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You've sure got a lot on your mind

By: CYNTHIA LESCALLEET, Greater Houston Weekly



Kids get a head start on learning about the brain and its workings at The Health Museum. Photo courtesy The Health Museum

Health Museum thinking about how brain works

Long-dead but not forgotten by brain researchers, Phineas Gage survived 12 years after a metal rod pierced a section of his brain in a mid-19th century accident. Post injury, his personality and behavior changed, early evidence that parts of the brain have specific functions.

A recreated skull depicting Gage's brain injury is just one of the displays at Houston's Health Museum, where a new exhibit invites you to explore how the brain develops, works - and malfunctions.

With its special effects and colorful, interactive displays, "Brain: The World Inside Your Head" delves into the body's vast neurological system, with its billions of neurons and countless synapses. A lecture series complements the exhibit, which runs through May 6 at the John P. McGovern Museum of Health & Medical Science, 1515 Hermann Drive.

Source of our behavior, thought, emotion, speech, movement, personality, intellect and creativity, the brain has become a research and medical frontier, said neurologist Stanley Fisher, co-director of Movement Disorders and Neurorehabilitation Center at the Methodist Neurological Institute, which has collaborated with the museum on lecture topics.

"We still know so little about why and what and how it (the brain) works," he said. "When we study the brain's function, we get a unique insight into the nature of man."

Among the concepts displayed in the exhibit are brain development from infancy through old age, the evolution of scientific understanding of brain physiology, brain disorders, addiction, self-awareness and dreams. The nature of pain, the relationship between depression and creativity, and how drugs work are also presented.

Entertaining and educational, the exhibit and companion lectures are also intended to demystify and help remove any stigmas associated with brain disorders, promotional materials said.

Few families have been spared some sort of neurological incident or issue, Fisher said, be it migraines, strokes, Alzheimer's disease, addiction, mental illness or behavioral conditions. Even a backache involves the nervous system.

"People need to know more about their brains so they can take care of their neurological health," he said. "A healthy brain is responsible for defining our personality and our understanding of our place in a social structure. And since recovery of the nervous system is extremely difficult and unpredictable, it's important to prevent potential injury or disease."

As a neurologist and an academic, Fisher's professional interest is in rehabilitation, but he is personally interested in the brain's role in creativity.

"Our schedules leave us no room for (having) new ideas," he said. He recommends scheduling some downtime so unrelated thoughts can connect in new ways rather than just react to stimulus. A person trying to outrun a lion, for example, does not think about possible improvements to the internal combustion engine, he said.

The Health Museum's limited-engagement exhibit began its run at the Smithsonian, was made possible by Pfizer and was produced by Evergreen Exhibitions and the National Institutes of Health.

www.thehealthmuseum.org

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