

You CAN Teach a Dog New Tricks

By Mary Beth Wighton, Person with Dementia

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The door bell rang. I could see a tall figure holding a large box. My supplier was here. I opened the door and let him in. He had not been here for a delivery in a few weeks. We gave each other a warm hug and proceeded with pleasantries. I eyed the box and waited in anticipation for him to hand it to me. He slowly took off his boots. I continued to wait. We walked towards the kitchen where, finally, he gave me the box that held my supplies. I love that moment!

My supplier – is also known as my brother David. He is my puzzle supplier. If you like puzzles, than you can appreciate my anticipation. And if you don't, well, you are missing out!

David proceeded to tell me about the puzzles he had brought for me. He had a few of my favourite Ravensburger Puzzles. As the name suggests, this puzzle brand is made in Germany and shipped around the world. It is well-known for its high quality: made from recycled board, they are strong and the pieces properly fit together. This company has been in the puzzle business for over 100 years, so they know what they are doing. The pieces can range from just a few to 32,000 (the world's largest puzzle). That's a little too big for me. I keep to the range of about 60 – 180 pieces.

The second puzzle brand that David discussed with me is called Springbok. This company from the United States manufactures a line named “Puzzles to Remember” specifically for people with Alzheimer's. The puzzle dimensions are the same as a 500 piece and contain adult themes. However, the pieces are much larger and range from 12 – 36. It too creates high-quality pieces allowing for easy interlocking. Although, it targets those with Alzheimer's, it is well-suited for someone like me who has dementia.

Growing up, my parents usually had a puzzle on the go. They enjoyed working together to complete it. Today, at the ages of 83 and 86, they still work together on puzzles and enjoy the satisfaction of finishing it. However, they stick to the Springbok Puzzles to Remember. Sometimes they receive help from my little nieces and nephews who also like a challenge.

This Christmas, my mother-in-law, Joyce, gave me a metallic 3D puzzle containing 36 pieces manufactured by Cheatwell. The extra challenge is not only is it 3D but that each piece is shaped in a square. How naive I was to think I could quickly finish this puzzle.

After opening up the puzzle, I sat at the kitchen table with Nana, Dawn's grandmother and a.k.a. MB's puzzle companion. Nana and I have lots of chats about the latest puzzles we have been working on and periodically exchange them. We looked over this little tin box of 32 pieces. How hard could it be? Two hours later, we loudly told everyone just how hard it really was. People raised their eye-brows in

disbelief. During the 2 hours, Dalan, my young nephew of 10, causally picked up a few pieces of the puzzle, looked over the puzzle for a minute, than put them right into place. We couldn't believe it! Our eyes and brains obviously work very differently from this young whipper-snapper.

In a day of technology, puzzles may seem a bit outdated to some people. Not to me. There are so many benefits of puzzles. They provide a great social setting for both the young and old, develop patience, focus and concentration. When you complete one, you have a wonderful feeling of success. Oh yes, and of course they are fun.

For years, it was believed that our brain was “hard-wired” and our mental ability was fixed after childhood. But over recent decades, neuroscientists have discovered that brains are constantly changing.

Growing new neurons and connections is a process called neuroplasticity. Change of the brain is associated with learning at the level of connections between neurons. New neurons can form and existing synapses can change. This is a hot topic in the world of research.

In layman terms, we must use it or lose it. For instance, did you use to know a foreign language? Haven't used it in a while? Now you can't remember it – because, you have not used it. Neuroplasticity suggests we have the ability to keep our brains sharp and capable of learning new skills well into our 90's. Like all organs, we must take good care of our brain and exercise it regularly by stimulation.

For those of us in Ontario, we are fortunate to have more than 500 neuroscientists in Ontario alone. Several important discoveries have positioned Canada as a global leader in the neuroscience market. Research groups are utilizing new technology and focus on top quality services. Baycrest Rotman Research Institute (RRI) in Toronto is considered to have scientists that are probably the best in the world. (Neuroscience Industry Briefing. A Review of Ontario's R&D Excellence with a Focus on Aging).

What does all this mean to me? I'm not a dog and I'm not old, but I definitely can learn new tricks!