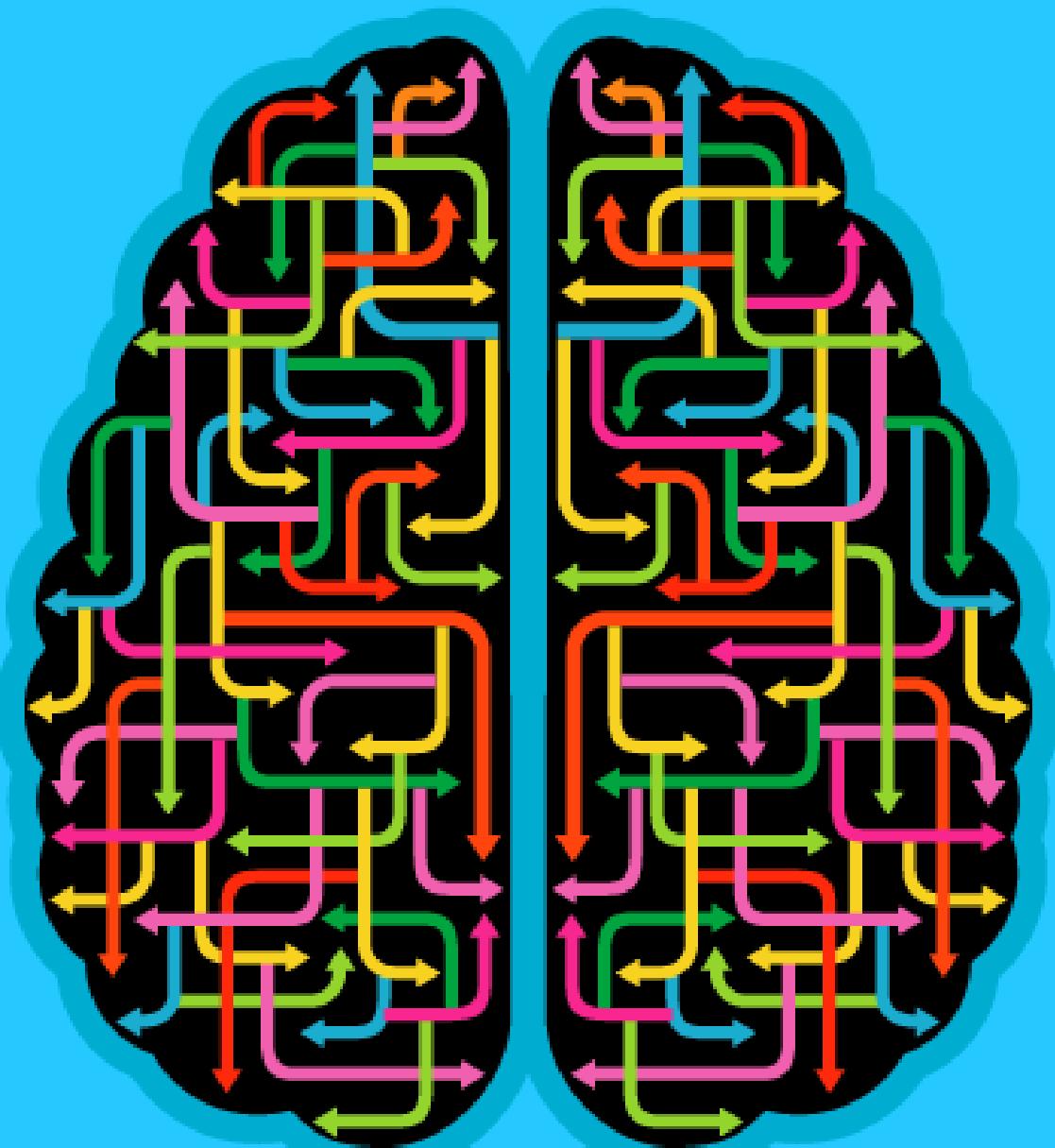


THE *Art* OF LEARNING



By The American institute of Health Care Professionals, Inc.

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Introduction

"Anyone who stops learning is old, whether at twenty or eighty. Anyone who keeps learning stays young. The greatest thing in life is to keep your mind young."

~Henry Ford

Most people can't wait to get out of school so they can stop learning, or at least, stop studying. Maybe you thought once you graduated you would be free to stop learning and start living. But in reality, life is all about learning. You are constantly learning new skills, though you may not realize it. And what a boring world we would live in if we didn't!

There are many different reasons why we participate in lifelong learning. At different stages of our lives, we have different needs, and we tend to build our skills around those needs, at least if we are wise we do. We might want to learn something so that we can share in the activity with a loved one, want to advance in our career or simply want to learn a skill that will make our lives better in some way. Whatever the reason, whether out of necessity or desire, we are wired for lifelong learning.

Lifelong learning has little to do with the formal classroom setting. It's about discovering new ways to do things, trying something you've always wanted to learn and acquiring skills that will help you do something more effectively or with more enjoyment. Even those people who loved school must admit that most of the things they have learned over their lifetime have been not in the formal classroom while earning a grade, but through questioning, listening and good old trial and error.

People who continue to seek out learning opportunities throughout their lives are happier, balanced and enthusiastic. Where others see problems, they see yet another chance to grow and develop in a new way, to advance their knowledge and skills in unexpected ways--in essence, they look for occasions to learn.

But what makes some people view learning this way? And how can you change your view so that you too look for learning opportunities? What resources are available to continue learning once you are out of school? And what, if any, benefits are there to lifelong learning? These questions and many others will be answered in this eBook, so keep reading.

The Power of Lifelong Learning

Until relatively recently, it was believed that our brains were fixed once we became an adult. It was believed that around the age of 25, our brains "hardened" and never changed after that. So while we could learn a lot and grow our knowledge and understanding through our childhoods and throughout college, after that, what we had was all we would ever have.

Now, with the advances in technology, especially in the field of neuroscience, we know much more about the human brain and how it works. We now have evidence that our brains do not stay fixed, but rather, that they change all throughout our lives.

Neuroplasticity, or brain plasticity, is the brain's ability to change throughout our lifespan. Our brain changes through childhood, but also when there is any type of brain injury and when we learn new things! Our brain is even more amazing than we thought! It can actually reorganize itself by creating new connections between neurons--the cells of the brain. These new connections occur when we learn new skills.

The internal structure of the synapse can also change as we acquire new knowledge and skills. In fact, when you learn something new, the part of the brain that controls that type of activity actually gets larger! For example, when you learn a new language, the left inferior parietal cortex, which is where language development is controlled, grows in size.

Practice Makes Perfect

We've all heard the expression, "Practice makes perfect," but now we know it's true. As we practice a new skill, the new neurons and connections we have built learning that skill become stronger and faster. The nerve impulses that the new connections use to "speak" to one another get stronger and smoother, so the neurons and synapse can communicate with each other faster. This is why as we practice something more and more, the activity starts to feel natural and is easier to complete. For example, a simple way to illustrate this is when you drive to a place where you go all the time, for example, to work. Many days you probably go on "autopilot" and show up to work without realizing how you got there. That's because you used the same route you always use, and the neurons can communicate seamlessly, so there's no real effort or attention needed to get you to work using that route. However, if you must change your route due to construction, for example, your brain will require you to apply effort and attention to getting to work so you don't get lost. This is because it's learning a new pattern that it hasn't seen before. These types of practical applications happen all the time, though we rarely recognize them.

But it takes more than frequent practicing for our brain to develop these new neuron pathways. It requires both quantity and quality. Frequent practicing any skill is vital to developing strong neuron pathways, but if you practice the skill incorrectly,

it doesn't help. For instance, if you are learning to play the guitar and you practice every day, but ignore your teacher's feedback and fix the mistakes you are making while practicing, the pathways won't strengthen and that part of your brain won't grow or develop the way it would if you were practicing both frequently and correctly. I told you our brains are even more amazing than we thought!

Besides keeping your mind sharp, scientists have proven that learning makes our lives better in every way, including:

- More self-confidence
- Stronger sense of purpose
- Connections with new people
- More hopeful
- Less averse to risk
- Greater ability to get the most out of life
- More empowerment through achievement
- More adaptable to change
- Strong social relationships
- Better self-esteem
- Greater satisfaction with life
- Better able to cope with stress
- Reduced risk of developing Alzheimer's and dementia as we age

The Learning Mindset

The old adage "Attitude is everything" gained popularity because it's so very true. Thanks to advances in neuroscience and psychology, we can now be certain that attitude, or mindset, as it is often called, really does make a huge difference in success. You may know someone who seems like they can learn anything easily. More than intelligence, they probably have a learning mindset that helps them tackle any new learning with self-confidence and gusto.

A mindset is simply what you believe about yourself--your talents, abilities and intelligence. Although they didn't have much formal education, Henry Ford and Thomas Edison had ideas and took action on them, believing that they could help others with their inventions. They understood that belief in oneself was half the battle, so they didn't allow their lack of education to control their thoughts about their intelligence or abilities to think and create. They had a learning mindset that provided them with the determination and enthusiasm to be curious, ask questions, learn and implement ideas. This is what made them so successful that they are still household names all over the world.

What is a Learner Mindset?

The learner mindset is also called the growth mindset. People with this mindset believe that they can learn any new skill or information they put their mind to, with enough studying, research and practice. In fact, they believe that anyone can do this. The learning mindset is characterized by:

- Being open-minded
- Pushing out of comfort zones
- Believing that mistakes aren't failures, but learning opportunities
- Thinking optimistically
- Taking note of feedback and apply it to the task
- Ignoring what others think about them
- Being curious
- Asking questions
- Taking time to reflect
- Looking for challenges
- Being motivated and passionate
- Loving to learn new things
- Being quick to adapt to change or setbacks
- Encouraging competition
- Believing that natural talent can be cultivated
- Believing we all have limitless potential
- Enjoy helping others develop their skills and talents

On the other side of this is the fixed mindset. Individuals with this mindset believe what talent they were born with is all they have--that it either isn't possible to develop their talents further, or they see it as just too much work to do so. They are the type of people who "rest on their laurels" and want to be praised for their talents, even though they were born with them, rather than working hard to develop them. It's easy to see why those with a growth or learning mindset can take on new tasks with ease, while those with a fixed mindset struggle with learning new things.

Stages of Learning

During different stages of our lives, we have different motivations for learning. This makes sense and ensures that what we are learning about is useful and will better our lives in some way. No one stage of life learning is more important than the others. It's a good thing that our interests and attitudes change as we mature, so why shouldn't our learning change with them?

Learning for career advancement

If you love your career, but want to keep your options open for advancement, you may need more formal education, but maybe not. Sometimes just learning a new needed skill is enough. There are often ways you can make yourself more valuable to your employer by taking a weekend seminar or going through the modules of a free online course. You could shadow a coworker who has the job you would like to take on. Adding to your "bag of tricks," even informally, can make you a greater asset to your employer, which can give you more job security and may even help you advance and get a raise.

Learning to get a new career

Many people in the last few years have found themselves unemployed when they thought they were safe. Job security is more and more scarce these days with downsizing and many long-established, large companies going out of business. If you find yourself in this position, there are things you can do to make yourself more employable, and some don't require a long, formal education or new degree. For example, you could brush up on your skills so that you are up on the latest changes in your field by reading the industry journals that have been stacking up--you know, the ones you never seemed to have time for. You could watch TED talks and read books on new technological advances and techniques in your field too. Or maybe you have always wanted to start your own business. It's easier than ever with the Internet. You could do informal research to determine what type of business model would work best for you. You could even learn some basic accounting or management techniques that would help you be a more successful entrepreneur. How about joining in Meetups or attending other local groups where you can network or learn from others. Just because you are looking for a job or a whole new career doesn't always mean formal classroom education.

Learning for personal development

Let's not discount learning for learning's sake. There's a lot to be said for the satisfaction that comes from learning a new skill or mastering a new hobby. It's also enjoyable to curl up with an interesting book and spend some time just learning about something you've always wondered about. Not a bad way to spend an afternoon, I'd say! Learning is a rewarding experience in itself. It boosts your self-confidence and makes you fun to have around...everyone enjoys good conversation, and when you know about a wide range of topics, you can easily struck up connections and make new friends. Learning improves our quality of life in innumerable ways that aren't tangible, but important for living a happy, fulfilled life.

Learning to make your life better in some way

We've established that lifelong learning improves our quality of life. But there are tangible ways it can make life better also. Maybe your goal is to save money so that your family can live on one salary and the other spouse can raise the children. A noble goal for sure! But how can learning help with this? Well, you can learn to fix your own appliances and car so you don't have to pay for replacements or a mechanic. You can learn new crafts and skill to help save too. Learning DIY crafts can be fun and stretch your funds by making it possible to make gifts instead of buying them or making some of your children's clothes or costumes for Halloween and school plays. You can learn how to raise chickens or grow an organic garden to supplement your food costs. There are many free and low-cost ways that you can learn to make your life better.

Learning after retirement

When they retire, many people are at a loss at how to spend their time. We all long for the days when we can retire and have all the free time we want, but really, once most people enjoy a few weeks of relaxing, they are ready to get active again. Work gives us much more than an income. It provides us with a sense of purpose and offers social interaction that we don't always consider until we don't have the job. Learning after retirement in many ways is easier. There's more time available and with fewer financial responsibilities since the children are on their own, lifelong learning can become a priority that you have time and money to invest. As already mentioned, learning is important for retired people--it keeps your brain active so that you can make the most of your golden years. Many college and universities offer low-cost tuition to seniors, so if this interests you, you can check into what's available to you in the formal educational setting, as well as informally. Who knows, maybe you will discover a passion you didn't even know you had!

Lifelong Learning Best Practices

So now that you understand why learning is so important all throughout your life, you may be wondering how to accomplish learning in a way that doesn't disrupt your whole life. After all, you've already gone through school, and now you have lots of responsibilities. But that doesn't mean you don't have or can't create the environment necessary for learning.

Perceived Obstacles of Learning

Sometimes we don't start something because we think for whatever reason, we won't be able to complete it. This is often the case with learning something new. But if we break down the "obstacles" (some might call them excuses) into bite-size pieces, it's easier to see that they aren't really blocking our way to success like we thought they were. Let's look at four perceived obstacles of learning that most people cite as the reasons they can't learn new things.

No time

Sometimes we don't start something because we think for whatever reason, we won't be able to complete it. This is often the case with learning something new. But if we break down the "obstacles" (some might call them excuses) into bite-size pieces, it's easier to see that they aren't really blocking our way to success like we thought they were. Let's look at four perceived obstacles of learning that most people cite as the reasons they can't learn new things.

If you are having trouble finding time to learn, try:

- List it out--Try keeping a list of what you do during the day for at least 48 hours. Write down everything. Then, at the end of that time, see where you can exchange one or two activities and add in learning instead. For example, you may spend a total of 3 hours watching TV in the evenings. What if you spent just one of those hours learning a foreign language? Or whatever it is you would like to learn. When we really evaluate how we spend our time, we can usually find a few hours a week to schedule learning time.
- Learn on the fly--We all have little sections of the day when we could sneak in some learning. Instead of messing around on social media during your lunch break, read a book. Waiting for the kids to finish soccer practice? Tune into an educational podcast. Waiting in the dentist office or the motor vehicle registry can be a chance to practice your new skill. For many types of learning you can find some aspect that you can take with you wherever you go. Heck, stick that yarn and crochet hook in your bag and go.

- Find downtime--Do you ride the bus, train or subway to work? These are great opportunities to learn. Just like learning on the fly, these times are often ones where we sit idle when we could be making use of them. You'll probably find that you get so engrossed in what you are learning that the long commute goes by all too quickly.
- Schedule time--adding learning to your planner or to do list will make it happen more easily. Think about all the ways you make sure everyone else is taken care of. Don't you deserve the same? Schedule time to spend learning--no one else needs to know what you are doing during that time. If someone asks you to do something during that time, just tell them you have a previous engagement. They don't need to know you will be going to yoga class.
- Include the family--Set up a night each week when everyone in the family is learning or engaged in some sort of mind-expanding exercise. You could all read or practice your new skill together. This sets a great example for your children--you are showing them that learning is important--no matter what your age.
- Do your homework--If you have younger kids, they will think this is cool. When they do their homework at night, sit down with them at the kitchen table and do yours. Even if you are reading a book or blog or maybe working on a new hobby, they will take notice that you are making an effort to continue learning. Plus, you will be right there if they have a question on their assignments.
- First things first--Set aside the first 15-30 minutes each morning to learn something. This will ensure you don't run out of time later in the day if unexpected stuff comes up. Plus, it starts you off on the right foot. It gets your mind working and brings curiosity into your life, which can increase your creative powers and curiosity to the rest of your day.

No money

You may think that you don't have the money to delve into lifelong learning, but like with time, when something is a priority in our lives, we find the money. And, remember that you don't need to sink thousands of dollars into a formal education--there are lots of free and low-cost ways to learn. For example, there's no need to go out and purchase a bunch of new books. Go to your library or to used book stores to find resources to learn from. And don't forget all the free resources online too!

If you are having trouble finding the money for learning, try:

- Be mindful--Some learning opportunities are more costly than others, so consider the price before you choose what you want to learn. For example, learning to play golf is expensive. You need all the equipment, lessons with the golf pro and you have to pay to play. On the other hand, learning the history of golf can be interesting and is free. You can read books from the library, listen to famous golfers being interviewed and watch YouTube videos on how to improve your game.
- Earn the cash--Okay, so maybe you really want to learn to play golf, but you don't have the funds. Consider ways you can make the extra cash you need so that you can learn to play. You could sell stuff around your house that you never use, start your own

- Join a club--If you've never heard of Meetup, you are truly missing out (plus you have probably been living in a cave for the last 10 years). Meetup is an online directory of local groups who are always accepting new members. You can find groups on any topic imaginable. You can spend hours talking and learning from others who have the same interest as you do. You might even find some new friends who are happy to loan you books or other tools so that you can learn even more.
- Choose wisely--Did you know that often times, professors who teach at a university also teach the same or similar classes at the community college or even the community center? Why pay for a costly course when you don't need to, especially if you are doing it for fun? You can learn the same material for a fraction of the cost. If you are a senior or a veteran, check into local colleges to see if you get a tuition break or even free tuition on certain classes of interest!
- Budget it--We all make choices about how we will spend our hard-earned money. If learning is a priority (and it should be!) then add it to the budget under entertainment. If necessary, cut back on some of the other things you currently have. Do you really need 700 TV channels? Are you willing to eat at home a little more often so that the money you save can go towards learning something new? Keep in mind, lifelong learning doesn't have to be expensive to be quality. Even finding a few bucks a month that you can set aside will give you enough to learn something new that you've always wanted to know more about.
- Take advantage of free--There's tons of free information available--and today more than ever. Okay, you do have to pay your Internet bill, but really, wouldn't you have Internet anyway? Google to see what videos, free courses, blogs, podcasts and forums are available on your topic of choice. Need some books? Don't forget about your public library. Even if they don't have what you want, they can usually inter-library loan books quickly...and it's free!

No opportunities

It's harder to use this excuse to avoid learning in our digital age. We have a world of information for free or almost free at our fingertips daily. Even taking formal classes is easy now, no matter where you live. If you have good Internet, you can take classes from just about any college or university from all around the globe. You no longer have to depend on learning about only what you can find around your area. The sky is the limit, and you can take your pick of what topics to choose from and how you learn about it!

If you are having trouble finding learning opportunities, try:

- Get online--In the West, it's pretty rare to be unable to get Internet services, and the Net provides you with unbelievable free information on every topic under the sun! You can now learn from teachers from all over the world if you want to take formal courses, but informal information is also crazy easy to find. We've already mentioned blogs, podcasts and forums, as well as TED talks and Udemy courses. Did you know that some major universities like Harvard and MIT now offer the same courses that they teach for

- Find a group--Ask around and find out if there's a group in your local area that meets to discuss the topic you are interested. You might also try looking on Meetup or just Googling it. Or you could really get proactive by putting a short ad on Craig's List or in your local paper asking for information on a group you can attend. One of the cool things about learning as an adult is it gives us a chance to socialize with people we might not otherwise meet.
- Start a group--Tried everything and can't find a group to join? Why not start your own! Whether it's a nonfiction book club or a philosophy club or a scrapbooking group, there are probably others in your community who would also wish there was a group where they could learn from one another. If you can't find anyone else who is interested just by casually asking those who you think might want to join, try the ideas above--put an ad on Craig's List, start a Meetup online (it's free!) or place an ad in your local newspaper.
- Trek into town--If you are determined to learn and don't have anything around you that's close by, it's usually possible to go into your closest big town to access courses or groups that you can't find closer to home. Doing this a couple of times a month usually isn't that big of an obstacle.

Not smart enough

A lot of smart people had a real challenge in school. Sometimes they were told untruths about their skills and abilities by teachers, peers or even their own parents. But if you really do want to learn, you can overcome the negative self-talk that you hear in your ear every time you think about trying something new. Think only dumb people flunk out or are told they aren't up to the challenge of learning something? Albert Einstein flunked out of university and yet went on to be one of the most celebrated scientists the world has ever known. What he had was diligence. He didn't let the naysayers tell him what he was or wasn't capable of. You can overcome it, just like he did!

If you are finding it hard to believe you are smart enough to learn, try:

- Start with what you already know--build upon the knowledge you already have on a subject. This will motivate you to give it a try without a lot of perceived risk.
- Learn about something that fascinates you--it doesn't matter what it is. The chances are that if you are enthralled in the subject matter, you will learn effortlessly. In fact, you probably won't even label what you are doing as "learning."
- Forget the past--we can all get hung up on past beliefs about ourselves and our abilities based on our experiences or what we were told about ourselves. But that was long ago. You can move beyond that mindset and prove that you aren't those things you believed about yourself!
- Look at your attitude--if you start a new learning project thinking you won't be able to accomplish it, you are probably right. Take a positive mental attitude and give it your best shot. Catch yourself thinking negative thoughts and replace them with positive ones.

- Remember this--you are only in competition with yourself. There's no need to prove yourself to anyone. You are learning to keep your mind active, to develop a new skill and to have fun. So relax and enjoy yourself!
- Reframe learning--A great many people mistake education level with intelligence. But what if I told you that Henry Ford and Thomas Edison had very little formal education? It's true. Their intelligence, just like yours, wasn't based on the amount of formal education they had. Anyone can learn anything--if they work at it!

Fun Ways to Learn

We learn new things almost every day, even though we aren't aware of it. Every time we take a new route to the store, use a new appliance or make a new recipe we are learning. Lifelong learning doesn't have to mean spending a sunny afternoon with dry textbooks. It's fun! Have you thought about trying some of these fun ways of learning?

Learn to play a musical instrument

People often envy others who have musical talent. If you are one of these people, why not learn to play an instrument yourself? Find a local teacher and go for it. If you can't afford private lessons, ask the teacher if they would be willing to barter or start out by learning the basics by finding videos online. Playing music is a way to bring enjoyment to your life, as well as others'.

Fix your own stuff

Instead of immediately replacing a broken item in your home or calling a repairman, give yourself a chance to learn how to fix it yourself. You can find YouTube videos that show you step-by-step how to fix a toilet, flush your radiator and repair a broken toaster. Or go to the library and get a book on how to fix the item. There's nothing quite like being self-reliant. Being your own handyman is hugely rewarding, plus it will save you tons of money!

Learn to cook

Most people who think they can't cook have never really given themselves a chance to. It's just like anything else--it's a skill you have to practice. Start out with easier recipes and then graduate onto more challenging ones. Try gourmet meals or go with a theme and fix all types of Italian food, or whatever is your favorite. Then, instead of going out to your favorite Italian restaurant, you can have the satisfaction (and savings) of making the same dishes yourself. You can even show off your new mad skills by cooking for others.

Learn a language

Like learning to play an instrument, lots of people wish they could speak another language. But just because you aren't in school anymore doesn't mean you can't do that. Find free or low-cost language materials in the form of audio, videos and books at the library or online. This can be a fun way to prepare for a trip to another country. Remember, learning doesn't have to mean mastering something. You can learn as much of a new language as you want. If you want to learn just enough to help you communicate with waiters and hotel staff or to ask for directions, that's perfectly fine. You are in charge of your own lifelong learning.

Take up genealogy

It's fascinating to learn where you came from and what your ancestors were like. It builds a bridge between the past and the present. It's now so much easier to do genealogical research! There are free and premium databases online and genealogical software you can buy to find out just about any detail you want to know. You can even see copies of actual documents your ancestors signed, like their draft cards or marriage certificates.

Volunteer

While volunteering is all about helping others, you can still learn while you do it. You can learn new skills, meet people you normally would never meet and try new things that you might never have tried for your own benefit. We can all learn from others if we are open to it. For example, if you volunteer to help recent immigrants improve their English, you can learn all about the customs and cultures of their countries. Volunteering is a fabulous way to enjoy many of the aspects of learning, such as social interaction and a deeper sense of purpose.

Take up a new hobby

Trying your hand at a new hobby is a fun way to add lifelong learning to your life. Or, maybe as your responsibilities grew, you dropped a hobby due to lack of time. Why not try it again? Participating in a hobby is something we look forward to and offers many new ways to learn, no matter what hobby you chose.

Write a book

Approximately 80% of people in the United States say they have a book in them. Are you one of them? If so, why not get started? There's never been a better time to write a book because anyone can self-publish an eBook now! No matter if what you enjoy writing is nonfiction or the next great American novel, making sure it gets in the hands of others is now under your control. Or, maybe you don't want to publish it. Maybe you want to write for the satisfaction of it or you want to write your memoirs to give to your children or grandchildren. Writing is an excellent way to learn and can even provide you with some extra income, if you want.

Start a blog

Do you have a hobby or talent that you enjoy sharing with others? Have you ever considered starting a blog? It's a great way to connect with new people and teach informally to people around the globe. Plus, you can do it for free! Some people make a living from blogging while others use it as a sort of public journal. Either way, it's a great way to learn some new skills and develop ones you already have.

Tips for Lifelong Learning

Get creative--Doodle, journal, color, join a choir, scrapbook. Doing anything creative is a great way to learn about yourself, develop skills, keep your mind active and enjoy yourself.

Make a "to learn" list--Just like a to do list, a to learn list helps you remember things that came up in conversations or something you saw on TV or in a movie that you want to know more about. This is a handy tool to stoke consistent curiosity.

Make new friends--It's fun and educational to meet new people, especially when you have things in common to discuss. Find groups or individuals who, like you, cherish learning. Social interaction can be one of the benefits of lifelong learning.

Keep a notebook handy--When you keep a notebook with you at all times, you can easily jot down things that you want to add to your "to learn" list, a book someone recommends or even your own epiphanies about something you have been learning.

Always have a book--Keep a good book in your purse or car so you always have something to do (and learn) when you have unexpected downtime. This is even easier now, since many people read on their tablets or phones, which they always have with them anyway.

Allow time for reflection--Reading and studying are a part of learning, but so is reflecting on your own ideas about what you are reading about. Use your notebook to journal and make time for pondering how these new ideas connect in unique ways or challenge earlier beliefs.

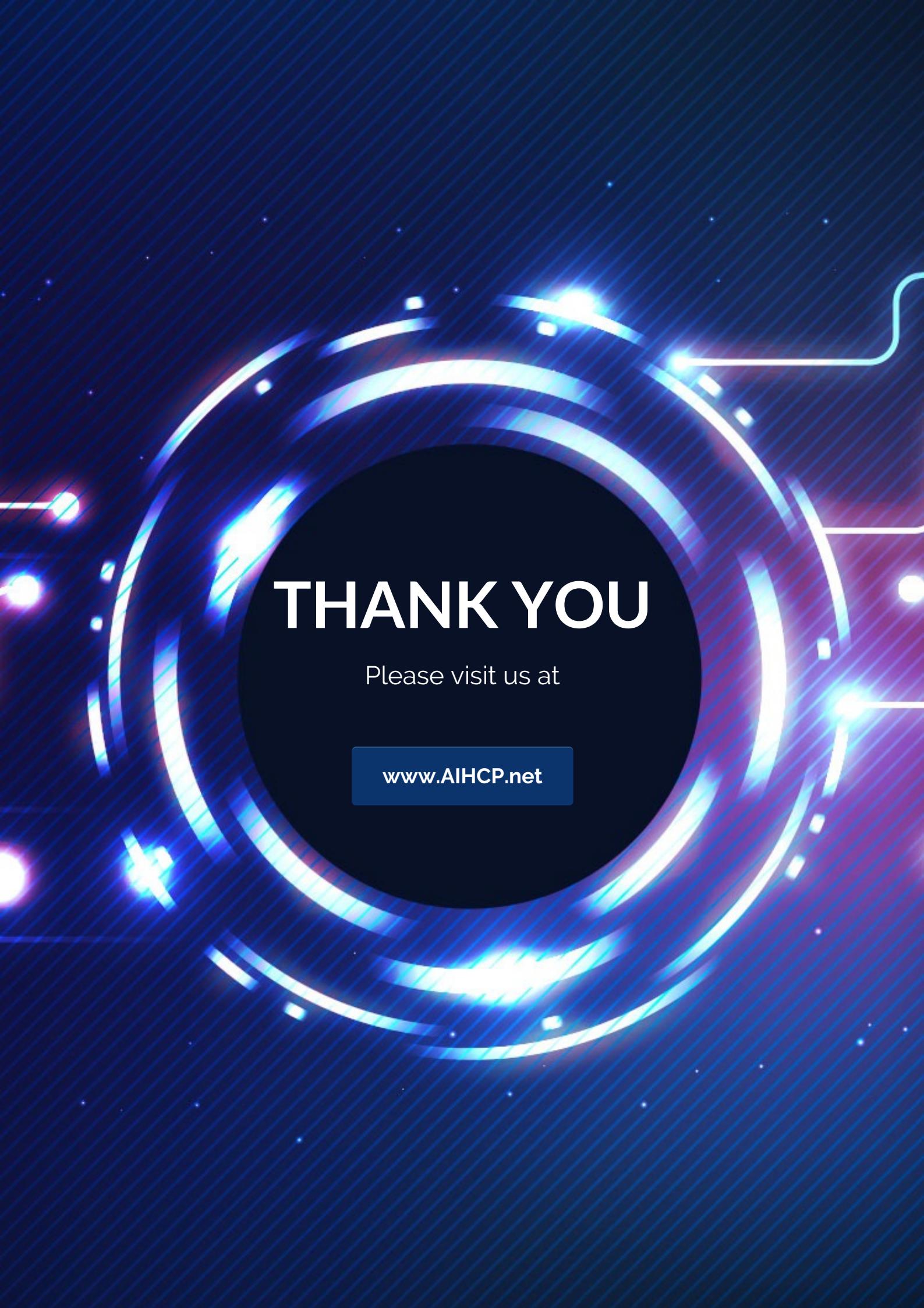
Prove yourself wrong--Challenge yourself to take up a task you have always thought you'd be lousy at. Whether it's oil painting or building an invention you've thought up, if you attack the task with enthusiasm and a learner's mindset, you just may surprise yourself!

Conclusion

Lifelong learning is something that everyone should strive for. It keeps your mind sharp as you age and it builds self-confidence and provides you with a sense of purpose. Plus, it's easy and fun and can be free or very low-cost, depending on what you decide to learn. You may want to learn new skills to propel your income earning ability or to start a new career, or you might just do it as a way to enjoy life and grow as a person. With lifelong learning, you no longer need to fill someone else's requirements--you can choose from any topic or skill that interests you...and there won't be a test at the end!

Here are some ideas to take away with you as we wrap up this book:

- The art of lifelong learning has nothing to do with intelligence or formal education
- Learning makes us healthier and happier
- You are never too old to learn
- Learning doesn't have to be expensive
- Learning for learning's sake is its own reward
- Making lifelong learning a priority is something everyone should do
- You can make time for lifelong learning



THANK YOU

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