

Shrink Rap: Gaming Brain Drain

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Can't remember names and places the way you used to? Having trouble coming up with just the right word? Forgetting to do things or misplacing items more often? A new product aimed at baby boomers has hit the market, designed to help slow down mid-life memory drain. It's made by Nintendo, the same folks who baby-sat Gen X'ers with video games before computer games became the rage.

The intention of "Brain Age" is to help keep you mentally sharp by doing 14 basic, fast-paced mental activities. These include counting the number of syllables in phrases, memorizing words and performing simple math problems. You play the games on a handheld system that allows you to touch the screen or use a microphone to give your answers.

Already popular in Japan, the product will attract those wanting their mental exercise in entertaining video game form. It opens up the adult market to a company whose products tend to cater to children and teens.

Will playing video games really improve your memory? You may have fun, but there is no evidence it will result in measurable cognitive improvements. While a gradual slowing of the ability to recall information and erosion of short-term memory has so far seemed an inevitable part of the aging process, it's generally assumed by psychologists and neurologists that continued use of the brain/mind through mental exercise keeps us sharper over a longer period of time.

One issue is that the activities comprising the game may not correspond closely enough with everyday situations of memory and recall. Responding quickly to a video game question is not the same as trying to recall the name of that charming Italian town where you had lunch on Lake Como three years ago.

Many other kinds of activities do the same thing Nintendo is aiming for with their "brain training." For example, 20% of the blood in the body goes to the brain. So physical exercise to move that blood around is an important factor for brain health. Doing crossword puzzles and other types of word recall games can also help stave off memory decay, as would any mentally challenging activities that help form new connections and preserve old ones.

Some physicians believe that certain vitamins, minerals and nutrients (such as Phosphatidyl Serine) may also make a difference, as well as specially developed "cocktails" aimed at increasing memory and recall.

The important thing to remember is that brain/mind functioning is the result of the holistic integration of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of our lives - not just the brain itself. Depression and anxiety, for example, are going to have negative effects on memory, independent of age or mental exercises. Diet, sleep patterns, work stressors and intimate relationships all matter, too. Reading newspapers, books and keeping a daily journal can help you maintain or develop your vocabulary, as well as retain the mental skills you've already developed.

As an early boomer, I've noticed some memory and recall lapses, mostly names of people and places. My anti-brain drain program includes taking vitamin supplements, meditating, playing electronic drums, and making reading and writing part of my daily life. I find it helpful to challenge myself by reading material that extends my present knowledge. So, I'll read a book on the discovery of black holes in outer space because I know it's going to force me to think about new ideas and "work the brain."

Finally, I don't scare myself that forgetting nouns means my mind is deteriorating. I realize that given the large amount of mostly irrelevant information and chatter bombarding me daily, some of it will be quickly forgotten. And I keep in mind that what is forgotten makes room for new information and what I don't easily recall may always be researched if necessary.