

# The value of my brain

By Wendy McNeill

**M**y brain is worth something. I should be more specific: Pictures of my brain are worth something. UCSD is conducting two MRI studies, and I'm enrolled. I'm enrolled because, one, I believe in science, and two, I believe in cash.

On the day of my appointment, I was instructed to meet one of the research doctors on the UCSD campus. The doctor went by her first name (how refreshing), had an Australian accent (nice to hear), and was punctual. We made our way through the School of Medicine to the MRI lab. Along our walk, I took the opportunity to ask about the study. I was told the control group was made up of "healthy brains" while the other group—my group—consisted of "bipolar brains." At this juncture, my warm and fuzzy feelings started to turn cold.

I was bowled over that the doctor seemed completely at ease using such politically incorrect terminology. I mean, I know I have a pathology, but do I like to be reminded to my face that I'm not "healthy?" Why didn't she call me fat in the bargain?

"So what exactly is a healthy brain?" I asked. Hemming and hawing ensued. "Oh, brains that haven't had strokes, for example," she said. "Brains that haven't had a head injury. Brains that aren't taking certain kinds of medications," she added. The doctor pointed out that quite a lot of people in their lifetimes have taken antidepressant medication. "You mean like one in four?" I asked. Actually, she did mean like one in four. I wondered just where were those healthy brains out there.

I started to contemplate the unhealthiness of my brain. It was possible the MRI would find something unhealthy about it. Maybe my brain would turn red when it should turn blue, or would light up like a

Christmas tree when something, say like, an In-N-Out burger flashed in front of it—reflecting, you know, lowered inhibition and no self-control. Those pesky bipolar brains!

Once we reached the MRI building, and consent forms were completed, the researchers trained me to do a "task." I cringed. I've never done well with these types of "tasks." And this time was no



Photo: ELLEN FRUDAKIS

## So what **exactly** is a healthy brain?

exception. There was a joystick involved, and due to my lack of mechanical savvy, I kept getting the answers incorrect. I mean, the answers were monkey-level, but I was just having trouble with the hardware. I panicked. What if my brain really did look unhealthy? What if I threw off the results of the study and made my people look bad just because I had failed to

play enough video games in my youth? It seemed so patently unfair. I didn't ask for reassurance. I just let them load me into the (cold!) machine.

To my delight, I skyrocketed up the learning curve and soon mastered the joystick and the task. I happily spent an hour or so inside the machine, certain that my brain was going to be indistinguishable from "the Healthy Group." They unloaded me out of the MRI, and I put my shoes, belt, and glasses back on. Note: There's something bizarre about being in a lab with a bunch of investigators without your gear. Need I say I felt vulnerable?

Before leaving, I asked the principal investigator a few more questions about the study. Dr. E. informed me that they're trying to find out if a certain part of the brain performs differently in the bipolar brain. "You mean the executive function?" I asked. Yes, that was it. I made the observation that a stable bipolar brain is probably going to look just like a "healthy brain." The doctor merely stared at her computer screen.

I got my cash and made my way unescorted back to my car. Fifty-five dollars! That's half my gas and electric bill for the month. Not too shabby. But is my brain shabby? That was the real question.

Well, truthfully, my brain has experienced a traumatic scenario or two...or three. But is it "unhealthy," as the good doctor would suggest? Most emphatically, no. I can calculate, memorize, determine, discover, relate, recall, reason, and more, and after all, I'm smart enough to have a gaggle of PhDs pay me to take pictures of my brain.

Now, that's worth something! 🍌

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