

5 Tips for a Healthy Challenge

1. Try something you've never done before.
2. Get out of your comfort zone.
3. Make new friends/ share experiences with others.
4. Master a weakness (whether it's poor computer skills or drawing).
5. Don't do anything stressful as stress hurts optimal brain function.

MENTAL MUSCLE

Your body isn't the only thing that grows weak from inactivity—so does your brain. Maintain your mental edge with specialized help from a Boca-based company.

Contrary to the saying, the brain is not the biggest muscle in the body. In fact, it's not a muscle at all. However, another saying does apply.

Use it or lose it.

That's the premise behind Boca Raton's Sparks of Genius (123 N.W. 13th St., Suite 221, 561/859-4060). Dr. Rohn Kessler, psychologist and founder, believes that exercising the mind is such an important part of mental fitness that he started a company that creates customized brain optimization programs for

children and adults. The use of science-based techniques, tests and software can help people improve their brain function.

"People often come to us with a diagnosis," Kessler says. "Mild cognitive impairment is a common one. It's a precursor to early Alzheimer's. So what we've been able to do is definitely slow down the process and, occasionally, if it's not neurodegenerative we can stop it."

Years of research on the neural plasticity or changeability of the brain

show that when a person engages in new and challenging activities, the structure and function of the brain actually changes, making new connections, neurons and axons.

How you define a mental challenge is the key to getting the most out of brain fitness. At 66, Kessler still plays the violin (and occasionally juggles), but he doesn't rely on those activities alone and is always on the lookout for new and meaningful pursuits.

"A lot of people think because they are doing crossword puzzles and playing bridge, things they have been doing for 30 years, [that's enough]," Kessler says. "But they won't change. They won't try something new. They won't go out of their comfort zone, and it has a very negative effect."

Learn more at sparksofgenius.com.