

MAGAZINE

# KEY BISCAYNE<sup>®</sup>



## WINNING EDGE

Grigor Dimitrov has big plans for this year's Miami Open, on and off the courts.



The 2015 Miami  
Open Guide

# MIND GAMES

**It's commonplace to hear of someone training for a marathon or simply going to the gym to stay in shape, but how often do you hear of someone going to workout their mind? It's time to start paying attention to our mental fitness.**

TEXT BY DENA ROCHÉ

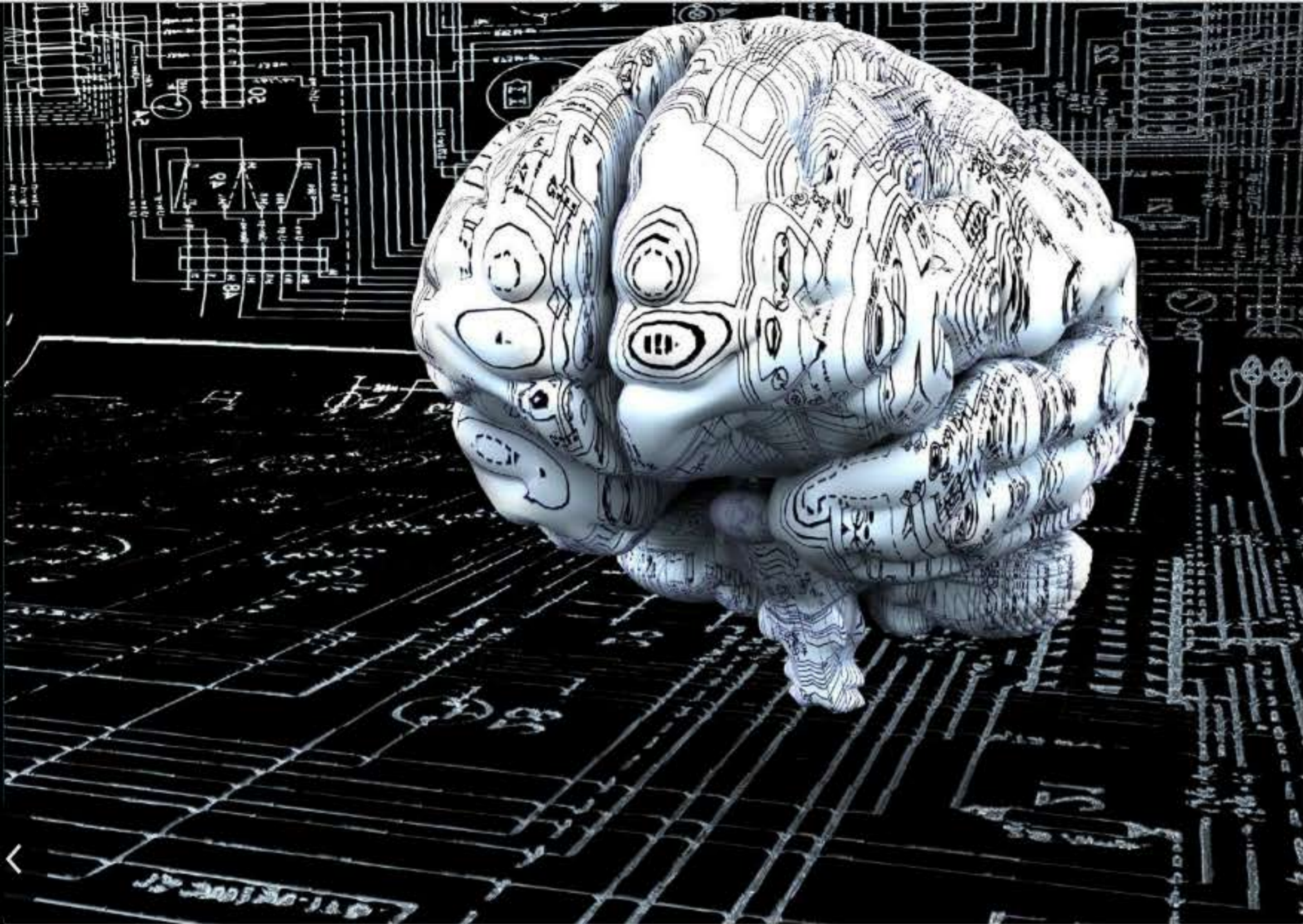
**N**ew research is showing that perhaps we should put the same effort into inner fitness as we do on getting a 6-pack. And just like getting ripped abs, it takes work. "Your brain comes into this world in defense/fight mode," explains Sharie Spironhi, Author of *Why We Are Wired For Worry & How Neuroscience Will Help You Fix It*. "It's set to focus on things to keep you alive; it never evolved."

To the brain, a fight with your spouse is the same as an encounter with a lion and it floods the body with fight or flight chemicals like cortisol. To stop this natural reaction, you have to wrestle for control of your mind and recognize false alarms. "If you fix your brain, you have a powerhouse," says Spironhi. She maintains that in under a month you can train the brain to release more "happy chemicals" like dopamine, oxytocin and serotonin, which leads to a happier, more peaceful existence.

The first step to whipping your mind into a shape is becoming aware of your own thoughts. "How are you talking to yourself?," asks Emily Boorstein, a San Francisco-based Life Coach focused on Inner Fitness. "You are with yourself all day, you need a kind voice within."

But instead, most of us carry a sharp critic along for the ride that chides us all day long with thoughts like "You're stupid!"; "How could you say that?"; "You're a bad person." In lieu of this highly critical voice, Boorstein believes the biggest thing we can do is develop an internal nurturing persona. This voice is truthful and holds us accountable, but doesn't resort to name-calling and shaming. "If you want to build any muscle, you have to work at it," advises Boorstein. "At every opportunity ask 'What would a nurturing parent say?'"

And just like working out physically, you won't see results on the first day, but Boorstein feels that after a few months there should be a shift in your perspective. After a couple of years, Boorstein had her "aha moment" and realized that her life shined in a whole new way because she wasn't internally beating herself up anymore.



California-based Coach Suzanne Strisower says a good trick is analyzing the story you're telling yourself about an event. "Ask yourself whether you did the best with what you had to work with at the time," she says. "If so, forgive yourself and release the emotions."

One path to changing your internal voice is through meditation. The practice teaches you to focus on one thing, and when thoughts occur to simply let them go instead of ruminating and attaching emotions to them. "A mindful mind is aware of distortion patterns and can filter things and respond appropriately," says Boorstein.

What's more, the benefits of meditation can't be overstated. Studies show that it results in lower stress and increased emotional stability as well as a strengthened connection between brain cells. It can also physically change the structure of your brain by creating more gray matter and gyrification, which in turn affects processing speed.

That means that the brain is always changing. This is called *neuroplasticity* and it's the science behind brain games like *Lumosity*. "The exercises are based on tests used in labs for decades," says Erika Perng, a Spokesperson for *Lumosity*. "They train the brain in areas like memory, attention, flexibility, problem-solving and processing speed."

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Working on the mental side of the brain is important, especially as we age. "The reason that everyone over 45 starts to forget things isn't that the brain is dumbing down, it's because our brain is switching from functioning in a left to right manner to back and forth," explains Spironhi. "Our brain is now taking what it learned and making sense of it. This is where wisdom comes from – you must actively step in and keep your brain learning."

People who have developed their brain into a fine-tuned mental machine also seem to share common do's & don'ts. In *13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do*, Amy Morin, LCSW, found that mindful people don't feel sorry for themselves, have stopped people-pleasing and giving away their power, and don't dwell on the past. On the flip side, what they do is regulate their thoughts, manage their emotions, behave productively and have realistic thoughts. "Mental strength requires good habits and the ability to give up bad ones," concludes Morin.

In the end, it seems that achieving a stronger mind is simply a willingness to put your mind to it and use some basic tools to exercise both the emotional and mental sides of the brain. It's time to hit the cerebral gym. Your quality of life depends on it. **KB**