

# Boomers jog memory by exercising the brain

Fear of losing their faculties drives many to fork out green to gear up gray matter

By Katie Hafner  
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SAN FRANCISCO — When David Bunnell, a magazine publisher who lives in Berkeley, went to a FedEx store to send a package a few years ago, he suddenly drew a blank as he was filling out the forms.

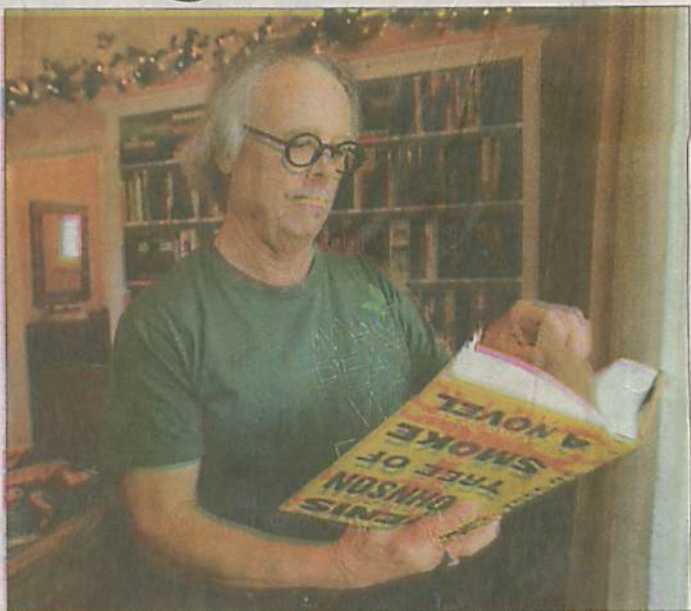
"I couldn't remember my address," Bunnell, 60, said with horror in his voice.

Bunnell is among tens of millions of Baby Boomers who are encountering the signs, by turns amusing and disconcerting, that accompany the decline of the brain's acuity: a good friend's name vanishing from memory; a frantic search for eyeglasses only to find them atop the head; milk put away in a cupboard.

"It's probably one of the most frightening aspects of the changes we undergo as we age," said Nancy Ceridwyn, director of educational initiatives at the American Society on Aging. "Our memories are who we are. And if we lose our memories, we lose that groundedness of who we are."

At the same time, Boomers are seizing on a mounting body of evidence that suggests that brains contain more plasticity than previously thought, and many people are taking matters into their own hands, doing brain fitness exercises with the same intensity with which they attack a treadmill.

Decaying brains, or the fear thereof, have inspired a mini-industry of brain health products — not just supplements like coenzyme Q10, ginseng and bacopa, but computer-based fitter-brain products as well. Nintendo's \$19.99 Brain Age 2, a popular video game of simple math and memory exercises, is one. Posit Science's \$395 computer-based "cogni-



New York Times photo by Jim Wilson

Magazine publisher David Bunnell, 60, reads inverted type last year, an activity that he says helps keep the brain fit.

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—Dr. Gene Cohen, director of the Center for Aging, Health and Humanities at George Washington University

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tive behavioral training" exercises are others. And for about \$10 a month, worried Boomers can subscribe to Web sites like Lumosity.com and Happy-Neuron.com, which offer cognitive training exercises.

Alvaro Fernandez, whose company, SharpBrains, has a Web site focused on brain fitness research, estimates that in 2007 the U.S. market for so-called neurosoftware was \$225 million.

He expects it to reach \$2 billion by 2015.

Boomers believe they have ample reason to worry. There is no definitive laboratory test to detect Alzheimer's disease. But most doctors think

that by the time symptoms show up, the brain damage is extensive.

By 2050, according to the Alzheimer's Association, 11 million to 16 million Americans will have the disease.

"Most people when they turn 50 begin to look at forgetfulness with more seriousness," said Dr. Gene Cohen, director of the Center for Aging, Health and Humanities at George Washington University.

"When you misplace your keys when you're 25, you don't pay any attention to it," he said. "But when you do the identical thing at 50 or older, you raise an eyebrow."

Lisa C., 47, a clinical psychologist in the San Francisco Bay area, who preferred not to disclose her last name for fear that friends and colleagues would question her mental faculties, misplaced her cell phone a few years ago.

While making dinner a few hours later, she found it — in the freezer.

She was so unnerved, not just by that but also by the poor results of a subsequent mental status test, that she had an MRI done on her brain. The diagnosis: perfectly normal.