

Don't jump in at the deep end!

By Deborah Noel

Every evening around 10:00 after the dishes are done, lunches made for the next day and children settled for the night Cindy sits down to her computer. Is she playing computer games? No. Conducting a clandestine cyber relationship? Not tonight. Tonight, Cindy is surfing the Net doing research for her next school assignment.

Cindy is one of many midlifers (people who are 35 and up) returning to school to continue her formal education. The reasons for midlifers returning to school are as varied as the students themselves; however, their challenges and advantages are very similar. Recent research shows that the number of people returning to school in midlife (40 and over) is higher and higher every year.

Many people return to school after a major life change such as a divorce but others are also going back to improve their career prospects or to expand their intellectual horizons. I returned to school at the age of 40, following a divorce.

Although you may feel that you won't be competitive going back to school in midlife you will find that you have some advantages over younger students. Your memory may not be what it was when you were twenty, but older students are often more motivated. Many of my classes were predominantly people returning to upgrade skills. My older comrades had a stronger sense of why they were back at school and had developed organizational skills they did not have prior to entering the work world. Midlife students often say that they benefit from their experience and can often relate academic scenarios to real life ones, thereby helping the learning process. In fact, midlife students often report that despite the challenges they often earn higher marks than they may have in their younger school days. I know that my grade point average upon graduating was considerably higher than my marks in college. Here are some tips for you before you jump into the School Pool!

1. Start in the Shallow End! If you have been out of the school scene for quite a while going back can take an adjustment. Either start out

by just taking one course in your chosen area of study or take some courses just for fun through continuing education.

A good idea is to take a course in writing or math at the high school level to brush up on groundwork. You might also try taking a course in the humanities to practice your essay writing or upgrade your computer skills. Make sure before entering any program that you have the prerequisites that are required.

2. Different strokes for different folks! The way you studied as a teenager may not work for you as an adult. In my teen years I did most of my studying in front of the television. Now, I find I have to concentrate more and take notes, as my memory is not what it used to be (despite copious doses of ginkgo biloba). What I do find is that I am now more able to focus and make homework a priority.

Everyone has a learning style. Some experts say there are as many as seven different learning styles; but it's easier to narrow it down to three types of learning: Listening Learners, Seeing Learners and Touch/Experience Learners. As an example, think about one of life's earliest lessons—often taught by our mothers: "The stove can burn you!" Listening Learners heard their mother, believed the information, and never touched a stove. Seeing Learners watched another person touch the stove, and never touched it. Experience Learners touched the stove but only once! There are many websites that can help you discover your learning style and give you study tips designed to your particular style.

Are you doing Laps or Recreational Swimming? Have an eye on your end goal. Are you returning to school for stimulation? A recreational pursuit? Or are you hoping to improve your career prospects? If you are hoping for a career change, do your research first. Make sure that employers accept the program you are in. See if your current employer provides incentives for people returning to school.

If you are going for intellectual stimulation or for purely recreational reasons, don't just stick with the traditional academic settings. There are many organizations throughout the GTA that offer sewing classes, gourmet cooking and craft programs. The Toronto Public Libraries offer short-term day programs along with book clubs.

There are also companies such as the Learning Annex that offer short-term or one-day courses.

3. **Don't go swimming alone!** Build a support group around you. There will be times when you will encounter some difficulties along the way. Look to your fellow students or friends to provide support and reassurance. Your fellow students will be or may have already encountered some of the roadblocks you are experiencing and may be able to help you out of them. You may want to form a study group of people who are like-minded learners. (Remember your learning style!). I found, when doing my certificate program, that many of my fellow students were my greatest source of inspiration to stay in the program. In fact, many of us keep in touch to this day to share, to network and just socialize.

Whatever your reason for returning to school you will find the experience to be at times stimulating, at times frustrating but ultimately rewarding. You will learn a whole lot about the subjects you choose, but what is for certain, you will learn a whole lot about yourself. As Christopher Morley, Rhodes Scholar and playwright once said "There are three ingredients to the good life; learning, earning, and yearning" May you have all three!

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