



Want a workout for your brain?

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For 10 minutes or so, I've been staring at a peculiar image on my computer screen. It is a perfect circle, sliced like a pie into several dozen skinny pieces. Just above and to the left of its center is an inner shape that may or may not be a circle. It's up to me to decide.

My eyes are watering and my head hurts. The inner shape, which at first glance looked like a circle, now resembles a misshapen tomato, seeming to bulge on one side and vibrate on the other. Sort of like my brain at the moment.

Welcome to SharpBrains .com, a new Web-based company peddling programs designed to improve your memory, attention span and cognitive skills, ensuring you can balance your checkbook well into your 90s.

"Think of it as a gymnasium for your mind," SharpBrains CEO and co-founder Alvaro Fernandez says from his office in San Francisco.

My bulging tomato turns out to be a circle, which I correctly identify after more consideration. I try another teaser on Fernandez's site: "A blind beggar had a brother who died. What relation was the blind beggar to the brother who died?" Hint: The answer isn't brother.

My head hurts again.

"This is not entertainment," Fernandez explains. "It's like when you go to a gym. It takes concentration and commitment, like a physical workout."

I decide not to mention that I haven't been to the gym since Reagan was in office. I tell him instead of my fondness for crossword puzzles.

"That's good, but, like your body, you don't just exercise one part of the brain," says Fernandez, who holds an MBA and a master's degree in education from Stanford University. "You need constant variety, and new things, to keep your brain working hard."

He sees mental gymnastics as the next mainstream adult trend and points out that therapists have long used a variety of similar exercises to help in the recovery of brain-injury patients. Athletes and airplane pilots have had access to exercises designed to improve their peripheral vision and reaction times, Fernandez says.

With SharpBrains co-founder Dr. Elkhonon Goldberg, a clinical professor of neurology at the New York University School of Medicine, Fernandez has collected what he says are the best computer-based brain workouts available, including a program to help children with attention deficits and another aimed at reducing stress management among business executives. The least expensive, at \$139, is MindFit Brain workout, which, in 20 minutes three times a week, won't turn you into Einstein, but might make you smart enough to win a round of "Jeopardy."

The relation of the blind beggar to the brother who died? She was the dead man's sister. If she is of a certain age, say, the menopausal years, she'd be the perfect candidate for SharpBrains. "That's one of the markets we're targeting," Fernandez says.

I'd be willing to bet that most of us in that category don't care much about peripheral vision and reaction time. But we'd love to be able to find our car keys. E-mail kkemp@bhamnews.com

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