



"I saw red—and then nothing."

Anne Kearney didn't know something was growing in her brain. Until it nearly killed her. As told to Judi Ketteler

The summer night I almost died began sticky-hot, hectic—and happy. It was a Saturday in July 2002, and Peristyle, the restaurant I owned with my husband, Tom Sand, in the French Quarter of New Orleans, was packed. I worked between 65 and 70 hours a week, but at age 35, I had already achieved my lifelong goal of being head chef of a successful restaurant. Plus, I was in the best physical shape of my life. That morning, I had gone on a 5-mile hike (sporting a 35-pound backpack) with my friend Liz, a fellow chef. We had been working out daily to prepare for a three-week hiking tour of France, and we were leaving in three days.

Home at last at around 2 A.M., I took a shower to wash away the smell of sizzling garlic and onions. My mind wandered to my upcoming trip. I needed a vacation (badly) and couldn't wait to explore the farmers' markets of Provence.

As I stepped out of the tub, I was instantly overcome with the worst headache of my life. I had never felt a pain this intense before; my entire head felt as if it were going to burst. I stumbled, stark naked and dripping wet, into our living room and shouted, "Tom, Tom, my head is exploding! Something is wrong!"

He leaped off the couch. "Should I call 911?" I said yes, and then no, and then yes again. I saw a sea of red and I passed out.

At Memorial Medical Center in New Orleans, a CT scan showed that I had a ruptured aneurysm: a weak blood vessel that had ballooned and popped, causing bleeding in and around my brain. Doctors couldn't explain why it had happened. On the outside, I had felt invincible; but inside, a blood vessel had been waiting to rupture, perhaps since birth, and I never knew it.

While I was unconscious, the doctors told Tom that I probably wouldn't live. About 40 percent of the roughly 27,000 Americans who have ruptured brain aneurysms each year die within 24 hours, and of those who survive, 20 percent to 30 percent will experience brain damage or paralysis, or die within weeks. Tom called my parents in Ohio and told them to get on a plane that night. It's hard for me to even reflect on the pain and fear that I know Tom felt. I can't imagine being told I might lose him.

Frank Culicchia, M.D., one of the state's top neurosurgeons, had a bed waiting as soon as the ambulance could transfer me to West Jefferson Medical Center across town. He quickly confirmed that the

the list issue
WACKY BRAIN FACT #2
The brain uses roughly 12 watts of electricity (about as much as the bulb in your fridge), mostly to pass info between neurons. And it's a power hog: The brain consumes 17 percent of the body's total energy.

abnormal blood vessel had stopped bleeding but was in danger of rupturing again.

My doctors decided it would be best to repair the aneurysm with endovascular therapy, a nonsurgical procedure that involved threading tiny catheters through an artery in my leg and up into the blood vessels in my brain. There, doctors would deliver soft titanium coil spirals through the catheters into the aneurysm in the blood vessel wall until it was filled up, cutting off blood flow to the aneurysm and preventing another rupture. They performed the procedure late Sunday morning, while Tom called our friends to let them know what had happened. About three hours later, Dr. Culicchia delivered the news that the coiling was successful. For the first time since I had collapsed, my family had hope that I would survive.

Apparently, I floated in and out of consciousness for a few days, but I don't remember anything until I fully came to on Thursday. I wasn't in any pain—in fact, I remember waking up and seeing

GOING MENTAL

For the first two months in the womb, you weren't a girl or a boy—as far as your brain was concerned, anyway. Then it began the lifelong journey of making you the smart, unique woman you are today.

IN UTERO

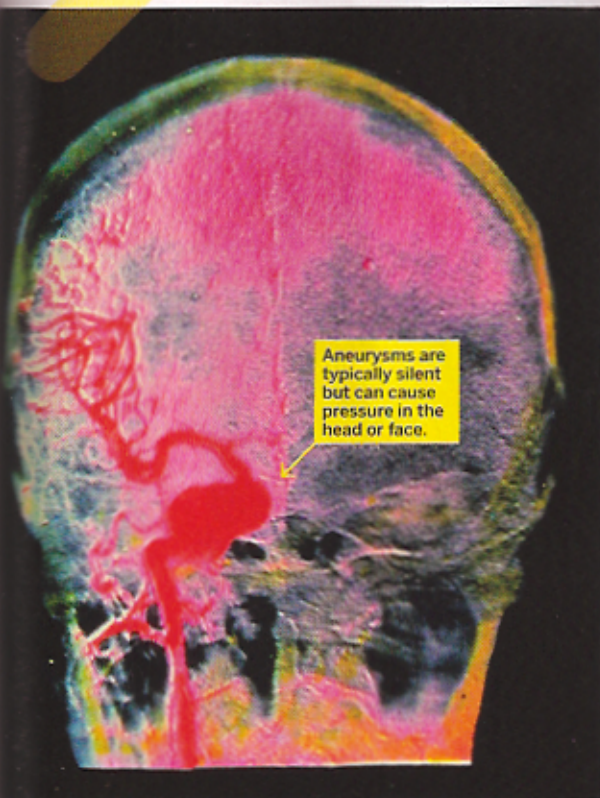
The brain begins developing three weeks into pregnancy, forming 100 billion neurons or nerve cells—a lifetime peak—by the time a fetus is five months old. During those first eight weeks, all brains follow the same developmental path. "Then testosterone starts to marinate boys' brains," says Louann Brizendine, M.D., a neuropsychiatrist and author of *The Female Brain*. This hormone bath kills some cells in brain regions that promote communication and emotion, while spurring cell growth in the sex and aggression centers. By the time we're born, we have female- or male-type brain circuits, Dr. Brizendine says.

BIRTH TO AGE 5

Our brain is more "plastic," or impressionable, now than at any other time in life, Dr. Brizendine says. It's also growing fast: By your fifth birthday, your brain is 90 percent of its adult size! This is a great time to learn a second language; it builds an enhanced ability to concentrate that can last into adulthood and may even delay age-related dementia. Experts aren't yet sure why, but bilingual adults have denser gray matter in areas that help control language and communication, suggesting that learning multiple languages as a kid increases blood and oxygen flow to the brain and keeps nerve connections healthy.

AGES 5 TO 20

By now our brain has begun to select the neural connections we use regularly and get rid of the rest. This process fosters a healthy brain in the same way pruning promotes a healthy tree—by nixing unnecessary branches that compete for nutrients. Meanwhile, a fatty substance called myelin coats your axons, long fibers that connect nerve cells, to speed processing. Before puberty, there's a second growth spurt in the frontal lobe, which controls impulse control and reasoning, although some research indicates our reasoning centers aren't fully developed until young adulthood (which goes a long way toward explaining prom night).



Aneurysms are typically silent but can cause pressure in the head or face.

my senses were restored and I believed that the rupture was behind me.

Unfortunately, I got some unexpected news at my one-year checkup: The neck of my original aneurysm was wide, and the coil was ineffective, putting me in danger of another aneurysm, which happens in about 1 percent to 2 percent of cases. Dr. Culicchia, Tom and I agreed that he should repair this one by "clipping" it—which meant craniotomy surgery to clamp the base of the aneurysm with a tiny, clothespinlike metal clip. He would have to saw open my head! Scary as that sounds, I felt more determined than anxious to take care of it. I asked Dr. Culicchia

my family and dear friends standing in a semicircle around my bed, and thinking how lovely it was that we were all together.

Sixteen days after the rupture, I left the hospital, and after a few more weeks of taking it slow, I was back where I wanted to be—at home with Tom and in the kitchen at Peristyle. Physically, I felt great. But my sense of taste and smell were dulled, a scary realization for a chef. It was a temporary side effect of the anesthesia, I was told, so I didn't panic. I took my employees aside, spoon in hand, and asked, "Does this taste right to you?" Within two months,

to explain the process to me, thinking that if I understood exactly what he was going to do, I could control my fears. Although Tom and I tried to avoid talking about the possibility of something going wrong, privately, I wrote him a letter telling him how much I love him and asked my mother to give it to him if I didn't survive.

I woke up from surgery and learned it had been a complete success. In November 2004, Tom and I made a major life change: We sold Peristyle and moved back to my home state of Ohio. I loved that restaurant, but my priorities had shifted.

I needed a hiatus from the hectic pace I was living, and I wanted to spend more time with my family. Doctors couldn't say if my stressful job had anything to do with the rupture, but I wasn't taking any chances.

By November 2007, I was ready to return to cooking, and Tom and I opened an American-French bistro in Dayton called Rue Dumaine. Since my aneurysm, I've learned that life is going to throw things at you that you can't control. Still, you get to decide how you react to them. We've opted not to start a family because I'm still taking an antiseizure medication that could be harmful to a fetus. I'd like to have children, but I've come to terms with it by focusing on my many blessings: Tom, our two chocolate Labradors, my wonderful family, my new restaurant and a second chance at life.



WACKY BRAIN FACT #3

You can store up to 1 billion bits of information in your brain over the course of your lifetime. That's more than 50,000 times the amount of text contained in the Library of Congress.

ADULTHOOD

At age 20, our brain cells begin to die, and we lose 10 percent over a lifetime. But we continue to generate neurons, albeit at a slower pace, Dr. Brizendine says. Women's brains are on average 9 percent smaller than men's, but they're more dense with cells—and equally capable of making brilliant discoveries and decisions. Young men's brains devote more area to centers for fear, aggression and sex, which may explain why they think about sex three times more than we do, Dr. Brizendine says. (It crosses a young woman's mind one to four times a day.) So there you have it: the real answer to "What are you thinking about?"

MOTHERHOOD

Feel like an alien stole your brain? A woman's brain shrinks 8 percent during pregnancy. The whys aren't fully understood (perhaps nature is prepping you for *Bob the Builder*), but the theory is that surges of the bonding hormone oxytocin may be restructuring brain circuits, rerouting energy and nutrients to the regions dedicated to attachment and baby tracking. And never fear: Brain size returns to normal six months post-baby, so if you're still feeling spacey, chalk it up to sleep deprivation and stress. Both have been shown to decrease brain function temporarily in numerous studies.

PERIMENOPAUSE

As women begin to transition into menopause, natural fluctuations in levels of the sex hormones estrogen and testosterone affect the neurotransmitters that control mood and memory. As a result, some (lucky) women experience zesty surges of libido and energy, others feel depressed, and many women alternate back and forth between the states, sometimes seemingly from minute to minute. Women and men experience normal memory declines in middle age: At 45, you'll probably have a 35 percent loss of memory for names compared with your recall prowess at age 25.

AGE 50 AND UP

Age-related memory loss is totally normal in everyone older than 50—not to be confused with Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia, which affect about 4.5 million mostly elderly Americans. A number of studies, however, show that simple lifestyle improvements such as adding a vigorous walk to your daily routine can actually slow decline, create brain cells and improve memory. So if you're dreading menopause or an empty nest, consider this: Freedom from raging hormones and child rearing can give you the time and energy to learn and achieve, engaging in activities that recharge your brain.