



Mental Fitness in the Game of Life

by MARIE WALL

There is much discussion about physical fitness and its contribution to one's health. But have you considered your mental fitness? Sport psychology can teach you a great deal about honing skills to assist you in daily life. In my life, sports like water polo and golf have taught me skills such as mental fitness that I use regularly. Mental fitness is one's ability to control thoughts, emotions and actions, qualities admired in those who possess a strong character. It is often thought that people of strong character are born, not made; yet we can learn the skills of mental fitness and apply them.

Mental fitness is essential in enhancing one's enjoyment of life and productivity. It requires developing reflective skills, learning more about yourself, assessing your strengths and areas of growth. It also means validating your accomplishments. When you learn more about yourself and develop these skills, you enhance your self-esteem.

The skills necessary for mental fitness include mental, emotional and cognitive. These skills enhance your conscious participation in all areas of your life and help you attain the levels of enjoyment and productivity you desire. Your inner desire gives direction and helps you set goals. Commitment to mental health gives you focus and helps you maintain sight of your goals. Celebrating your accomplishments is important. Self-knowledge, reflection and validation give perspective and in turn, build you up as you proceed.

Perspective enables a person to better understand their life experiences. Similar events could happen to two different people, yet how each views the events has either positive or negative mental and emotional impact. When you are able to see the potential in a given situation there are opportunities for immediate and long-term gains. The benefits include positive feelings and thoughts that empower you to take actions towards your goals. A "Murphy's Law" perspective causes negative feelings, self-defeating thoughts and limited action to influence change. The combination of mental fitness and healthy perspective can take you a

long way in developing wellness and balance, and can even positively affect those around you.

The emotional component is an integral part of mental fitness. Stress is a part of life and can be constructive or destructive. Self-awareness leads to reflection of one's stress level and indicates what action must be taken to cope and control stress or to motivate oneself to attain higher productivity. Relaxation time and techniques allow you to re-group and re-focus your efforts. Physical activity is an excellent way to de-stress, to release pent up emotion and adrenaline. This physical release assists the body in restoring equilibrium and prepares you for further activity at home and work. Time out, for quiet and space, is another avenue useful to de-stress your life. Taking time to assess an event that occurred can give you the opportunity to look at a situation with less emotion and more perspective, opening up different options and consideration for positive opportunities. Learning deep breathing exercises, meditation or even a martial art can be ways to deal with stress build up.

While deep breathing exercises and meditation may not be completely familiar to you, some people do engage naturally in these activities at some level. Just remember a time when you went off by yourself and after a period of time felt revived. Or a time when you felt panicky and just took a few deep breaths to help calm yourself. These are responses that come natural to you. To make them more useful you can practice them regularly.

For example, take the practice of centering meditation. There are several steps you can take to get yourself centered. Find a place that is comfortable and, if possible, free from interruption. Begin by noticing yourself, your body, your emotions, your thoughts – this is called a body scan. Take a slow, deep breath, filling your whole body and then slowly exhale. Take another breath, slowly, comfortably. As you do this bring your attention to your muscles and consciously relax them, allowing yourself to let go and sink further into your seat, knowing as you let go you are

supported; continue to deepen your relaxation. Once you have relaxed your muscles, picture yourself in a positive place and notice the pleasure you feel. Allow yourself to stay in this place until you are ready to leave it. Then gradually let yourself come out of this state more relaxed and centered than before.

Relaxation is one side of the coin; the other side is knowing how to get yourself motivated. Getting psyched up is not always easy but completing tasks allows you to feel good about yourself and your accomplishments. A few techniques that could help are positive self-talk, imagery, visual aids, or physical activity. Positive self-talk is a conscious effort to think and make statements that motivate action, such as “I work efficiently” or “I am safe and in control”. People may scoff at this but see no problem with negative self-statements that may play like mental tapes. Visualization can be positive stimulation that activates adrenaline and your emotional response. Imagine yourself completing a task with ease and confidence. This often goes well with positive self-talk. Another option is to post inspirational messages and pictures. A brisk walk or jog can also help jump start your energy and increase your productivity.

Another component that is essential to mental fitness is cognitive skills. Developing the ability to focus and re-focus are keys to staying attuned to things around you. “Focusing is the ability to direct and maintain your attention on task-relevant cues while ignoring those that are irrelevant and distracting” (Durand-Bush, 1998). It is the ability to focus on one thing at a time and feel the pleasure of accomplishment. In an age of multi-tasking this skill can increase efficiency and allow more time for other things. When you are stressed it is challenging to hold your attention on the task at hand. You have to assess how much attention you require at any given time. Being able to focus intently to accomplish a task is rewarding; yet, having a broad view, when appropriate, gives perspective.

Mental fitness is part of a healthy approach to life. These skills hone your mental fitness thereby increasing your self-esteem and efficiency, leaving more time to do the things you desire with the people who are important to you. Learning the skills of mental fitness and developing a positive perspective will increase mental acuity, emotional rewards and a stronger character. For more information and concrete exercises in developing mental fitness consult *Getting Mentally Fit for Competitive Water Polo* by Natalie Durand-Bush (1998) or contact me for the reference material.

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