more optimistic. And this shift comes from how our brains develop. In middle age, our brain cells begin to respond more to the positive and less to the negative.

We see solutions

Middle age adds life experience, better judgment, and perhaps a little wisdom. Science has a word for this: *gist*. *Gist* is that intuition, that gut feeling that proves to be right. It's the way the brain, with all its experience, has learned to recognize the patterns, see the connections, and move quickly to a solution, consciously or even at an unconscious level.

We start to use our brains differently—and better

The younger brain does have a higher processing speed, but the middle age brain is adaptable and finds ways to function at a top level. We use both the left and right sides of our brains on tasks once done by only one, and we call upon reserve brainpower to help ward off diseases that occur in later life.

We're smarter than we think

Everyone worries about those common middle-age memory lapses—where are those keys? What *is* his name? But these are actually not serious and they are not dementia. While we may tend to forget things, we do better in areas such as logic, deductive reasoning, verbal skills, and even spatial reasoning.

The long-held assumption that we lose thousands of brain cells as we age is false

Our brains (as long as they are healthy) continue to develop, change, and adapt. Growth of white matter and brain connectors allow us to recognize patterns faster, make better judgments, and not only find unique solutions to problems, but be more creative in a range of areas.

We can keep our brains in top shape

Physical exercise protects the brain, and what we eat may make a difference in brain health. For the first time, scientists are zeroing in on what it is about exercise that helps us remember where we put the keys, and what *exactly* in a glass of red wine or a handful of blueberries helps brain cells.

Dementia is not inevitable

We now have enough people living long enough to prove that dementia is *not* inevitable. There is an increasing number of “pristine agers” whose brains remain intact well into their nineties. And for the first time, science is able to study them.

We need to rethink middle age

Our culture says people should retire and slow down in middle age. In fact, with such a long span of time in middle age—and our brains in full bloom—we need to rethink our life patterns. It's time for those in middle age to use their very capable brains to figure out how society needs to adapt to a changing human being and his changing brain.