Brain gyms work out the mind and body

By Diane C. Lade

Hop off the treadmill. Hit the weight machines. Then head over to the computer for some push-ups for your cerebellum.

Welcome to the brain gym.

Programs and centers that combine physical and mental exercise are springing up, with a new one recently opening in South Florida.

Entrepreneurs hope to appeal to the 76 million aging baby boomers who entered adulthood as Jane Fonda exercise tapes were the rage and now are looking to keep old age at bay.

Another target market is the growing numbers of seniors diagnosed with age-related neurological disorders. Some 450,000 Floridians have Alzheimer’s disease, according to a recent report from the Alzheimer’s Association, with the numbers projected to rise 30 percent by 2025.

When doctors recently told Ina Zaloom that her 90-year-old husband Albert, who has early stage Alzheimer’s disease, needed to improve his walking ability after a fall, she remembered an ad she seen for Mind & Mobility in Fort Lauderdale. The combination physical therapy and brain gym, featuring a spa-like atmosphere, was opened two months ago by Mateo Martinez, a physical therapist who came up with the idea through his work with geriatric patients at Holy Cross Hospital.

Training software

Zaloom said she could have taken her husband to other physical therapy clinics “but the fact that this place had the brain training software as well was sensational.” Martinez charges $19 an hour for the cognitive sessions, with Medicare or health insurance typically covering the physical therapy.

Albert just started his sessions less than three weeks ago, so Ina isn’t surprised she hasn’t noticed any major differences in his behavior or memory yet. But Martinez said Albert already has both increased his exercise bike sessions from one to 12 minutes, and upped his scores on the brain training program.

Research consistently has shown that regular exercise is good for the brain as well
as the body. But experts say the field of “brain fitness” is so new there is not enough evidence so far to conclude computerized mental workouts coupled with physical ones cause significant brain changes and improve functioning.

“I think this area has a lot of potential,” said Dr. David Lowenstein, a professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine. “My concern is while scientists still are looking at the data, we already have brain gyms and boutique services springing up.”

But many practitioners working with cognitive training say they have no doubt that physical activity enhances their brain programs and they encourage their clients to exercise. Some experts believe combining that activity with mentally stimulating exercises can only enhance that effort.

Rohn Kessler, whose Sparks of Genius brain fitness center in Boca Raton draws children and adults, sometimes has his clients start their sessions with physical “brain stretches” like juggling.

Even with kids dealing with attention disorders or learning disabilities, “the exercise helps tremendously,” according to Kessler, who says he has turned down offers to franchise his center.

Neurological researchers think combining brain and body exercises holds promise. The National Institutes of Health two years ago funded several studies on simultaneous workouts of brain and body, including one project at the University of Miami, which is tracking 80 South Florida seniors with mild cognitive impairments. Researchers will be begin analyzing the results late this year. And another benefit of cognitive cross training, Lowenstein said, is it has no side effects and can’t hurt you.

The market potential for brain gyms is huge.

Memory workouts

A report by SharpBrains, a firm which analyzes the brain training business, estimated the worldwide brain fitness software market at $295 million in 2009, a 35 percent growth from the previous year. The company predicted boundaries between physical and mental exercise and therapies, traditionally offered in very different settings, would continue to blur until there are ways to “train working memory as we jog.”

Canadian-based Brain Center International two years ago loaned its NeuroActive Bikes on a trial basis to two South Florida Lady of America Fitness Centers. The bikes, which sell for about $4,000 each, have a built-in computer screen and mouse that allow exercisers to answer question designed to boost memory, problem solving and other skills while they pedal away.

The Lady of America program was not continued but there still are at least two bikes
in South Florida – in a Palm Beach County elementary and high school. Neuroscientist and entrepreneur Dr. Stephane Bergeron, Brain Center’s CEO, said education specialists are increasingly interested in cognitive training for children with learning issues.

About 80 percent of the personal use brain training software, which Brain Center makes along with the bikes, is purchased by seniors. Bergeron said his company has been approached by a hospital chain, which he declined to name, to set up brain gyms in South Florida for retirees.

Anna Lisa Curtis, a research coordinator at Florida Atlantic University’s College of Medicine in Boca Raton, anticipates there will be more brain gyms and cognitive training programs in the near future.

“The population that is aging now is sophisticated and doing their homework, so they can make good decisions about how they spend their time and money,” said Curtis, who emphasizes exercise in her Brain’s Gains public workshops at the college.