

The Scarlet A and Esprit D' Escalier

Off on an early morning hike, a girlfriend and I encounter three younger friends of mine on the trail. Based on a lifetime of evidence I knew my nervous anticipation of a four-way introduction was the guarantee I'd forget a name. So, I defaulted to a brief if awkward hello to the threesome, and my hiking companion and I then continued on our way. Of course, I immediately thought of all sorts of things I could have said to include everyone, such as, to the threesome, "Do you all know Gretel?" and leave it to them to sort out.

Forgetting names when faced with making introductions I attribute to post-traumatic-introduction-syndrome, not that there is such a thing. But as a kid I was overwhelmed by all the rules and, when tested, rarely got a passing grade.

Look the person in the eye.

Use courteous language.

Use names and titles.

When introducing someone to a small group, name the group members first.

The order of introduction is by "rank" based on considerations of age and gender.

And then there are the qualifiers. All other things being equal, the person you've known the longest should be named first. In making social introductions, men are introduced to women as a sign of respect. Rank is more important than gender in business settings. Your relatives rank higher than your friends. I mean, come on! I make my case; I've always been miserable with introductions. This is not a late-in-life issue.

Or is it? Most of us 65 and older would admit that worries of cognitive decline tiptoe in at moments like this. The fear is that every brain fart (forgive the vulgarity), every instance of forgetfulness is a symptom of the scarlet A, the queen of dementia...Alzheimer's. In the U.S., it's a disease that currently affects nearly 6 million across all ages, 4 million 65 and older. According to Dr. Bradley Hyman, director of the Alzheimer's disease research unit at MassGeneral, more deaths can be attributed to Alzheimer's than to breast and prostate cancer combined.

But it's not all bad news. As Dr. Hyman pointed out during a recent presentation, there are preemptive assessments that detect proclivity for the disease and/or early evidence of it, and there are improved medications for Alzheimer's, most effective with early detection. Funding for Alzheimer's research is robust. There is even talk of a standardized test in the future.

Oldsters are inundated with suggested ways to strengthen noggin skills. Some sound draconian, some silly, others snake oily. But the latest I recently heard about, fasting two days per month, got my attention. Complementing extensive research being conducted in Europe and Australia, a study conducted by USC's Leonard Davis School of Gerontology and reported in the September 2022 issue of "Cell Reports," found dietary cycles that mimic fasting appear to reduce signs of

Alzheimer's in mice genetically engineered to develop the illness. "Mice that had undergone several cycles of a fasting diet had lower levels of two major hallmarks of the disease: amyloid beta – the primary driver of plaque buildup in the brain – and hyperphosphorylated tau protein, which forms tangles in the brain. They also found that brain inflammation lessened, and the fasting mice performed better on cognitive tests compared to the mice that were fed a standard diet." And get this, the fasting mice finished WORDLE in two tries and could say hyperphosphorylated fast, three times! Just kidding.

There is another approach, though it has yet to be vetted by rigorous studies in highbrow medical research centers. Let's call it the "joie de vivre" technique, the French culture's penchant to give everything a classy and intriguing name that somehow makes any gaffe, frog leg, faux pas or ailment seem chic and desirable rather than, as in this case, the possible symptom of a deadly disease. Forget about the decidedly déclassé moniker "brain fart." Instead, let's go with "esprit d'escalier." The French define it as coming up with the perfect repartee, the exact right thing to say but, sadly, after the fact as you're headed down the metaphorical stairs or the hiking trail.

To avoid after-the-fact, to get ahead of esprit d'escalier in health and in life, means leading with esprit. Stay up to date on, need I say, names as well as recommended lifestyle changes, tests and, when necessary, medications for what ails us. In the meantime, all the things we forgot to say or didn't think to say or thought to say too late...say them now, before we descend the ultimate staircase. Allons y!