

Are We Mentally Fit?

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It's the pandemic after the pandemic—worldwide mental health is now taking center stage. Life on earth has always been stressful, but the level of stress has increased over the last two decades commensurate with technological advancements and the flood of information combined with instant communication. This real time, always on, always connected, and much less active lifestyle has taken its toll. Like frogs in boiling water, we haven't noticed the gradual but steady decline in our mental health. The COVID-19 pandemic and political turmoil put mental health decline into high gear through a combination of isolation, job loss, fear, anxiety, and bereavement. Just within the last week, headlines read:

"COVID-19 pandemic made US college students mental health even worse"

"Partly hidden by isolation, many of the nation's school children struggle with mental health"

"Loneliness pandemic—work from home during COVID-19 takes mental toll"

"It's not just you: everyone's mental health is suffering"

The very technology designed to bring people closer together actually makes us feel more lonely, isolated, anxious and depressed! The competition for every second of our mindshare is overwhelming our brains. Multiple studies show a correlation between heavy social media and news media with depression, anxiety, loneliness, and even suicidal thoughts.

Technology can't replace real-world human connection. Our in-person, live contact with others triggers hormones that alleviate stress and make us feel happier, healthier, and more positive. Fellowship is important.

Most of us probably don't even think about our mental fitness, but we should. What is mental health? Mental health is defined as our overall state of mind, positive or negative. Simply put, it's the health of our attitude and thoughts. Our mental health drives our actions, emotions, decisions and impacts our self-awareness and interpersonal relationships.

Just like physical health, we all have varying degrees of mental health. We're all at different points on a mental health continuum—usually in the middle, but we move up or down based on life events. If we have a rough day at work or a significant trial, our mental health and attitude often takes a dive. Signs that point to a decline in mental health include sleep difficulty, loss of appetite, isolating ourselves from people and activities, loss of energy, irritability, anxiety, depression, and difficulty performing daily activities.

Just like physical health, we can improve our mental fitness. Mentally fit people have a positive outlook on life. They have a resilience to take life's ups and downs in stride. And there is a strong interdependency between physical and mental health, much stronger than anyone thought before.

Our mental health impacts our mood, our energy, our motivation, and even our immune system by suppressing T-cell responses to viruses and bacteria. People with poor mental health—people without a positive attitude—get sicker easier and stay sicker longer. Feelings of depression, stress, and anxiety often lead to physical tiredness and sleep disorders. Angry outbursts and feelings of anxiety increase the risk of heart attack almost ten times within the following two hours.

Just as poor mental health impacts physical health, poor physical health impacts mental health. If we're not eating right, getting daily exercise, and sleeping, our mental health will suffer. Physical activity is proven to reduce stress, improve sleep, increase mental capacity, improve and significantly reduce the risk of developing dementia and other related diseases.

Our body's physical hormones and chemical balance directly impacts our mental well-being. As most women go through their monthly cycle and life change at menopause, they often struggle with depression and anxiety. I

know what you're thinking men: not my wife! Prioritizing quality sleep is foundational as well for both physical and mental health. People with insomnia are four times more likely to develop depression. Moreover, 50% of people with anxiety and 90% of people with depression experience sleep problems. The two go hand in hand and feed off each other.

Failure to take proper care of our mental and physical health is indeed sinful and often leads to a gradual death by suicide. Think about that. We're taking our own life through a series of poor daily choices. Knowing the relationship between physical and mental health, we all need to make better daily choices to get the right nutrition, daily exercise, and proper sleep—very important.

There are many activities to improve mental health: Forest bathing, a simple walk outside in the woods (yes, with our clothes on, but without our cell phone), is proven to reduce stress and anxiety. Getting vitamin D through sunlight elevates our mood and our mental fitness.

As Ryan McClure reminded us in his "Thankful in 2020" commentary, using a daily gratitude journal and sending a written expression of gratitude creates in us a thankful attitude. Quickly forgiving offenses and holding no grudges significantly improves mental health and sleep. Simply taking time to smile lowers our heart rate. And laughing by hanging out with a funny friend is great for improving mental fitness (*Cliff, you better make room for company—we're all coming down!*) And to say it again: Getting together with our physical and spiritual family is vital to our mental health!

As we read in *The Berean* this morning (coincidence? I think not!), Job 32:8 reads "...there is a spirit in man, and the breath of the Almighty gives him understanding." As John Ritenbaugh explains, this "breath of the Almighty" enables communication to take place between God and humans. But it also enables communication to take place between other beings (evil spirits) and humans. These living spirits possess the power to negatively change our attitudes and our mental health if we're not on guard.

Just as daily physical exercise improves physical fitness, daily spiritual exercise of prayer and meditation improves mental fitness. I'll refer you to Dr. Maas's six-part series, "The W's and H's of Meditation," and Martin Collins' sermon, "Prayer Makes a Difference."

Daily prayer enables us to overcome the world's stresses and avoid a self-focused, bad attitude. To maintain good mental health, we must continually thank God for whatever we are going through, knowing in faith that, regardless of the difficulty, that God is in control. Daily prayers of thanksgiving are a verbal gratitude journal. I'll point you to John Ritenbaugh's Bible Study on "Thankfulness," given just a few years back (1986). It's available online at [cgg.org](https://www.cgg.org), and some 30+ years later, it is even more relevant. Take the time and go listen to it. John explains the primary driver of sin is an ungrateful attitude and a prideful self-focus that drives us to focus on all we don't have versus all we've been given.

It was this ungrateful attitude that led Satan to rebel against God. He was one of the most powerful and beautiful creations ever made. But his ungrateful attitude led him to dwell on what he did not have. He wanted more; he deserved more! It was that attitude that led to his sin. The same thing happened to Adam and Eve, right? They allowed Satan to influence their attitude and became focused on the thing they did not have, the thing they couldn't have.

Brethren, we live in a world of mental illness, controlled by Satan's busyness and ungrateful attitude. As we read,

Ecclesiastes 9:3 This is an evil in all that is done under the sun: that one thing happens to all. Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead.

Paul warns in Romans 1, "this world refuses to glorify God nor are they thankful for all He does... their foolish hearts are darkened...they profess to be wise and become fools." And in II Timothy 3, "in this end time, men will be lovers of themselves, self focused and ungrateful."

As Paul admonishes us in Colossians 2, Colossians 3, and I Thessalonians 5, we must:

[Be] rooted and built up in him [Jesus Christ], and grounded in the faith, abounding therein with thanksgiving

Above all things put on love... And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, and be you thankful

In every thing - IN EVERYTHING - give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you

Summarizing Ecclesiastes 3, there is a time for everything and our time here on earth is limited. We cannot control the circumstances in our life. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us. We can't allow ourselves to become resentful about what God has permitted in our lives. Doing so is opening the door to mental illness and sin. We must choose to work to maintain a positive, thankful outlook through sickness and health, prosperity and poverty, joy and sorrow.

As we conclude, I'll confess I've had a hard time maintaining a positive and thankful attitude during this time of great turmoil, combined with the loss of a brother and mentor. But I came across this Bible study on Thankfulness at just the right time (coincidence? I know not!) I've since repented in prayer and thankfulness for our Great God is faithful. He really loves us and He is working all things - ALL THINGS - for good to those who love Him and who are called according to His purpose.