



MENTAL FITNESS – by Marney W. DeFoore, LCSW-S

We have all read about and know how to find information on physical fitness. We have heard about body-mass-index, body-fat percentage, caloric intake, low-carb this, and high-protein that. Experts disagree on what works, but agree that it takes commitment and determination to make practical use of the knowledge. Physical fitness involves breaking old and creating new habits. Many give up after repeated failed attempts. Others grow weary but don't give up. Folks from this latter group are those who get a real payoff from their trial and error. They try, make mistakes, learn, try again, and persist until they succeed. The distinction here is that those who succeed do so by persisting despite whatever emotion they might experience. Mental fitness requires a similar process.

So, what does it really take to be a mentally fit person? Is positive mental attitude enough? What role does spirituality play in mental well-being? What is normal? These are all great questions and there are undoubtedly dozens more. While there does not appear to be any clearly definitive answers I do have some opinions which some find helpful.

Mental fitness is expressed in the basic opinion that a person holds about his or herself. This opinion comes from one of two places – either the old life-script or the new change decision. In the last issue of this newsletter we discussed creating a clear, concise, positive, and measurable personal change contract. This is the substance of the new decision. Let's discuss each of these separately.

First, every human being makes qualitative decisions in early childhood. These are referred to as the life-script and serve as points of origin for internal messages subscribed to throughout life – some OK, and some not-OK. Each person makes decisions about self-image (who I am), self-esteem (the value of who I am), and self-worth (my right to be alive).

These early decisions set the stage for how life is experienced later on... (happy, sad, hopeful, worried, optimistic, pessimistic, serene, anxious, autonomous, addicted, fulfilled, alone, successful, or down-and-out). The old life-script is what drives human behavior so as to direct the person to end up in a particular life position(s). Some of these positions are wonderful and others are (or become) not so wonderful. At some point in life the early decisions (script messages) become antiquated, outdated, worn-out, or in some way useless.

Earlier, I said that mental fitness is an expression of one of two decisions. The first is the life script. An updated, here-and-now decision (or re-decision) becomes the second place of origin for expressing mental fitness. This can be called the new life-script. While this new life-script does not replace the old one, it can over-ride it. That is, the new life-script (or new decision) supersedes the old one. So, what becomes of the old script once the new one is in place?

It is important to remember that the old life script never truly goes away. It lingers, hangs around, patiently waiting for something or someone to “push a button”. Some life events that can trigger the old script include illness, holidays, vacations, buying a home, empty nest, marriage, divorce, etc. With buttons pushed like a radio that is preset to a favorite station, the old script is there and “playing it's tune”! Over time and with a great deal of practice you can learn to laugh at yourself for having reactivated

your old script. The internal adult is blindsided by uncontrollable forces. The old (original) life script is the default position. It takes a manual effort to force out the antique operating position and to force in the current one! A good laugh can cue the new script to once again become active – effectively reminding oneself of the new commitment to experience life autonomously in the here and now vs. in the historical way.

The inner-child in all of us is dependent upon the internal adult to make healthy decisions today. The degree to which we succeed at doing this is a measure of our mental fitness.

Socrates said that knowledge begins with wonderment. So, I say “Wonder!” Ask yourself the question, “What do I want to change?” Wonder about this, think about it, write about it, talk to someone about it, pray about it. If your answer is “another person”, or “the past”, or “the facts,” give it up – let go – whether they or it changes or not is not for you to decide.

If the answer to your questions is “I want to change how I see my self, and/or what I feel,” then proceed with this formula:

- Learn – Do your research. Find out as much information as you can about where it is that you want to end up. Stephen Covey says, “Begin with the end in mind” – then visualize yourself already there!
- Re-Decide – Make a new, superseding decision that updates the life-script so as to directly address the outcome(s) you desire.
- Act – Do something positive and supportive about your new decisions
- Be consistent with your actions so as to break old habits and create new ones. The US Army says it takes “2000 repetitions to create a conditioned response”
- Experience Attitude changes – this will come as a direct result of your efforts of learning, re-deciding, acting and being consistent.
- Experience Emotional Results – ultimately you will begin to experience new feelings because of what you have learned, decided, acted upon, and with which you have been consistent.

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