

Thou Shalt Not Disappoint the Wife

... and other longevity commandments from UCLA's Dr. Gary Small

By Charlie Schroeder

From an early age I have taken it for granted that, like my grandparents, I would die really, really old. There's no reason, barring a lightning strike on the back nine, to imagine otherwise. But Gary Small thinks I'm wrong. "It's not all genetics," he tells me in a voice as soothing as a scented candle. "A large portion of how the brain ages comes from nongenetic factors."

I'm hanging out on a spring evening with Dr. Small at the Bel-Air home he shares with his wife, two children and a Labradoodle named Rocky. The doctor is 54, but he looks far too young in his untucked dress shirt, designer jeans and Euro eyeglasses to have racked up a 57-page curriculum vitae that culminates in his post as director of the UCLA Center on Aging. The two of us are seated on a voluptuous beige couch in a tidy room. Even the firewood is stacked in perfect formation because, as I will soon learn, clutter creates

stress and stress hastens death. Behind us, through the glass doors and beyond the hilltop pool, the late afternoon sun backlights the Palos Verdes Peninsula. Small is talking about incidents in which he walks into a room and forgets why he's there. Experts like him call these lapses age-associated memory impairment. I admit that I occasionally experience what we lay people know as senior moments, but I figure I owe them to smoking pot. Small explains that exercising the mind and adhering to the longevity diet that he cooked up for his forthcoming mass-market book can help curtail them.

"You're close to your peak of mental capability," he tells me. "You're 34. You're very sharp. How is your memory?"

"Selectively bad," I reply.

"When are the times it doesn't work for you?"

With no coaxing, I spew my issues all over Small and his immaculate floors



(AEROBICIZE THE BRAIN)



(EXERCISE EVERY DAY)



(UNCLUTTER WORK SPACE)



(LEARN TO MEDITATE)

as he scribbles notes on a yellow legal pad. I yap away about my two-year marriage, my diet, work and tendency to procrastinate. He prods me for details. Hell, I'm thinking, what's this got to do with my brain?

I also confess to: drinking up to four Cokes a day, eschewing exercise for TiVo'd "Daily Show" episodes, fretting over my role as breadwinner, working nights and weekends instead of having sex, putting off vacation plans and commuting two hours each weekday on the 134/101/405 freeways.

"It's a good thing you're meeting with me now before it's too late," Small says when I finally shut up.

His antiaging algorithm is this: Happy life + healthy life = long life. It's a simple formula, but it stymies plenty of Americans. How else to explain a self-help industry constructed of common sense? Eat less and exercise more, the book doctors tell us. Replace bad habits with good ones. You can't change

what you don't acknowledge.

At least "The Longevity Bible," Small's third in a series of brain fitness titles, fortifies its commandments with reams of persuasive scientific research. Studies show that visiting "a house of worship" once a week, meditating, laughing, being married, living near a park, "eating a diet rich in antioxidant fruits and vegetables, olive oil and monosaturated fats" and owning a pet can add years to our lives. That's funny, I'm thinking as I thumb through the pages, the thought of owning a pet makes me want to kill myself.

It is clearly too late for me, but Small, taking his own advice to maintain an optimistic outlook, puts me on a regimen of "mindful awareness," which he defines as "moment-to-moment awareness of one's thoughts, feelings and physical states." In particular, he suggests practicing it on my wife. "You want to be mindful of what's important to her," he says. It's a skill, he assures me,



(GET PLENTY OF SLEEP)



(GET A PET)

that will pay big dividends. He also maps out a mel-lower commute for me: Take Mulholland to Coldwater and avoid the freeway to eliminate stressful lane changes.

When Small and his wife, Gigi Vorgan, finally escort me to the front door, I pause to admire the skylights. “I have to clean that one,” Vorgan says, gazing up at a cobweb blemish. As we reach the threshold, Small agrees to release me on one condition. “Can I trust that you’re going to make reservations?” he asks. “You can use the computer here.”

I’m under doctor’s orders to keep a promise to my wife to take her to Palm Springs for the weekend. “Happily married people live the longest,” Small’s “Bible” says.

“Don’t listen to him!” my co-worker barks.

I’m in the pantry at work peeling my midmorning snack, a hard-boiled egg. After tossing the yolk down the disposal, I had bragged to this healthier-than-thou colleague that I am a changed man. For one thing, I’m eating five small meals a day to steady my blood sugar. For another, I’m forsaking Coca-Cola for Diet Pepsi. “As many as you want,” Small had told me during our diet discussion.

“Eat chocolate instead,” my co-worker suggests. “That Diet Pepsi stuff has worse things in it than Coke. Stuff that will do bad things to you.” “Bad things,” I suspect, is in this context a euphemism for cancer.

I slink back to my office. Why would Dr. Small want to kill me? I crack open the Diet Pepsi and sip what tastes like liquid aluminum foil as I click on an e-mail from my wife reminding me yet again to book our getaway.

A five-minute online search for vacancies in our price range yields only one option, the Highlander Lodge in Desert Hot Springs. A few days later we pull up to a one-story structure with peeling paint and a Scotsman sign flapping hard in the 50-mph wind. Sand swirls around the six cats roaming the

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courtyard as we force our way to a room the color of day-old salmon. I throw myself face down on the bed and close my eyes. I’m the world’s worst husband.

Then I remember to think positively. There are hot tubs and a deck with views of distant snow-capped mountains and a soda machine that dispenses Diet Pepsi. I can get in my prescribed “daily 10 minutes of brisk exercise” on the rusty rowing machine parked near the pool and practice the “Bible’s” Look, Snap, Connect name-retention game with the cats. (In my mind the cross-eyed one is Columbo.) And despite our room’s retirement home decor, my wife and I have our best sex since saying I do.

“Can I comment on a couple of things?” Small says a week later during my checkup. I had just

confessed that my procrastination in finding a hotel cost us the perfect Palm Springs weekend. “It’s not the place and the wallpaper,” he says. “It’s the two of you having the chance to connect and get together.” I summon the nerve to ask, what’s up with the Diet Pepsi? My notes from our session say “drink as much Diet Pepsi as possible,” but people keep saying it’s going to kill me. Small replies that the goal is to wean myself off the high-calorie Coke, then cut down on the Diet Pepsi. “Substituting something a little healthier,” he says.

Just the other day I poured myself a glass of orange juice and then wandered off. About an hour later, my wife came across it and asked me if I intended to drink it. I looked at her, blank-faced, and said, “Yes, yes, of course.” But I was thinking, I never would have left a Coke unattended.

I wondered what Cruz Hernandez, believed to be the world’s oldest living person, drinks. She celebrated her 128th birthday in May and, according to news reports, sleeps most of the time. Me, I’ll happily call it a day as soon as I lose the will to pretend I’m as sharp as ever. **w**