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New Book by UCSB Author Offers a Formula for Alzheimer's Disease Management and Prevention

With the aging of nearly 80 million baby boomers, Alzheimer's disease is an impending epidemic that requires a new approach to prevention as well as management of the disease, according to a UC Santa Barbara professor who has co-authored a new book on the topic.

"The Alzheimer's Solution, How Today's Care is Failing Millions and How We can Do Better," by Kenneth S. Kosik, Harriman Professor of Neuroscience Research at UCSB and co-director of UCSB's Neuroscience Research Institute, is filled with new ideas about the disease. Kosik, who is both a neuroscientist and a physician, wrote the book with Ellen Clegg, science writer and communications specialist for the Broad Institute.

"We have no satisfactory treatment for Alzheimer's disease," Kosik said in an interview. "Drugs don't have much of an impact. If you have a problem for which neither surgery nor pills will work, then the medical system is really more of an obstacle than a help." He explained that people don't generally know this and they think that if they have a medical problem, they should seek help within the medical system. "It need not work that way," he said.

The authors outline a bold vision of one-stop centers that would provide expertise and reliable information on a range of topics: dietary regimens, physical and cognitive exercise programs that may help reduce the risk for dementia, and palliative measures to reduce suffering. The centers they describe would take a family-oriented, personalized approach to care and prevention, creating an atmosphere conducive to adult learning, and facilitating personal growth in areas that patients have enjoyed over a lifetime, including the arts, dance, socializing, and a host of other possibilities.

Kosik has created such a one-stop center in Santa Barbara, called The Center for Cognitive Fitness and Innovative Therapies (CFIT), as a test site for a new way of helping with Alzheimer's disease. It provides at one location all of the services known to decrease risk. It is the first full-service, community-based "cognitive shop" in the nation.

The authors state that the best way to cope with the disease is to try to treat it before it starts. They note that the disease process -- degeneration of the brain -- can begin as much as 10 years before there are any symptoms.

Kosik explains that there are both medical and lifestyle risks. These have been documented by scientists and physicians, in peer-reviewed journals, and educating oneself about them can reduce the risk of Alzheimer's disease.

The medical risks include cardiovascular factors such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes or a tendency toward diabetes. "All of these increase risk for Alzheimer's disease, and all of those things can be controlled medically," said Kosik. "We already knew these things were bad for you; the new information is that all of those things are risks for Alzheimer's disease too."

The following are ways to reduce the risk of getting Alzheimer's disease, according to the authors:

Exercise.

Exercise keeps every organ in the body healthy, including the brain.

Certain diets. The Mediterranean diet is the one that has shown documented results.

Reducing stress. Chronic stress -- such as divorce, losing a home, or losing a job -- is not good for the brain. Consulting counselors, coaches, social workers, and spiritual guides can help with recovery.

Keep your brain active. Present your brain with cognitive challenges. To reduce risk there are computer programs with graded series of cognitive challenges that keep the brain active.

Keep up a social life. Don't get isolated. Many studies have shown that successful aging -- people who reach their 90's and are still healthy -- are statistically more likely to be people who have friends.

Michael S. Gazzaniga, director of UCSB's Sage Center for the Study of Mind, commented on the book. "If you think getting old is simply about losing neurons, read this book," he said. "Many things change and the good news is that by realizing the complexities of aging, there are many ways to make life pleasant and rewarding. Ken Kosik and Ellen Clegg capture this idea with brilliance and verve."

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