

Web site helps you to build a better brain

by Diana Rossetti

You work on your abs, condition your hair and pay dearly to have someone make your feet presentable.

But what are you doing to make your mind sparkle?

Well, good news. There is a virtual gym for mind workouts on the Internet. Schedule regular workouts there and see if someone doesn't sashay up to you with the compliment, "Wow, great mind."

The Web site www.sharpbrains.com is designed to provide a personalized brain fitness evaluation and then a program of mental exercises to stimulate that space upstairs.

NEW YEAR, NEW MIND - Learning to manage stress can free the brain for positive tasks. Here, a SharpBrains interactive program helps the user keep thinking positive. CNS Photo courtesy of SharpBrains.
SHARPENING RESPONSES - The brain exercises, left and above, are part of several online programs to supercharge the synapses and keep the mind fit. CNS Photo courtesy of SharpBrains. A New York University School of Medicine clinical professor of neurology maintains that research has found that the brain undergoes constant neurogenesis, the development of new neurons and dendrites.

"Learning and targeted mental exercise promotes neurogenesis - the creation of new neurons - just as muscle growth is promoted through physical exercise," explained Dr. Elkhonon Goldberg, also the co-founder of SharpBrains and its chief scientific adviser.

A decade of studies, he added, has shown that brain fitness training can improve memory, concentration, decision-making and planning skills, reaction time and stress management as well as help delay the onset of age-related decline including various types of dementia.

The key, Goldberg stressed, is focusing the exercises on novelty and variety and constantly upgrading the mental challenges.

HOW MUCH DOES IT TAKE?

So how much of a workout does the brain need to stay in shape? Consultation with SharpBrains' coaches will establish which of a number of programs is best for each individual, but usually 30 minutes three times a week yields good results. And, unlike 100 sit-ups, SharpBrains' creators say the mind exercise leaves one feeling energized rather than exhausted.

If you are questioning if completing a daily Sudoku puzzle is enough to keep the synapses snappy, you are on the right track, said SharpBrains co-founder and Chief Executive Officer Alvaro Fernandez, who holds two master's degrees, one in education, the other in business.

He cited a statement made by Dr. George Rebok, professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

"It's wise to start mental workouts even in one's 40s, 30s or 20s," Rebok advised. "We haven't yet developed a culture of mental exercise like our culture of physical exercise, but we should."

And, no, Sudoku alone won't do the trick. Your brain needs cross-training just as your body does.

"Have you ever seen the guys in the gym with the buff upper bodies supported by little chicken legs? The same thing can happen in your brain," Goldberg explained. "Just as you cross-train in your physical fitness routine, you need to cross-train your mental fitness to exercise your brain through motor coordination, emotional understanding, memory, focus and attention, sensory processes, communication, language skills and mental visualization."

ARE YOU TALKING TO ME?

But my mind is active all day long on the job, you counter. Why do I have to stimulate it even more?

Think stress, answered Goldberg. Too much work stress can lead to burnout, which can be expressed as emotional exhaustion, physical exhaustion and/or "cognitive weariness." Translated, that is slow thinking.

By focusing different areas of the brain on a variety of challenging tasks, stress can be managed and, as a result, the brain becomes more efficient in filing and retrieving information.

SharpBrains' interactive programs target different mental muscles. But the popular "no pain, no gain" theory of physical fitness does not apply here.

Want to develop a sharper, more agile mind? MindFit marches your brain through exercises for memory, planning and problem-solving.

Freeze-Framer is a biofeedback-based software designed to teach users to prevent and manage negative stress.

Children with attention deficit disorder can benefit from RoboMemo, a working memory training program.

Then there is IntelliGym, which teaches amateur and professional basketball players to play a smarter game. It focuses on coordination, attention control, peripheral vision, perception and mental stamina.

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