

FIVE FACTORS FOR MENTAL FITNESS

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As you have seen reading in Impact Magazine over the last five years, there are more factors involved in health and wellness than a lifelong commitment to regular exercise. There is also the need to commit to healthy nutrition, adequate rest, and well-maintained family and social networks. In addition, your sense of energy, balance, thriving, and enjoyment of life depends on several other factors in the dimension of mental fitness.

Research on health and wellness has shown that these mental fitness factors have positively affected feelings of well-being, resiliency, and vitality, and thus physical health as well. As you read this article, the key is to find ways to make these factors work for you every day by integrating them into your lifestyle.

1. TAKE A 20-MINUTE STRESS BREAK AT LEAST ONCE EVERY DAY.

If your life is so busy that you cannot find time to do this, take note. You are already in the danger zone for developing stress-related disorders such as headaches, sleep disorders, lowered immunity levels, and frequent injuries and illness. You need to take action to correct this imbalance and create a safe space in your life.

A stress break is generally a quiet mental sanctuary in which nobody else can make a demand of you. It might be at home, when you have your spouse, your friend, or even a neighbor spell you off in child care for a short break. It could even be at your work station, provided your cell-phone is off and you have an effective "Do Not Disturb Right Now" sign or signal so that others will respect your space. Furthermore, you need to respect your brain's need to stop processing new information or material that could distract you from relaxing deeply. Therefore, watching TV or reading are less refreshing than shutting your eyes and breathing slowly and deeply.

Why 20 minutes? Because for most people in most cultures this is the minimal time in which an adequate relaxation response can develop and remain long enough for refreshment to occur.^{1,2}

It is also important to know when to schedule your stress breaks so that they will be congruent with the rhythms of your Ultradian Cycles.² I will be writing more about this in future articles in Impact. For now, a brief guide is that you need to schedule a stress break at a time that coincides with your low energy points in your daily rhythms, such as early afternoon or early evening.

2. LOWER YOUR TENSION LEVEL. CLEAR THE CLUTTER: EMPTY YOUR MIND.

You could begin and then maintain a **meditation** of focusing on your breathing, excluding or ignoring all other thoughts, for a set period of time. I have opted for the idea of 108 breaths so that I do not have to set or check a timing device. It takes about 5-8 minutes to do, depending on my rate of breathing on that day. I now have done it daily for several months, and it has turned down the volume on my mental chatter. Occasionally, it has stopped it altogether for brief periods of time, replaced by a sense of peaceful abiding. I intend to continue this daily practice for at least a year to see what effects continue and expand.

For those who prefer external guidance and support in clearing the mind, there are many commercially produced MP3 files and CD format programs designed to assist the listener to drift into a deeply relaxed state.^{3,4} Several combine classical or new age music with sounds from nature such as oceans, streams, and bird and animal calls. Some are designed to work with neurotechnology or brainwave entrainment devices.⁵ This is fine if you have your MP3 player and equipment available where and when you need a break.

But what about times and places when you don't have these supports? For these situations you need to have a well-learned set of skills in tension release, deep breathing, and mental imagery skills. These skills are worth acquiring and practicing. You can learn them from a coach or consultant, or from various audiovisual programs^{3,4} designed to take you through the procedures.

3. USE IMAGERY TO SHAPE YOUR FUTURE WHILE YOU ENJOY YOUR PRESENT

Once you have learned how to settle yourself down and clear the clutter from your mind, now you are ready to instill positive models for success and enjoyment. These can be practiced in stress breaks, although the best time is other mental training sessions when you are totally alone, or when doing some activity that is essentially mindless, like riding a bus or waiting in a grocery checkout line.

Just recently we all had the thrill of watching (or even participating in) the Summer Olympic Games. All of these athletes and coaches use mental imagery skills to guide their precision and excellence in high performance situations.⁶ We can use these same skills to have effective, graceful, and enjoyable processes in our recreational, business, and social contexts. We can image ourselves making a great shot in golf, a wonderful presentation at work, or the feeling of a warm and affectionate hug from a family member or close friend. The more we mentally rehearse these events, the more our words become our realities, and our images become the guides for a self-fulfilling prophesy of enjoyable living.

The key is to desire a successful outcome, to mentally practice the sequence of actions to produce it, then merely allow it to play out in real life with a sense of enjoying the process while being detached about the outcome. Easier said than done, but easier done with practice using imagery. The steps involved in constructing effective mental imagery are outlined in several self-help books and tapes.^{6,9}

4. DEVELOP PASSION. WRITE AND REVISIT YOUR MISSION STATEMENT

Even if you can lower stress and perform more optimally in various life settings, the real essence of enjoyment or flow is the sense of progression in your development as a person.

This is the more philosophical or spiritual enquiry that actually adds value to daily living by providing purpose and passion. Some questions to consider are: "Why am I here on this earth? What do I want to do while I'm here? What values do I want to live by? How congruent is my life with the values I say I live by?"

The answers become the guidelines that increasingly can direct the time and energy you expend, so that less is lost in idle and mindless drifting, and more is devoted to purpose. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi,⁷ interviewing people who considered themselves to be personally fulfilled, noticed that few of them had their happiest moments in leisure. Almost all of them derived their greatest enjoyment through work and social or physical activity that challenged them to expand their mental or emotional capacities, to develop as more connected and integrated persons. In order to experience Flow more often and more deeply in daily living, a person needs to have a sense of mission or purpose to define personal development, and the feedback of progress in this mission.

In this quest for a personal mission statement, as Steven Covey⁸ says, begin with the end in mind. Consider the 10 values you consider to be most important in your life. For each value, write a brief sentence to describe your feeling about its importance or meaning. This list of value statements is the basis for your Mission Statement, or personal charter. From this list you can begin to use imagery to focus your goals and objectives for the coming year.⁹ Then you can work backwards to the next half-year to image steps along the way to realizing these values in weekly planning for daily living.¹⁰

Every year or so is a good time to revisit your mission statement and track your progress. People change. What was important several years ago may be insignificant now, so your mission statement may need to be revised to reflect shifts in your life and values. This review is often best done in consultation with your personal board of directors, the people you have gathered around you as friends, confidantes, and personal advisors.

5. CONSTRUCT AND MAINTAIN YOUR PERSONAL SUPPORT NETWORK

Enlist the group support of family and friends. Even the strongest individual needs regular social support to sustain positive change and personal growth. It is especially helpful to include in your support group at least one **role model** of someone who has successfully made the personal

change that you are now attempting. Even if it is your project, friends can keep you on track by giving you technical (how to do it) and emotional (cheering you on) support.

Also, friends serve as a public witness to your progress, making it more real and more integrated with your self-concept, your image of who you are. So celebrate goal attainment frequently and publicly with them, and increasingly repeat to yourself positive attributions about who you are as seen through their eyes, and as experienced by you as you integrate steps in personal growth.

These positive attributions are the basis of a solid platform of self-esteem,⁸ the foundation of mental fitness and emotional wellness. They help you construct your personal history and your connectedness in space and time in the context of community.

CONCLUSION

Mental fitness flows from a process that begins with taking a break, to get off the carousel of life and begin to see it from afar. Then using skills to relax and take it easy. Next, employ the imagery to construct a future life around the living of values that make sense to you. Then work with others in activities that allow those values to be expressed and fulfilled. Finally, integrate these personal habits with a sense of self that includes not only exercise of options, but also the options to exercise these factors in daily living.

The richness of life is the dance between the autonomy of personal freedom, and the synergy of connection and mutual creation of activities that add value to our celebration of life.

The 5 factors that have been outlined here are starting points in transforming our world from the only point of influence we know and can truly change: ourselves.

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