



Between the mid-30s and 50s, our intellectual capacity declines significantly. Fact! Is there still hope?

Reading time 10 minutes

When the same name keeps popping up on my news feeds and podcasts, it's worth taking a closer look. Arthur C. Brooks is, among other things, Harvard Professor of Management Practice and Public Leadership. His book [From Strength to Strength: Finding Success, Happiness and Deep Purpose in the Second Half of Life](#), published in February 22, has already been on the New York Times bestseller list and has 3000 above-average reviews on Amazon.

I ordered the book immediately - and almost put it down after the first chapter. As an over-60s, I found it simply depressing. Brooks brings many examples of intellectual toppers who tried desperately to repeat their great successes long before they retired - and failed. Even the legendary Darwin was not immune to this, or even the double Nobel Prize winner Linus Pauling. Who is one of five people to have received two Nobel Prizes, one of two, along with Mari Curie, to have received a Nobel Prize in two different disciplines, and the only one who did not have to share his prizes. He did everything he could to gain renewed recognition later, for example by propagating vitamin C in megadoses. The experts soon wrote him off as an ageing crank.

Brooks reports that many top managers he advises do not want to accept the intellectual fall. They prefer to pay for their desperate struggle with great personal sacrifices.

Those of you BrainCandy readers who still have a relaxed distance from your 50th birthday should read on anyway, it's helpful to understand what's sure to come your way.

And that there is actually also something positive that one should be prepared for.

What Brooks is telling us is that unless we follow the James Dean formula - "Live fast, die young and leave a good-looking corpse" - we need to understand that our professional, physical and mental decline is inevitable. Probably my readers also think it's a long, long way off. Me too, of course.

We are not alone in this opinion. Most people believe that ageing and its impact on job performance is something that lies in the distant future. When asked in 2009 what "being old" means, the most popular answer among Americans was "turning eighty-five". The average American dies at 79, before they have grown old.



Among people in professions that require ideas and intellect rather than athletic skill and physical strength, almost no one admits that they expect to decline before the age of seventy; some even later. Unlike athletes, we do not become aware of reality. Our brain has no sensor for decreasing breakthrough ideas per unit time as we grow older.



Great talents and success at a young age are simply no insurance against later suffering. On the contrary, studies show that people who have striven for power and success in their professional lives are unhappier in retirement than people who have not.

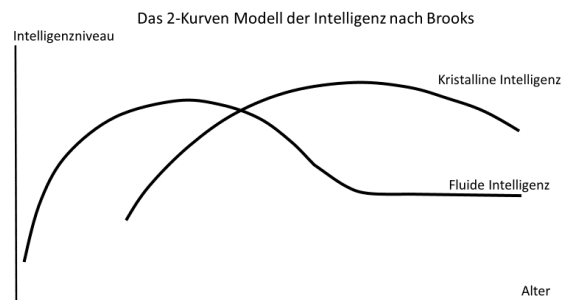
We humans are simply not made to enjoy an achievement long past. It is like a hamster wheel. The satisfaction of success lasts only a short time. We cannot pause. Otherwise we fall off the wheel and break. So we run and run, hoping that the next success, preferably greater than the last, will bring the lasting satisfaction we crave.

So the problem of decline is twofold: we need more and more success to avoid dissatisfaction, but our ability to perform consistently declines. Strictly speaking, it is a triple disaster, because while we try to perform constantly, we fall into addictive behaviour patterns. We become workaholics, which inevitably leads to unhealthy relationship patterns, at the expense of deep connection with partners, children and friends. This is the quintessence of the so challenging first part of the book.

Since BrainCandy readers love scientific facts, here's a study by Benjamin Jones, professor at the Kellogg School of Management, to finish off the bad news. He studied when people are most likely to make award-winning scientific discoveries and inventions. Jones found that the most common age for great discoveries is the late thirties.

It shows that the probability of a major discovery increases steadily in the twenties and thirties and then decreases dramatically in the forties, fifties and sixties. Of course, there are outliers. But the probability of producing a major innovation at the age of seventy is about the same as at the age of twenty - about zero.

But fear not. 'From Strength to Strength' is a self-help book, after all, and these books always have happy endings. In this case, the path to self-efficacy lies in the fact that our decline is largely related to dwindling 'fluid intelligence', or what we commonly call 'raw intelligence'.



The good news, Brooks says, is that there is another important skill called "crystalline intelligence" - "defined as the ability to use a stock of knowledge learned in the past" - that actually increases with age. The way to salvation, then, is to move from activities that rely predominantly on fluid intelligence to those that take advantage of well-developed crystalline intelligence, such as teaching.



This does not only mean professors at universities, but also coaching, training and generally advising people and companies. Brooks urges the use of older experts as companions in the management of start-ups. So that innovations also work on the market. Sounds almost revolutionary.

At that point in the book, I was finally captivated. Just as Brooks describes many examples from his life as a man in his late fifties, he was an exceptional musical talent who began to decline in his thirties and then had to change career paths, I have noticed many things for my life that fit the crystalline intelligence wonderfully.

On the one hand, my enthusiasm for the BrainCandies. Always compiling new knowledge about human behaviour and passing it on in a compact form. In my crystalline phase, I noticed connections that result from the better combination of acquired knowledge. This is how my books on brand experience and brand amazement came into being. And even more relevant the realisation that contexts and their specific memories explain human buying behaviour much better than the 'deep' psychological myths I had to struggle with for decades.

So everything will be all right by itself? In Brook's view, the golden idols of success, material possessions and social status are the greatest obstacles to the leap needed to find true joy in the second half of life.

For Brooks, it is necessary to take the time, at the latest in the second half of life, to review our ambitions for the rest of our lives and consider whether they do not at least need a refresher.

There are actually three ways you can go through:

- They can deny the facts and rage against the decline - and earn frustration and disappointment.
- You can shrug your shoulders and surrender to decay - and experience your ageing as an inevitable tragedy.
- You can accept that what has brought you to this point is no longer enough to take you into the future - that you need to develop new strengths and skills.

If you choose door number 3, congratulations. Get on your second curve. Jump from what rewards fluid intelligence to what rewards crystalline intelligence. Learn to use your wisdom. There is much good ahead of you. But it requires a new set of skills and a new mindset.

And now Brooks brings detailed advice on self-help. This includes many things that have been known to work, such as meditation, gratitude, reducing material ballast, intensifying social relationships. But also consciously dealing with death. Even if you know the topics, Brooks explains in an exciting way why they are particularly important for this phase of life.

In the reviews I noticed how much approval his 'meditative gratitude walk' has received.

It would go beyond the scope of this BrainCandy to go into more depth on his advice. Everyone will be able to pick out their own relevant things. I, for example, believe Brooks when he says that faith/spirituality is a great help, he is a true American. I don't doubt its effectiveness at all. But it's not for me. Science is more my spirituality.



Instead, I found his concept of the reverse bucket list inspiring. From his point of view, the bucket list propagated by many self-help gurus is more of a stressor in the second half of life. He takes stock of his bucket list once a year and considers which of the open projects would really still give him real satisfaction and whether there are not better things for his attention in the meantime. He feels deep satisfaction when he can eliminate projects undone.

While writing this BrainCandies, I got the nice news that Deutsche Bank boss Sewing has called together a sprightly group of pensioners as an advisory board.

This Global Advisory Board includes, among others, ex-Google boss Eric Schmidt, 67, former Pepsi boss Indra Nooyi, 67, and also the old master, Henry Kissinger, 99! They will meet for the first time in New York. And discuss complex topics such as trends in politics and economics.

So, our intelligence can always be used effectively. No matter which curve you are currently on - the second curve has exciting possibilities in store. Good luck in engaging the strengths of your crystalline intelligence!

Photo credit: [trumzz](https://www.istock.com/photo/trumzz), istock.com

Book recommendation

By Ralph Ohnemus, Uwe H. Lebok, Florian Klaus:

Context marketing

The key to consumer behaviour To [order](#)



Feedback, suggestions or criticism about this article:

braincandy@ka-brandresearch.com

The author

Ralph Ohnemus, CEO. Board member and main shareholder of K&A BrandResearch since 2001.

Previously a client of K&A BrandResearch for 15 years. National and international marketing and sales experience in senior management positions, including FMCG, fashion, media and telecommunications - most recently as SVP Consumer Sales responsible for marketing, sales and chain stores at Viag Interkom O2.

Contact: r.ohnemus@ka-brandresearch.com

