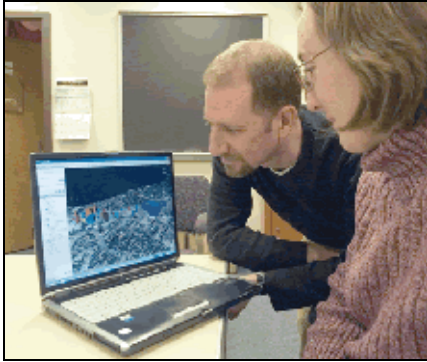


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Local

High-tech 'brain gyms' tone minds, reduce stress



(AP Photo)

Baby boomers are keeping their minds healthy by working out at high-tech

Edward Carpenter, The Examiner
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SAN FRANCISCO - While many Bay Area residents' obsession with ab crunches, dumbbell curls and "cardio" may never fade, the time they spend exercising their minds is growing, according to local "brain fitness" industry insiders.

In fact, the millions of baby boomers approaching retirement in California alone almost assures the success of the industry in the immediate future, said Alvaro Fernandez, CEO and co-founder of San Francisco software company **SharpBrains**.

Sales of programs designed by companies like his to help everyone from students with attention deficit disorder to senior citizens worried about memory loss have skyrocketed to about \$30 million in 2006 from about \$2 million in 2005, according to a SmartBrains survey of the industry, Fernandez said.

"We are at the beginning of the beginning, and we're already seeing remarkable gains," said Jeff Zimman, CEO and co-founder of San Francisco-based **Posit Science**, one of the only companies in the industry to conduct and publish studies on the effectiveness of its software.

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SharpBrains and Posit are just two of a growing number of start-up companies leading the way in the area of packaging and developing suites of software they call "brain gyms."

SharpBrains offers a suite of products that evaluate buyers' needs and target their weakness, gently pushing for improvement, Fernandez said. One program helps improve memory using a number game; another provides instant biofeedback to users so they can practice breathing and positive thinking to reduce stress, Fernandez said.

Donna Barrett, a registered nurse with the San Mateo Medical Center, not only uses one of the programs designed to teach her how to manage and reduce stress, but she teaches a class for hospital staff that has graduated more than 50 since it began last year.

"Studies show that these [tools] do work to relieve stress and even reduce high blood pressure," Barrett said.

"I can start seeing the changes in my stress level take place right in front of my eyes," said Baba Shiv, a neuroscientist and professor at Stanford's Graduate School of Business, who uses Freeze-Framer 2.0, one of the programs licensed by SharpBrains.

By monitoring his stress level through heart monitors hooked to his personal computer at work, he discovered that constantly monitoring his e-mail inbox raised his stress level, Shiv said. Now he limits himself to checking e-mail every two hours, Shiv said.

"It's like high-tech yoga and you get real-time feedback," Fernandez said.

Where the popularity of old-school physical fitness gyms took more than a decade to catch on, he believes most educated people will be involved in some sort of brain exercise in two to three years, Fernandez said.

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