Chicago Tribune

Tempo

Head trips

A personal trainer for the mind suggests flexing your mental muscles

By Connie Lauerman
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

'Even smart people make silly mistakes and dumb decisions," notes Donalee Markus.

Some people, she says, "sense that there's a missing link, a reason why their intelligence is compromised in certain areas, but they're unable to learn from their mistakes and failures."

Instead, she says, they develop tactics to compensate that may involve avoiding certain situations or falling back on routine solutions, especially when under stress. Others may spend tremendous amounts of time "reinventing the wheel" with each new assignment or client.

Markus, a onetime junior high teacher turned cognitive-restructuring consultant, has a solution: brain exercise.

"You spend several hours a week working out your body, why not flex your mental muscles?" she asks.

Markus, who is based in Highland Park, uses sequenced exercises involving visual imagery to diagnose gaps in thinking skills such as categorization, analysis and inference. Then she uses other types of exercises designed to remedy an individual's specific cognitive problems.

The exercises are content-free puzzles that require people to connect dots, figure out graphic progressions and such. The objective is not to solve the puzzles but rather to generate as many ways of approaching the puzzles as possible.
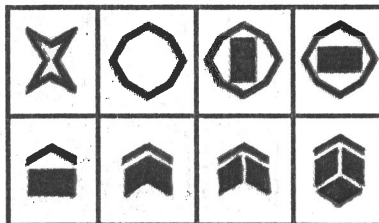
The beauty of this gamelike method, Markus says, is that "you loosen up, and if you

Photo for the Tribune by Kevin Tanaka

Shaping up: Donalee Markus challenges clients to look at problems and situations differently, working with them on puzzles such as the one below:

Objective: Determine which one of the descriptions below is not illustrated in the eight design changes at left.
(Answer below puzzle.)

- Size
- Spin, rotation, or flip
- Color or shade
- Shape
- Duplication
- Change of position
- Appearance or disappearance of a part
- Split in two

Answer: Color or shade