

'Brain gym' may exorcise Boomers' fears about aging

Heidi Benson, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Marathon-happy Baby Boomers, those 78 million Americans born from 1946 to '64, were the first generation to make a religion of physical fitness. Now, they are investing time and money to maintain what's above their six-pack abs and rippling biceps: their brains.

"People are living longer, and they want their brains to keep up with their bodies," said Lisa Schoonerman, who is on top of the trend.

She and her life partner, Jan Zivic, have opened a "brain gym," called vibrantBrains, on Sacramento Street in San Francisco.

"Studies show that regular mental workouts are WD-40 for the brain," Schoonerman said. "It's preventative maintenance."

This is music to the rock 'n' roll-addled ears of Boomers, who are hearing that Alzheimer's disease is on the rise, largely due to increased longevity. According to a recent study by Johns Hopkins University, instances of the disease will afflict 1 in 85 people worldwide by 2050.

As they "rage against the dying of the light," Boomers are clamoring for goods and services designed to defy aging and sharpen mental skills. Top among them are brain-training computer software programs and video games, including Nintendo's "Brain Age," which has sold 10 million copies since it went on the market two years ago.

All the latest programs and more are on the menu at vibrantBrains, which Schoonerman and Zivic have created as a neighborhood resource center, with classes, lectures and author appearances, plus drop-in computer brain-training sessions.

"You can come on your own or be part of a group," Zivic said. While health insurers and retirement communities are beginning to invest in such software, the founders of vibrantBrains believe theirs is the first storefront brain gym in a commercial setting.

They offer memberships, just like a gym (\$60 per month), and cite studies that show people learn best in group settings. The space is convivial, with a dozen computer stations, a retail area stocked with books and software and a sunny sitting room where tea and "smart" snacks like walnuts - rich in Omega-3 fatty acids - are in reach.

"It's a brilliant example of the rebranding of aging," said Mary Furlong, executive professor at the Leavey School of Business at Santa Clara University and author of "Turning Silver Into Gold: How to Profit in the New Boomer Marketplace."

"Boomers have always made their own mark on the culture, and now they have a 30-year 'bonus round,'" Furlong said. "They want to extend their vitality as long as possible. We are seeing the birth of new service industries ... and a lot of



entrepreneurial opportunities."

The vibrantBrains enterprise was inspired by personal experience. Long before digital brain-training was available, Zivic, 65, founder of a San Francisco executive search firm, suffered a traumatic brain injury in a car wreck.

She was about to be discharged from the hospital when internal bleeding and evidence of brain damage were detected. After surgery, she fell into a coma. When she awoke, her left side was "knocked out," she said. It took her 10 years to recover.

"My focus and my retention were affected, and my ability to multitask," Zivic said. When she returned to work, she couldn't even use the phone system.

She began researching brain health and nutrition, and trained with speech therapists and occupational therapists. "I saw everyone but a vet," Zivic said with a laugh. "My experience has a lot to do with what we're offering."

For her part, Schoonerman, 40, who formerly worked in legal publishing in England, delved into brain science after her mother was diagnosed with dementia. Her formerly socially active and dynamic mother began to show symptoms in her early 50s.

"It first presented as depression," Schoonerman said, but her mother's behavior became increasingly uncharacteristic. "She would get up from the table at a restaurant, sit down with people at the next table and begin telling them about her foot surgery. Eventually, it robbed her of her personality."

Children of dementia sufferers like her, Schoonerman noted, are eager to learn about care-giving and about ways to stave off the disease. They have found that, in little more than a decade, much has been learned about brain function.

Since the early '90s, studies like those of Dr. Michael Merzenich - of UCSF's Center for Integrative Neurosciences - revealed the brain's plasticity, which means that it continually adapts. On the heels of such studies, the market for cognitive-training products emerged.

Merzenich founded the Posit Science Corp. in 2003 and developed the Brain Fitness Program to strengthen neural pathways and speed up brain function.

Like other "neurobics circuit training" programs, the Posit Science Brain Fitness Program, available at vibrantBrains, has an array of exercises designed to stimulate parts of the brain. One is a sound-matching game that aims to sharpen clarity of memory; another hones visual memory cues.

In addition to the Brain Fitness Program, vibrantBrains has the local franchise for the UCLA Memory Training Course, designed by Dr. Gary Small of UCLA's Center on Aging.

And because stress is believed to affect brain health, it also offers stress-management software tools alongside cognitive workouts meant to build quantitative, reasoning and language skills.

The effectiveness of brain training is the subject of debate. While some scientists doubt that exercises can delay or thwart dementia, most agree they can sharpen particular skills, such as remembering lists of names or improving peripheral vision.

No interventions can reverse Alzheimer's disease once it has been diagnosed, said Anthony D. Wagner of Stanford University's Memory Lab.

Still, Wagner said, "There is a lot of hope that cognitive training software suites can assist the user and keep them spry."

There are reports of some promise, but it has not been definitively shown that adoption of these programs results in the kinds of cognitive improvements that are broad in their impact and long lasting."

Another expert who is cautious about the claims of brain training and the potential of brain gyms is Sandra Aamodt of Davis, editor in chief of the online journal "Nature Neuroscience."

"My suspicion is that many of the aspects that are being brought together under one roof are things that people could do for themselves," said Aamodt, co-author of the forthcoming book, "Welcome to Your Brain: Why You Lose Your Car Keys But Never Forget How to Drive and Other Puzzles of Everyday Life."

She dismisses the claims of longitudinal studies that point to the benefits of cognitive training. "The results are difficult to interpret, because positive behaviors tend to travel in packs," Aamodt said. "The same people who eat their leafy green vegetables are the same people who exercise and do other positive things for their health."

The best thing anyone can do for the brain, Aamodt believes, is take up physical exercise.

"Fitness training slows the age-related shrinkage of the frontal cortex," she wrote in a recent New York Times opinion piece. "People who exercise regularly in middle age are one-third as likely to get Alzheimer's disease in their 70s as those who did not exercise. Even people who begin exercising in their 60s have their risk reduced by half."

Despite the debate, the owners of vibrantBrains believe the need for their services will only grow as Boomers work later in life than members of previous generations and need to stay mentally sharp. They plan to replicate their "brain gym" model in other Bay Area neighborhoods.

"There is no guarantee that we're all going to be financially secure as we get older," noted Furlong. She believes people will do whatever they can - including getting a digital boost - to stay at the top of their game.

"It's like men coloring their hair," Furlong said, "just to look a little younger."

Resources

Alzheimer's Association

Web site: www.alz.org or www.alz.org/norcal

Help line: (800) 272-3900

E-mail: info@alz.org

Northern California Chapter offices:

Chico: (530) 895-9661

Lafayette (East Bay Office): (650) 962-8111

Monterey: (831) 647-9890

Mountain View (Greater Bay Area Office): (650) 962-8111

Sacramento: (916) 930-9080

San Rafael: (415) 472-4340

Santa Rosa: (707) 573-1210

Santa Cruz: (831) 464-9982

Educational programs: In December, "Savvy Caregiver Training" in Mountain View, Sacramento and San Rafael; and "Maximizing Your Memory" in San Francisco and San Mateo.

vibrantBrains 3235 Sacramento St., San Francisco, CA 94115

Phone: (415) 775-1138

E-mail: info@vibrantbrains.com

Web site: www.vibrantbrains.com

Online resources

-- Alzheimer's Research Forum: www.alzforum.org

-- Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral Center, National Institute on Aging, United States National Institutes of Health: www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers

-- Posit Science Corp.: www.positscience.com

-- Dr. Gary Small, UCLA Center on Aging: www.drgarysmall.com

-- Brain Fitness for Life: happy-neuron.com

-- Reclaim Your Brain: www.lumosity.com

Maintaining your brain - 10 tips

- 1:** Head first. Good health starts with your brain. It's one of the most vital body organs and needs care and maintenance.
- 2:** Take brain health to heart. What's good for the heart is good for the brain. Do something every day to prevent heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes and stroke - all of which can increase your risk of Alzheimer's.
- 3:** Numbers count. Keep your weight, blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar levels within recommended ranges.
- 4:** Feed your brain. Eat less fat and more antioxidant-rich foods (fish, leafy greens, whole grains, nuts).
- 5:** Work your body. Exercise keeps the blood flowing and may encourage new brain cells. Do what you can - like walking 30 minutes a day - to keep both body and mind active.
- 6:** Jog your mind. Keeping your brain active and engaged increases its vitality and builds reserves of brain cells and connections. Read, write, play games, learn new things, do crossword puzzles.
- 7:** Connect with others. Leisure activities that combine physical, mental and social elements may be most likely to prevent dementia. Be social, converse, volunteer, join a club or take a class.

8: Protect your brain. Take precautions against head injuries. Use seat belts, unclutter your house to avoid falls, and wear a helmet when cycling or rollerblading.

9: Use your head. Avoid unhealthy habits. Don't smoke, drink alcohol excessively or use street drugs.

10: Think ahead. Do something today to protect your tomorrow.

Source: Alzheimer's Association

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/12/13/MNMETNGMV.DTL>

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