

Winter 2009-2010 insert

Mental Health in the Off-Season

Mental fitness, what is it? We are all aware of the need to be physically fit whether we are or not.* But what about mentally fit? We don't hear much about that one. Much of the current emphasis on Physical fitness focuses on the problem of obesity with good reason. It is definitely an epidemic but so is substance abuse and we have been grappling with that issue decades longer. Both of these are health problems AND mental problems. Obesity is linked to depression, anxiety, sexual trauma and predisposition to addictive behavior. Obesity can lead to diabetes, heart disease and cancer. Substance abuse is linked to depression, anxiety, childhood trauma and predisposition to addictive behaviors. Its physical consequences can be heart disease, liver disease and diabetes. Those are just two examples among many where the mind and the body dramatically demonstrate the consequences of a lack of fitness.

Recognizing the mind/body connection is treating substance abuse has become widely accepted in the last 20-25 years. This is not yet the case with obesity. But as individuals we can and should always be aware of and working on both.

So back to the questions of what is mental fitness. There are several elements that most clinicians agree are necessary. They include:

- Having a reasonably good outlook on life and toward others.
- Feeling mostly positive about yourself and your abilities
- Having a developed set of guiding principles or ethics that help you treat yourself, other people and the world around you with some dignity and respect.
- Possessing strategies and skills that allow you to effectively manage stress and make good decisions even when under stress
- To be able to critically think, or think objectively when the situation calls for it. This skill leads to good problem-solving abilities even when the problem is with yourself.

We all have developed thoughts and beliefs in these five areas. The question is: How well does your system work for you? These five areas represent a standard or a guide. It doesn't mean you have to think and feel this way all the time. No one can do that. Anyone can and does get derailed by things that occur in life. If you do, that's OK, it happens. The goal is to make it temporary. It's no different than what you do when working on physical fitness and you get off track.

Taking a holistic approach to fitness is not a new message. After all the mind does reside in the head which is attached to the rest of the body. But, still, people tend to forget the fact. The reason is most likely rooted in the fact that people find it much easier to discuss anything physical. There is a stigma still connected to mental health issues. You know, like, "he's a mental case." That really needs to change. It's hard to feel comfortable looking at, talking about and improving mental fitness with that attitude.

Staying mentally fit in the off season assumes a couple of things. One is that a person is mentally fit during the season and two, that it may be harder to maintain in the off season. Both things

may be true. But, the first one may not be true. And if it isn't, then that is the place to start working. That's because it is likely that problems get worse in the off season. Avoiding issues usually means more trouble later. If your thoughts about on season and off season go something like this:

River Season

Good times

Party

Good friends

Get paid

Get tips

Get _____?

Off Season

Where's the money?

Boring

Conflict with partner to face

Then consider your options for fixing that. The Whale Foundation is a great resource.

It can be a challenge to make the transition from "on" to "off." For some it may literally feel like a switch being turned off when the season ends. There are things you can do but these recommendations don't work if you are lazy about your mental fitness and you avoid dealing with problems at home until you can't avoid them any longer.

1. Realize that life of the river cannot be similar to life at home. Don't make comparisons, because if you do, you may be disappointed.
2. Stay active, physically and mentally. Have a plan to maintain physical fitness. Pursue and maintain interest, hobbies or causes that you care about. One example is there are lots of opportunities to engage other people in conversation on river trips and to read. There's no T.V.! Don't turn it on at home.
3. Structure. This can be difficult because river trips are fairly structured. If you have more time on your hands at home, it needs some structuring. This allows you to feel and be more productive.
4. Relationships. Everyone needs emotional support. Friends, family members and significant others are crucial to maintaining mental fitness. If you don't have a good support network at home, start working on building it. If you have friends that you only see on the river, stay in touch. If you have conflict with people at home, work on it. Talk, get counseling.
5. Employment. This gets to the possible financial stress if you don't have steady reliable work in the off season. The financial stress can then lead to other problems like depression, anger or conflict with partner. Nothing can unravel a person quicker than not knowing where the money is going to come from to pay the bills. If you need help figuring this out, then get it.
6. Know and use the resources in your community. Getting started and following through on some of these things can be difficult, especially if you feel you are on your own.

Opportunities are out there but you have to be aware of them to take advantage. Talk to people, make phone calls, get on-line or get your local newspaper. All these things can help generate ideas than can lead to answers you need.

As I mentioned earlier, the Whale Foundation is a great resource. You can go to our website (www.whalefoundation.org) or call our help line (877-44-WHALE). This is why we exist.

Finally, don't think you should try to do all of this at once. Take small steps, maybe just talk to someone who might help you organize your ideas about how to improve your mental fitness. Have a short term plan and a long term plan. Go slowly but get started. It feels better to be in shape.

Susan K. Ash

- We just had an article in the fall BQR talking about how to stay physically fit.

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