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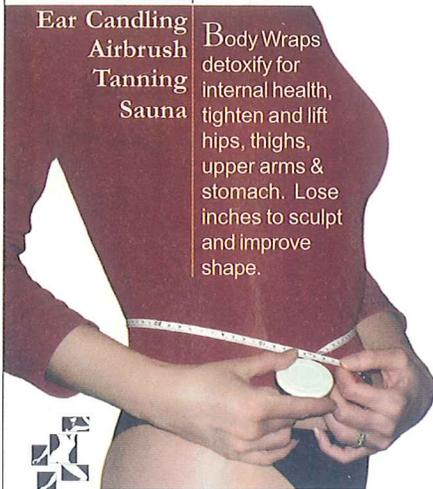
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mind & body

By Maureen Vernon, Psychologist
MD, PHD

**Basic Training for
Boosting Brain Power**

Just when you thought you had settled into a manageable physical exercise routine that worked for you, along comes another 'must do' workout plan. This one isn't the latest aerobics, pilates, yoga, or spinning class, but one that exercises one of the most important parts of your body—your brain. The brain consists of billions of cells that play a major role in keeping the other organs of the body functioning. The good news is that the brain can be stimulated and 'pumped up' just like the other muscles and trained to perform at peak level. Scientists have discovered that if a person suffers an injury that affects a section of the brain, other parts can be trained to take over those specific tasks. Also, researchers have proven the more you use your brain by practicing mental games or exercises, the better your brain begins to respond. Recent developments in the study of the brain have found that it continues to grow certain new kinds of cells throughout the life span and that we can even help influence this process.

Have you heard the expression, "if you don't use it, you'll lose it?" This applies to your mental abilities as well as your physical ones. In order to get mentally fit, let's try a few 'boot camp exercises'. First, answer the following riddle—"your spouse's brother's wife's grandparent is what relationship to your nephew?" Take your time, because just thinking about the question, even if you don't guess the right answer, has given you the kind of mental drilling that begins to build brain power. Some interesting studies have shown that older brains continue to function as well as those much younger in chronological age if they stay mentally alert and active. Solving crossword puzzles, playing a musical instrument, reading and even interacting with new people and surroundings are all useful brain boosters.

Another excellent way to increase your brain power is by using mental imagery or visualization. Picture yourself actually completing and checking off all the things on your 'to do list' while you're getting ready in the morning. This will provide your brain with an early morning exercise to get it tuned up for the day ahead, and you will more easily accomplish your daily tasks as well. Most successful people practice this mental rehearsal skill; also referred to as the power of positive thinking, and find it gives them the extra edge to achieve their goals.

The brain also requires adequate sleep and nutrition in order to do its best work. During rest, the brain is able to recharge itself and formulate the types of neural connections that are necessary to manage all the information it processes every hour of each day. Sleep studies show that good quality sleep for a minimum of 7-8

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Basic Training for Boosting Brain Power

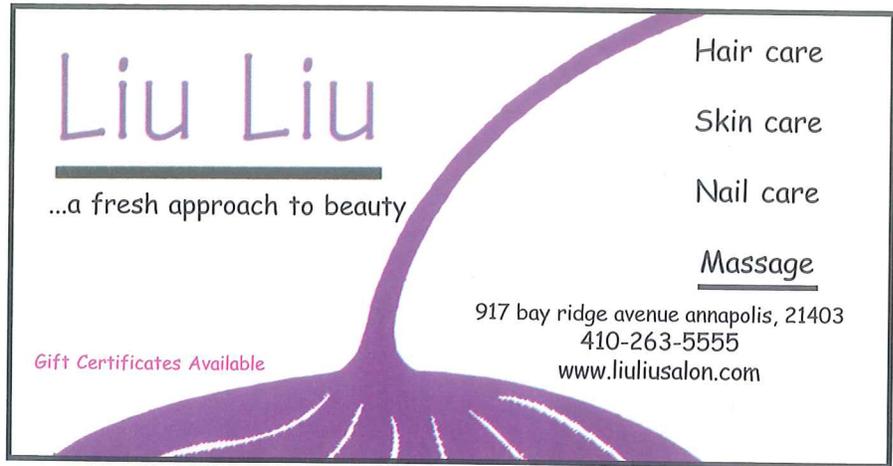
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hours is beneficial to improving short-term and long-term memory. A nighttime routine to help calm down and decrease stimulation and demands on the brain can improve the quality of sleep and lead to better performance and problem solving of tasks when you wake up.

Eating well is also an important component to include in your 'brain power boot camp'. Certain foods such as complex carbohydrates seem to effect blood-sugar levels more dramatically causing changes in the amount of mental energy you may have available at any given time. Unfortunately, you may be at a down point in the cycle just when you need it most. A safer bet is to eat more high protein foods such as cheese, eggs, nuts, fish, and some meat to keep your blood sugar and your brain on a more even keel.

We couldn't talk about brain boosting without mentioning stress and how it can interfere with our mental processing. Most of us have had the experience of being so stressed out that we have trouble remembering something which we know quite well and should be easily able to recall. This is because under stress the brain releases certain chemicals that increase our physical energy but decrease our mental abilities. Learning to deal more effectively with challenging and stressful situations, rather than feeling overwhelmed or out of control, is an important brain power tool.

The prescription for building brain power is one that everyone can follow. Just remember to take every opportunity to exercise your mental muscle rather than let it get lazy. So "Pump it Up" and practice these basic skills for boosting brain power and you will learn a lot more and live a longer and more mentally rewarding life.



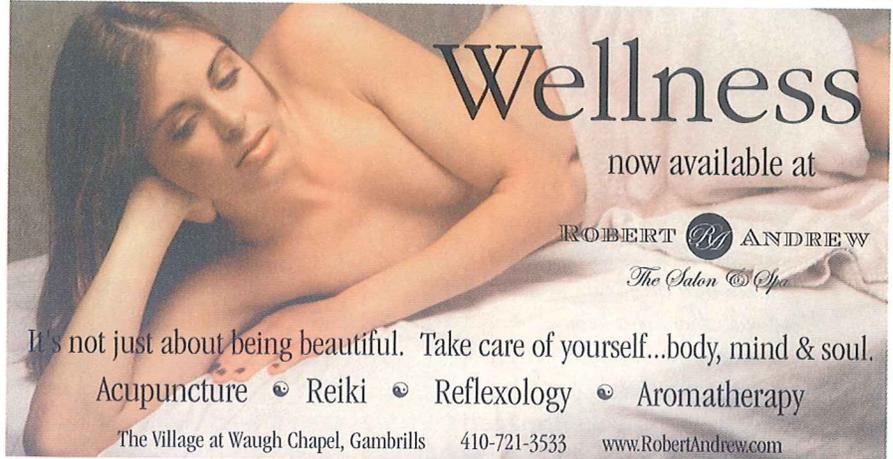
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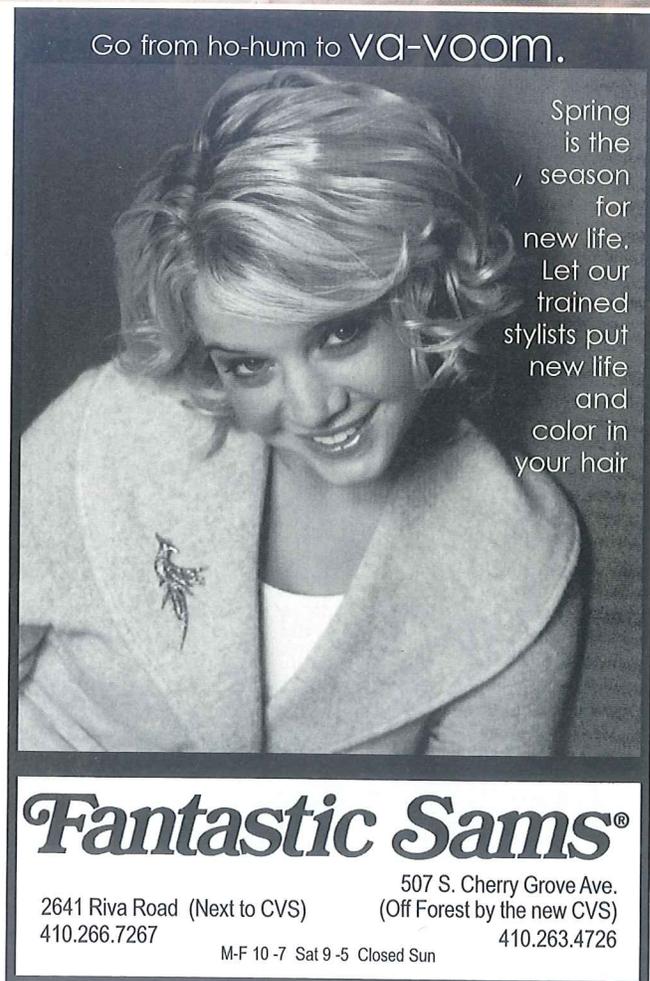
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