



Extreme Brain Workout: 500 Fun and Challenging Puzzles to Boost Your Brain Power

By Marcel Danesi

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Extreme Brain Workout is a series of puzzles designed to engage the core parts of your brain that are responsible for verbal ability, logical thinking and even your IQ. Each group of puzzles progresses from simple to complex so that they are accessible and challenging for everyone, from the very beginner to the dedicated puzzle master. With each set of puzzles you'll also find information about the specific part of your brain being worked out so that you can choose what areas to focus on.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

MARCEL DANESI is a professor of anthropology at the University of Toronto. He has published extensively on puzzles, and is the author of *The Puzzle Instinct*, *Increase Your Puzzle IQ* and *Sudoku: 215 Puzzles from Beginner to Expert*.

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We do not stop playing because we get old, we get old because we stop playing.

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950)

Do you like puzzles? If so, you're in luck, because research shows they are very good for your brain. If not, maybe this book will help you become accustomed to them and even like them by the end. It is both a compilation of puzzles and a training manual on how to solve them. It is also designed to help activate particular parts of the brain.

I recently searched the internet for relevant psychology, neuroscience, aging and education websites to get a sense of the kind of findings related to puzzles. I found a vast number of such sites. I then narrowed my search by looking up sources that I considered to be scientifically reliable. As it turns out, much of the research is still very encouraging. For example, a study published in *Brain and Cognition* in 2001 showed that older people performed significantly poorer on the Towers of Hanoi puzzle than younger people. However, subsequent studies have shown that if elderly people do such puzzles routinely, their skills not only improve, but they often become superior to those of younger people.

PUZZLES IN HUMAN LIFE

Since the dawn of civilization, human beings have been fascinated by puzzles of all kinds. There seems to exist a "puzzle instinct" in our species that has no parallel in any other species. Puzzles have been discovered by archaeologists across the world and across time. Throughout history, puzzles have also captivated the fancy of many famous figures. The Biblical Kings Solomon and Hiram organized riddle contests. Edgar Allan Poe, Lewis Carroll, Benjamin Franklin and many others devoted countless hours to the making of mind teasers. The widespread popularity of puzzle magazines, "brain-challenging" sections in newspapers, TV quiz shows, game tournaments and of course millions of puzzle websites bears testimony to the power that the puzzle instinct has over us. Millions of people the world over simply enjoy solving puzzles for their own sake.

Like an instinct, puzzle-solving involves a large element of commonsense thinking. But it is also true that without a basic understanding of how such thinking unfolds, and what techniques can be employed to enhance, practice and sustain it, the chances are that the ability to solve puzzles with facility will not emerge in many people. Without some form of systematic training and practice in puzzle-solving, frustration, disinterest and fear will probably ensue. Success at solving puzzles requires that several basic principles and "lines of attack" be grasped firmly and enduringly from the very beginning.

This book is designed to teach you precisely that. But this book by itself will not guarantee 100 percent success. It will, however, put you in a better mental position to attack puzzles of any kind more efficiently

and intelligently. The kinds of techniques you will be learning and practicing systematically in this book will help you see why certain puzzles are best approached in particular ways.

If you are already an accomplished puzzle-solver, you can use this book as a collection to solve during your leisure hours. You will find plenty here to keep you occupied and entertained. No advanced knowledge is needed to solve any of the puzzles in this book.

PUZZLES AND THE BRAIN

Research makes it obvious that doing puzzles diminishes the ravaging effects on mental skills brought about by the process of aging. I became interested in the relation between puzzles, games and intelligence after working with brain-damaged children in Italy in the mid-1980s. Here's what I did. If a child was assessed as having a weak visual memory, impairing how she or he spelled words or read them, I would prepare appropriate puzzle material, such as jumbled letters that the child was asked to unscramble to construct words. If the word were *tiger* I would give the child the jumbled form *gerti* and a picture of a tiger. What surprised me was how quickly the children improved in their writing and reading skills. However, I had no real explanation for the improvement. And I still don't, even after publishing my findings and engaging in various theoretical debates with other researchers. We know so little about the connection between brain activities and learning processes that the outcomes I was able to produce may indicate nothing more than a "co-occurrence," or coincidence, between an input and a brain activity, not a "correlation," or relationship, between the two. Nevertheless, it is my cautious opinion that puzzles are indeed beneficial to brain activity and I will attempt to explain here why I believe this is so.

Consider a simple riddle such as "What is yours yet others use more than you do?" This riddle stumps many people because it seems to defy common logic. The solver has to think outside the box, as the expression goes, in order to solve it. The answer is "Your name." Once the answer is reached, memory for it remains much more permanent because it is unexpected. The psychologists Sternberg and Davidson argued, as far back as 1982, that solving puzzles entails the ability to compare hidden information in a puzzle with information already in memory, and, more importantly, the ability to combine these two to form novel information and ideas. The thinking involved in solving puzzles can thus be characterized as a blend of logic, imagination, inference and memory. It is this blend, I would claim, that leads to a kind of "clairvoyance" that typically provokes an *Aha!* effect.

There is little doubt in my mind that puzzles are beneficial. I saw this with my own eyes within my own family. I once suggested to an ailing relative, who suffered from a serious brain-degenerative disease, to engage in crosswords and sudoku. He had never done puzzles in his life. His doctor immediately saw a significant slowing down of the degeneration. The relative eventually died of the disease, but I am convinced that his newfound passion for puzzles delayed his eventual loss of consciousness.

DESIGN OF THIS BOOK

In many ways, I have designed this book to complement and supplement my previous book, *Total Brain Workout* (Harlequin, 2009). Those who worked their way through that book will see a few of the same puzzle genres, but also many new and challenging types of puzzles.

The book is divided into three main parts. The first one consists of four chapters containing puzzles designed to activate the verbal part of the brain. The second part consists of five chapters organized to activate the logic centers. Many of these concepts derive from a university course I teach on puzzles—a course which has given me the unique opportunity to investigate, research and discuss the benefits of specific puzzle

forms. The third part consists of one chapter that gives you practice doing so-called "IQ tests."

Each puzzle genre is explained fully at the beginning of the set and a model puzzle is explained in detail. The puzzles in a particular set are organized in order of difficulty, thus giving you a chance to build your skills gradually as you go along. This book also features sidebars, peppered through each chapter, containing brain facts for your own information and edification. The answer section at the back of the book goes through all the solutions step-by-step. But you should not read these until you have attempted to solve the puzzles on your own first, no matter how frustrated you might be with any particular puzzle. If you get the answer using a different line of attack than the one suggested in the book, you should still study the given solution simply to get a different perspective on the puzzle-solving process itself. You might even get another legitimate answer. This too will enhance your puzzle-solving skills. Incidentally, these skills are not correlated with quickness of thought. A slow thinker can solve a puzzle just as successfully as a fast one can.

As you can see, this is a self-contained brain exercise manual utilizing research on puzzles to activate the brain effectively. You will likely spend many hours being both entertained and frustrated. So be it. My hope is that it will have been worth the while.

—Marcel Danesi

University of Toronto

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Mary Ayala:

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