

**MENTAL FITNESS**  
**THE CONTINUING EXPERIENCE . . .**



**Summary Report**

by

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*\*In the beginning, we didn't even know what mental fitness was, but we had a curiosity that brought us together. Now we are all researching into ourselves.*

~ Ed Keilbart, Age 62

*\*The mental fitness program is like a dream come true for me, because I didn't get much out of school. This is such fun, relaxing, full of hope and joy.*

~Pauline Mowat, Age 79

*\*I attended the first mental fitness program and I ended up on a mountain. When this course is over, I expect to be in orbit.*

~Robert Wain, Age 84

**\*Italics represent direct quotes of program participants.**

## **THE MENTAL FITNESS CHALLENGE**

Mental fitness is a way of life that promotes a healthy body, mind, and spirit, and it is the key to a healthy, productive aging society. The benefits of mental fitness go well beyond the group of people taking the course. All members of the community, regardless of age, gain a better understanding of how important education, learning, and mental fitness are throughout life, and they gain greater respect for the mental abilities of older people from their associations with senior leaders who are powerful role models of healthy aging. The challenge is to make mental fitness a way of life for everyone.

**MENTAL FITNESS: THE CONTINUING EXPERIENCE  
SEPTEMBER 1997 to JUNE 1998**

**Background**

During the past five years, the research and development of mental fitness for seniors at Century House has proceeded in three distinct phases:

Phase I - Lifelong Learning Project (Needs Assessment)

Phase II - Mental Fitness Research Project

Phase III - Mental Fitness Pilot Project

Phase I: The Lifelong Learning Needs Assessment (Cusack & Thompson, 1993) concluded:

*Lifelong learning means different things to different people and encompasses all learning, formal and informal. Mental Fitness is just as important as physical fitness, though less visible and more difficult to measure. In fact, mental fitness is the key to healthy and productive aging. But what is it and how do we exercise it?*

Phase II: The Mental Fitness Research Project (Cusack & Thompson, 1995) was designed to address these questions, and the research team concluded that :

*Mental Fitness is vital to healthy aging, encompassing many skills that can be developed. Like physical fitness, it is a condition of optimal functioning that is achieved through regular exercise and a healthy lifestyle. Mental fitness includes creative thinking, clear thinking, problem-solving, memory skills, learning new things, and expressing ideas clearly, setting personal goals and developing positive mental attitudes such as: (1) optimism, (2) mental flexibility, (3) self-esteem and confidence, and (4) a willingness to risk*

It was recommended that a Mental Fitness Program be developed and offered to people aged 50+ in the form of a series of eight workshops, 3 hours in length.

Phase III: The Mental Fitness Pilot Project (Cusack & Thompson, 1996) encompassed the development, implementation, and evaluation of a series of 8 all-day intensive workshops and a 5-week mini-series for people aged 50+ to exercise their mental abilities. Eighteen people (ranging in age from 63 to 83; with an average age of 71.2 years) participated in the series of 8 all-day intensive workshops covering the following topics: *Goal Setting, Critical Thinking, Creative Thinking, Positive Mental Attitude (PMA), Speaking Your Mind, Learning and Memory, and Mentally Fit for Life*. Twenty-five people (ranging in age from 59 to 91 years; with an average age of 75 years) attended the five week series of 3-hour workshops. The focus of the miniseries was on three key components of mental fitness: *goal setting, critical thinking, and creative thinking*. Based on the findings and discussions, we concluded that a series of 8 workshops was essential to cover the basic components of mental fitness. While we consider all-day intensives ideal, 3 hr. workshops were preferred by most seniors\*.

Funding from the Ministry of Health & Ministry Responsible for Seniors presented the opportunity to extend the research and development of mental fitness, and to showcase the program at a Mental Fitness Public Forum attended by a capacity crowd of 200 people from the Greater Vancouver area. Participants reported that the experience had a powerful impact on them, and they wanted more.

As a result of the success of the pilot project and the public forum, Century House was developing a waiting list of people who wanted a mental fitness program. And due to media coverage, articles, presentations and research papers, people from other seniors groups and centres expressed an interest in mental fitness programs; and people in other parts of the province and across North America wanted resource materials and programs. How could we address everyone's needs? The first priority was ongoing programs for Century House, and that is the focus of Phase IV, which is documented in this summary report.

\*Throughout this report, the pilot program refers to the 8-week series of all-day workshops.

#### PHASE IV: Mental Fitness: The Continuing Experience.

While providing needed programs for Century House, Phase IV also presented an opportunity to address a number of additional questions related to the development of (A) a model program that would work with diverse groups of people and (B) a model for second level programming for people who have taken an introductory course. Based on our experience with the pilot program, our task was :

- (A) To develop, implement, and evaluate a basic model program, Introduction to Mental Fitness.
- (B) To develop, implement, and evaluate a series of monthly seminars, Mental Fitness: The Continuing Experience, for all those who participated in the pilot program.

These two programs are experimental, part of our ongoing search for the *formula* for lifelong mental fitness.

This report contains a descriptive evaluation of both A and B above, and rich insights concerning mental fitness, its many benefits, and how it can be most effectively developed throughout the full span of life. In the report, italics represent direct quotes of participants from either the documentation of discussions or written feedback questionnaires.

## (A) INTRODUCTION TO MENTAL FITNESS

### Goals and Objectives

The goal of every mental fitness program is *mens sana in corpore sano* (a healthy mind in a healthy body). Objectives are:

- (a) to develop knowledge and skills of mental fitness;
- (b) to promote the attitudes of mental fitness (optimism, flexibility, confidence, self-esteem); and
- (c) to promote healthy lifestyles that sustain mental fitness

To evaluate any mental fitness program, the following research and evaluation questions must be addressed:

- (a) Is the program effective in raising the level of mental fitness?
- (b) How have attitudes and beliefs changed?
- (c) What goals are people setting? What are they achieving?  
What healthy lifestyle changes are being made?

In addition, there were specific questions to be addressed with respect to a model program in mental fitness.

### Program Development Questions:

- (1) Do we have the right format? Is 8 weeks the right length of time for the program? Is 3 hours the right length for each session?
- (2) Does the program work for people who have achieved a higher level of formal education (i.e., college or university)? For people who have very diverse educational and occupational histories?
- (3) What is the right balance between process and content? How important is it that the agenda be maintained, that each session focus on a specific component of mental fitness?
- (4) How important is personal goal setting?

## Methods

The following methods were used to gather information to address the questions:

- (a) Pre/post questionnaires provided participant information and self-assessment of mental fitness skills and attitudes;
- (b) A participant observation record of all sessions was used to record language, behaviour, and attitude change;
- (c) Take home questions prepared people to "speak their minds" concerning mental fitness and the specific research questions;
- (d) Focus group discussions addressed the four specific program development questions.

## Participants

Seventeen people (3 men and 14 women) registered for the course -- 12 people completed the course (2 dropped out because it wasn't for them; 2 dropped out because of illness; 1 because of a move). Ages ranged from 61 - 83 1/2 years, with an average of 70. With respect to education, everyone had completed high school with one exception, 5 had taken university courses and 2 people had Masters Degrees. Two people were on long-term disability, 1 operated his own company, and the length of retirement for the rest was from 1 to 23 years. In comparison to participants in the 8-week pilot program, this group has

- a similar age range;
- a lower health profile -- e.g., 3 people rated their health as satisfactory and 2 as poor;
- a higher level of education -- specifically, 2 people have achieved Masters degrees in later life;
- a higher initial level of mental fitness as indicated on the self-assessment scale.

The table on the next page compares the average pre and post test scores for participants in the 8-week pilot program with the average pre-test scores for this group of participants. Note: Before they had taken the program, this group rated themselves higher on (2) creativity, (3) optimism, (4) openness to new ideas, (8) ability to learn new things and (9) memory than the participants in the pilot program rated themselves after they had taken the program.

Table 1. MENTAL FITNESS SKILLS AND ATTITUDES

Comparison of pre program and post program means for participants in the pilot program with the pre program means for participants in the this program.

<b>PILOT PROGRAM</b>		<b>INTRODUCTORY PROGRAM</b>
<b>(1) LEVEL OF MENTAL FITNESS</b>		
pre program	<b>6.8</b>	<b>7.4</b>
post program	<b>7.5</b>	
<b>(2) CREATIVITY</b>		
pre program	<b>6.7</b>	<b>7.9</b>
post program	<b>7.5</b>	
<b>(3) OPTIMISM</b>		
pre program	<b>7.7</b>	<b>9</b>
post program	<b>7.8</b>	
<b>(4) OPENNESS TO NEW IDEAS</b>		
pre program	<b>8.2</b>	<b>8.7</b>
post program	<b>8.4</b>	
<b>(5) WILLINGNESS TO TAKE RISKS</b>		
pre program	<b>7.3</b>	<b>7.3</b>
post program	<b>8.1</b>	
<b>(6) FLEXIBILITY</b>		
pre program	<b>7.5</b>	<b>7.9</b>
post program	<b>7.9</b>	
<b>ABILITY TO SPEAK YOUR MIND IN A GROUP</b>		
pre program	<b>6.5</b>	<b>7.6</b>
post program	<b>7.1</b>	
<b>ABILITY TO LEARN NEW THINGS</b>		
pre program	<b>7.3</b>	<b>8.2</b>
post program	<b>7.5</b>	
<b>MEMORY</b>		
pre program	<b>5.5</b>	<b>6.8</b>
post program	<b>6.7*</b>	
<b>CONFIDENCE IN MENTAL ABILITIES</b>		
pre program	<b>7.0</b>	<b>8.1</b>
post program	<b>8.4*</b>	

\*indicates statistical significance at  $p=.01$

## Summary of the Introductory Program

The workshops were based on the components of mental fitness as outlined in the Mental Fitness Pilot Program report, and included the following topics: Goal Setting, Critical Thinking, Creative Thinking, Positive Mental Attitude (PMA), Speaking Your Mind, Learning and Memory, and Mentally Fit for Life. These topics recurred as themes throughout the sessions, building one upon the other. Goal setting, for example, was a thread running throughout that included an introduction to goal setting, related exercises and assignments, planning personal mental fitness goals and strategies for making long-term lifestyle changes. Puzzles, jokes, and brain teasers were increased in difficulty with each session.

We followed the format for the pilot program with minor adaptations to address the particular needs of the group. Specifically, the group seemed somewhat reluctant to set goals -- convinced of the importance of goal-setting, we spent more time on it, and explored ideas about having a mission in life and leaving a legacy. This group was more confident of their mental abilities (NB. the scores on page 9) and did not use the language of limiting beliefs to the same extent that participants in previous programs had. They were initially more optimistic about the options for them in later life, so less time was spent on optimism. Participants initially rated themselves more highly on creativity, and therefore time that wasn't required to change limiting beliefs was used for deeper discussion. For example, highlights from the discussions on creativity were:

- *Creativity comes from being original and taking risks.*
- *Creativity relates to the way you live your life -- its not how long you live, but how you live your life that counts.*
- *When you start creating, it leads to something else, so you are constantly growing.*
- *What a release of inspirational energy when you create something.*
- *In the process of creating, time stands still. On the completion, there is a euphoria, a sense of well-being.*

- *Before I came to this class, I never thought I was creative. Now I am getting boastful. In my generation, it wasn't done. I still don't boast to people outside of this class about what I have done.*
- *It is one thing to be creative, another to talk about it. None of us here lack achievements, but talking about it gives us renewed strength and confidence. We are pushing further in this class and breaking new ground.*

## RESULTS: Benefits and Achievements

Three short stories provide a flavour of the program, how people benefited, and what they achieved. These stories, (Beatrice, Marilyn, and Ernst) were selected because the people represent the diversity in the class and their goals and achievements are unique.

Beatrice is a woman 83 1/2 years of age who grew up in England and qualified for Oxford University at the age of 16. However, the Depression and the War intervened and education had to be postponed. She married and emigrated to Canada where she worked in secretarial jobs most of her life. When she retired, she enrolled in the Open Learning Institute and received a B.A. in her 70's, then an M.A. in Women's Studies from Simon Fraser University at 81.

Physically, she fits the stereotype of the "sweet little old lady" -- but like all stereotypes, it fails to convey the richness of her experience, her sharp mind, and her ability to speak her mind eloquently when the opportunity arises. She enrolled in the Mental Fitness class, because she felt she was getting mentally and physically lazy and needed something to get her back on track. She wanted to gain confidence and new knowledge that would fuel her keen interest in destroying the myth that "mental faculties decline with age".

*For the rest of my life, I shall be fighting for older people, so that with mental and physical fitness they can hold their heads up. We have so much that is on the shelf.*

Before she undertook university studies, she believed that her mental faculties would diminish with age, but research for a Master's degree together with personal experience changed this belief. Her mental ability continues to improve because she has a desire to be happy and to keep her mind active.

Beatrice's personal mental fitness goal was to get more confidence and knowledge to support her mission in life, which is to foster education for older people. As part of her goal, she spoke to a group of students at the university who are studying how to teach older people. She spoke about her experiences as a senior student, and was very critical of the quality of instruction at the university. She gave students tips to improve instruction for older adults, and impressed them with her spirit of adventure.

When asked to give the Mental Fitness class an update on her goal and achievements, she reported that she had been interviewed on television.

*Last week I was a guest on the Knowledge Network, a TV show entitled Generations. I was asked to speak about the importance of learning, and why I was driven to go back to school and get a BA and then an MA. And I spoke of the Mental Fitness program and how I was learning about new research that suggests the brain doesn't deteriorate when you get older. We are five years ahead of everybody else here. When you get older, there can be a lot of "clutter in the attic", but you just have to get rid of it. If you let your muscles go, they deteriorate and the same is true for the brain. In fact, to be fair, something vital may go, but the brain can still remain active. In other words, mental fitness doesn't solve all the problems of aging. But if you are doing a course, you have a goal, something that drives you on, and you forget your aches and pains. This class has helped me enormously. It has given me the push, it got the adrenaline going again, and I was able to make more progress.*

An unexpected benefit of the class was a change in attitude toward her peers and the development of new friendships. For many years, Beatrice had pursued her studies independently, and her solitary independent lifestyle put her at risk of isolation in later years. She felt

she had little in common with people of her own age, and preferred her own company or the company of younger students. In the Mental Fitness class she realized the value of group discussion, marveled at the achievements of others in the class, and developed a new respect and new social connections with her peers.

With respect to strategies to maintain a high level of mental fitness for the rest of her life, she felt it was a particular joy to develop bonds with younger people and to see oneself as equal.

*Sometimes we are loathe to push ourselves on younger people. I have a surrogate granddaughter and she and her friends (aged 25 to 35) want to know what I think about all kinds of things, and they are fascinated with my stories. Any way that we can find to contribute to others creates health.*

Marilyn is a 65 year old woman who has been retired for 4 1/2 years from teaching school, has taken some university courses and enjoys very good health. Always interested in personal development, she enrolled because the Mental Fitness program represented an opportunity to exercise and maintain her mental fitness, and she expected to gain new and interesting experiences and information. She said her mental functioning had not diminished in any way, because she was now more focused. To keep mentally fit, she does crosswords, reads, researches material on physical fitness, and writes articles. To keep physically fit, she teaches aerobics, walks her dogs, and does Scottish country dancing.

*My goal was to lose 10 pounds and I lost 17. I am well on my way toward my long-term goal, which is to lose 30 pounds. I have enrolled in an osteofit instructors course and I got started on a memorial album of my daughter who died 2 years ago in a skiing accident.*

Marilyn was an inspiration to all -- sharing her creativity in a variety of ways. On one occasion, she performed an Irish jig for the class; and on the final day she brought individual corsages for everyone and a stunning floral arrangement that she had made, the winner's name to be drawn from a hat. She also shared an album of her life and the memorial album of her daughter that she had begun. Like Beatrice,

Marilyn also found that being involved with younger people made her feel good.

*I was amazed how my 14 year old grandson wants to sit and listen to me. When I went to Parent's Night at the school last week, every teacher I met said, "Oh yes, he's told us all about you. and what you've done.*

Ernst is a 75 year old married man whose wife also attended the class. A high school grad with vocational training, he worked throughout his life as a sheet metal worker and currently operates his own company. He enrolled in the class because his wife "told me to", and he expected to gain "greater peace and a keener mind". He felt that his memory was not as good as it used to be, and kept mentally fit by doing some writing, but did very little for his physical fitness.

His personal goal was initially to publish a book, which he felt would be something he could leave behind, a source of pride, and a form of recognition. When he was asked to report on his achievement in the final week of the class, Ernst said,

*My original goal was to get published, and I was sidetracked. I made a speech in a play at the church and it was so successful they asked me if I would translate a hymn from Danish to English. I have now completed all 7 verses and it will be published in a new Danish / Canadian hymnbook. It was a particular challenge because it was written in 1681 and some of the words are not in the dictionary. The writer is one of my favourites, and this made it a particular honour. The commitment I made in this class helped me to complete the task.*

The class was beyond his expectations, and his mental fitness improved dramatically. The progress he talked about was reflected in his scores on the mental fitness self-assessment scale. On a 10-point scale, his level of mental fitness went from 6 to 8; flexibility went from 7 to 9; memory went from 5 to 8; and confidence in his mental abilities went from 5 to 8. His final comment was:

*If this kind of education is not continued it would be a great loss not only to us who participated in this class, but also to everyone who would be cheated of such an opportunity.*

## Program Evaluation

When people were asked what worked, they said:

- *Knowing what you were going to cover each day.*
- *The mensa quiz made me feel wise.*
- *I liked the humour and I liked the way you spoke to us.*
- *The handouts were good.*
- *I liked hearing what we had done the last day.*
- *I always appreciated the facilitators being here early, always busy, and ready to start on time.*
- *I liked the homework and the assignments.*
- *I liked the confidence you inspired in us.*

When participants in any program are asked how it could be improved, they say, "more time for discussions".

*We learn so much from one another. We need more time for discussion, people need time to share their work and their stories.*

People were adamant that all the topics be covered, and two said they would like more homework. One woman put it,

*Some people weren't used to homework and some didn't do it. I think there could have been more homework, it could have moved us ahead more. I liked your checking homework -- we need more feedback.*

## CONCLUSIONS: What We Learned from the Introductory Program

Based on this program, we concluded:

- (1) Do we have the right format? Is 8 weeks the right length of time for the program? Is 3 hours the right length for each session?

- yes, yes, and yes.

The group agreed that we had the right format -- 8 weeks was the right length of time and 3 hours was the preferred time for each class. Furthermore, they were adamant that the class size be kept to 13 or 14 people.

- (2) Does the program work for people who have achieved a higher level of education? For people who have diverse educational and occupational histories?

The program worked well for Beatrice, providing a mental workout that kept her sharp and confident, and gave her new knowledge to fuel her fight against ageist stereotypes. Ernst had no formal education beyond high school, and he used the program to increase his mental abilities and to fulfill his lifelong goal of being published. Marilyn has some post secondary education, and she used the class to improve her physical and emotional fitness; she focused on a specific goal of losing 10 pounds, and her success improved her mental and emotional health, giving new energy for creative activities. The results of this program suggest that the program works well for people who have a higher level of education (e.g., Beatrice), and that it works for people with very diverse educational and occupational histories. We do not know whether participants are inhibited and/or intimidated by those with higher education. Could this be a reason that 2 people dropped out because the program wasn't working for them? This requires further investigation.

- (3) What is the right balance between process and content? How important is it that the agenda be maintained, that each session focus on a specific component of mental fitness?

The balance between process and content is a delicate one that concerns every teacher, and maintaining that delicate balance requires skill and training. One of the ongoing debates in the public schools is, Do we teach children or do we teach subjects? In the context of seniors centres the question is, Do we teach mental fitness to seniors or do we teach seniors how to improve their mental fitness? The answer is, we teach seniors . . . .

The hallmark of effective older adult education is dialogue and discussion -- the most important aspect of any educational program is to put seniors in control of their own thinking, and to engage people in sharing their views with peers (Battersby, 1987). Generally, in traditional adult education, the content takes precedence, whereas in older adult education the process must take precedence. That means, the facilitator provides a framework -- the facilitator guides the discussion, ensuring that individual needs are being addressed, but never at the expense of either the content or the groups' needs. Good teachers are always aware of "the teachable moment" -- they have a carefully prepared agenda and the flexibility to "seize the moment" in order to maximize learning.

In an introductory course, it is critical that the key components of mental fitness be introduced. As one member of the class said:

*It is important to let others know what we are thinking and feeling. With any step forward that has been achieved, we are opened up to receive what other people have to share. There is not enough time for sharing. Everyone here could take a whole hour, but it mustn't stop the program. While the sharing is important, the teacher's part is even more important.*

(4) How important is personal goal setting?

In contrast to participants in the pilot program, this group was initially reluctant to set personal goals. They said, they had always set goals, and they had lots of goals. One woman said she was working on many goals, and she never did focus on a mental fitness goal. Another said,

*We have so many opportunities that it is hard to set goals -- you can spread yourself too thin. We need to distinguish between what we think we need and what we really want.*

If people really want to achieve their goals, they have to write them down and commit themselves to achieving them. As one person said,

*I have always thought about my goals, but writing them down made all the difference.*

Our experience over the past five years in the research and development of mental fitness programs at Century House has convinced us that personal goal setting is the most critical component of every introductory program. How important is personal goal setting to a second level course? That was only one of the research and development questions we proposed to address in the seminar series.

## (B) THE MENTAL FITNESS SEMINAR SERIES

A series of seven monthly Mental Fitness seminars was offered to people who participated in either one of the programs in the pilot project (i.e., the 8-week all-day intensive or the 5-week mini-series) and wanted to continue to exercise and improve their mental abilities. These seminars, 2 1/2 hours in length, were held approximately once a month from October 1997 to June 1998. The first session was spent in planning the schedule and the format for the sessions. Participants said they wanted to go more deeply into the components of mental fitness, and some people expressed a particular interest in assertiveness, which was incorporated into the topic, Speaking Your Mind. The schedule was:

Session 1 - Introduction & Planning

Session 2 - Goals, Mission

Session 3 - Critical Thinking

Session 4 - Creative Thinking

Session 5 - Speaking Your Mind Assertively

Session 6 - Learning & Memory

Session 7 - Mentally Fit for Life

### Goals and Objectives

While offering a program for people to deepen their understanding of mental fitness and to continue to exercise and improve their mental fitness, the seminar series gave us (the seminar leaders) an opportunity to continue to explore the topic of mental fitness and the most effective ways to develop, teach, and measure it. We focused on four specific questions.

### Program Development Questions

- (1) Have we got the right format (i.e. once a month, 2 1/2 hours)? Is this going to be adequate to maintain a consistent or higher level of mental fitness?
- (2) Should the seminar series focus on the same topics identified as key components in the pilot program?
- (3) How important is homework? Are academic articles suitable for assignments?
- (4) How important is goal setting?

### Participants

Nineteen people enrolled in the class, 14 from the 8-week program and 5 from the mini-series. Ages ranged from 62 - 84 years; with the average age of 73. With the exception of one person who is restricted by arthritis, people in this group are all involved in physical fitness, and participate in a variety of activities such as weight training, aerobics, square dancing, birding, yoga, tai chi, fitness classes, teaching fitness classes, hiking, playing baseball, swimming, golf.

To keep mentally fit, they participate in a wide variety of activities such as reading, spending time with people who are good conversationalists, crossword puzzles, learning new things, reading newspapers, being involved in activities at the centre, piano lessons, travel, attending study groups, crossword puzzles, bridge, poetry, memory work, jigsaw puzzles, staying confident and optimistic and positive, debates, square dancing, taking courses, scrabble, writing, associating with interesting young people, discussion groups, and taking on leadership roles.

People who signed up for the seminar series said they had benefited from taking the first mental fitness course in a number of ways. Note how each statement represents a different aspect of mental fitness.

- *The most important thing for me was learning that mental abilities do not decline with age.*
- *My outlook on life as a senior is brighter and more fulfilled.*
- *I gained a greater enthusiasm for learning.*
- *My self-talk is positive -- I learned that success is 99% failure.*
- *I'm more outgoing, and have more self-confidence.*
- *I'm more comfortable speaking out.*
- *This program revived a dormant brain - and improved my memory.*
- *I benefited most from learning to set goals and living up to them.*
- *A positive outlook and confident happy attitude is new to me.*
- *A new door has opened.*
- *I am more open-minded and I have greater self-esteem.*

When people were asked in the first session, why they had come to the seminar series, they said,

- *I enjoyed the introduction thoroughly and I am so glad to be back. I am still very concerned about my memory.*
- *I was brain dead when I came to the first program, and I have improved somewhat and expect to improve some more.*
- *I want to improve my memory and anything else is a plus.*
- *It is stimulating and exciting, and I like what happens to people. For example, when D. first came I heard her whisper her name -- now she shouts it out.*
- *I got so much excitement and energy out of the first course, and I have lost some of it. Now I want it back.*

- *I love learning, and I'll go anywhere where there's learning because it makes me feel so good.*

## RESULTS: Benefits and Achievements

When asked whether the seminar series helped them to maintain a level of fitness achieved in the pilot program, everyone agreed that it had. Comments were:

- *Yes, my whole being has been given a new chance to do things that add to the joy of living.*
- *Yes, I am able to focus better on jobs I do, I have less anxiety, I am more confident, and my memory is improving.*
- *This program renewed my self-confidence and worth as a contributing person.*
- *Yes, it has motivated me to be aware of the importance of ongoing maintenance of my mental fitness.*

People expected to improve certain aspects of mental fitness -- such as memory, creativity, confidence . . . and they got what they wanted from the series. The critical question is, of course, how do they know that their mental fitness has improved, what is the evidence? Some responses were:

- *Mental fitness is both mental and emotional. When I am mentally fit, I can cope with anything that comes at me.*
- *People who are mentally fit crave more knowledge.*
- *It's an individual thing. I know because my life is better now than a year ago.*
- *I know I am more mentally fit, because I have the interest and desire that I didn't have last year.*

- *I am not tops in all aspects - for example, I may say I am generally more mentally fit, but not in all aspects of mental fitness -- e.g., I don't think that I am more creative.*
- *It is very difficult to gauge, because it is so many things -- mental, emotional, and spiritual.*

### Program Evaluation

When asked if the seminar series met their expectations, everyone agreed that it had, with only one reservation.

*While I enjoyed the seminars and learned a lot, I missed the camaraderie and intensity of the longer sessions, and I prefer having less time between sessions.*

Other comments were:

- *I wish more seniors could experience the benefits of mental fitness and the improvements that I have noticed in my own mental abilities. I am happier and more contented with my life, even a little proud.*
- *I really want to develop creative thinking. I have always been proud of thinking logically. I can now see that logical thinking is often based on assumptions, so it restricts creative abilities.*
- *I need to be involved with people who are stimulating. This to me is like food that keeps me alive and enjoying life. That is the reason I attend the Mental Fitness classes.*

When people were asked how the seminar series could be improved, they suggested the following:

- *You have started on improving it by talking about better discussions and ensuring that everyone participates orally.*
- *Longer sessions closer together, more discussion.*

- *I want to hear more about what other people think and how they feel.*
- *Offer more resource reading on the Canadian aspect of aging, rather than the American one.*
- *Maybe 2 or 3 or a group could be asked at each session to prepare and present their views on a certain topic -- e.g., like seminar groups at university. But not if it puts too much pressure on us.*

## CONCLUSIONS: What We Learned from the Seminar Series

- (1) Have we got the right format (i.e. once a month, 2 1/2 hours)? Is this going to be adequate to maintain a consistent or higher level of mental fitness? While two people said they would like the sessions to be closer together, there was general agreement that once a month was adequate. However, everyone agreed that 2 1/2 hours was not long enough -- 3 hour is required.

Was the program successful in helping people to maintain their mental fitness? Everyone agreed that it was. What indications do we have? The following table compares the scores for this group before and after the pilot program and at the end of the seminar series.

Table 2. MENTAL FITNESS SKILLS AND ATTITUDES

	PILOT PROGRAM		SEMINARS
	<u>PRE</u>	<u>POST</u>	<u>POST</u>
LEVEL OF MENTAL FITNESS	6.8	7.5	7.5
CREATIVITY	6.7	7.5	7.0
OPTIMISM	7.7	7.8	8.8
OPENNESS TO NEW IDEAS	8.2	8.4	8.9
WILLINGNESS TO TAKE RISKS	7.3	8.1	8.1
FLEXIBILITY	7.5	7.9	7.6
ABILITY TO SPEAK YOUR MIND	6.5	7.1	7.5
ABILITY TO LEARN NEW THINGS	7.3	7.5	7.9
MEMORY	5.5	*6.7	6.3
CONFIDENCE IN MENTAL ABILITY	7.0	*8.4	8.1

\* means statistical difference between pre and post in the pilot program

(2) Should the seminar series focus on the same topics identified as key components in the pilot program? Everything that involves developing the mind is potentially good for our mental fitness. The challenge is to distinguish between what is "good for the mind" and the legitimate topics of a mental fitness course. In the seminar series, the introductory session involved some preliminary planning. Assertiveness was a topic that everyone was particularly interested in and we agreed that assertiveness was clearly an aspect of the topic, Speaking Your Mind. In Session 6, interest was expressed in learning more about how to participate more effectively in group discussion. Participating in discussion is also a part of Speaking Your Mind, and we propose to include it in the next seminar series. In the final analysis, it was agreed that any second level program or seminar series at Century House must include topics that relate clearly to the key components of mental fitness identified in the research project.

(3) How important is homework? Are academic articles suitable for assignments?

Homework is important, perhaps more so in the seminar series than an introductory program. While some people don't really like assignments, most agreed they were necessary, "otherwise, we could just drift along". Participants agreed that everyone needed to have an opportunity to contribute to the discussion and "be recognized" for what they had prepared. Someone even felt there should be more pressure,

*Could we have some pressure, some exercises, like things we have to do between classes that use what we have learned?*

And what about the level of difficulty? Are academic articles appropriate for discussion? At the end of the first seminar, people were given a challenging article on the subject of one's "mission in life" to read and questions to answer in preparation for the next

class. The following month, when they were asked how they felt about the assignment. The response was mixed:

- *I was bewildered*
- *I read it 3 times.*
- *Every time I read it I got more out of it -- it was very worthwhile.*
- *It didn't make any sense. I had negative impressions. I wasn't keen but I started reading it and began to enjoy it -- after the initial shock.*
- *For me, it was a challenge. I could take it or leave it, and I wanted to make the most of the opportunity.*
- *I found it thought-provoking -- it really made me look deeply into myself.*

Two people found the academic articles too difficult, and two people said they didn't find them very interesting.

(4) How important is personal goal-setting?

People in the seminar series said they were working on goals, but their goals tended to be nonspecific and/or ongoing (e.g., working on the computer, getting better on the piano, working on critical thinking, improving memory, and working on creative thinking. Rather than focus on personal goal setting, we deepened the discussion by asking people to consider "having a mission in life" and "leaving a legacy." Comments were:

- *I had never connected goal setting to having a mission in life -- it was inspiring.*
- *I had difficulty thinking about a mission. I have lots of goals, but do I have a mission?*

- *The first time I read it, I thought no I'm not interested in goals and mission statements but I was fascinated by the articles concept of time and light.*

In the final session, when people were asked how important personal goal setting was to a seminar series, they said, it should be top priority; and some comments were:

- *You have to have a road map if you want to get somewhere or you stay in the same place.*
- *I find it so easy to just drift along since I have retired and remarried.*
- *My piano teacher says with discipline you can reach your dreams.*
- *I find it interesting how much I can achieve when I put my mind to it.*

During the past year, the continuing experience in Mental Fitness at Century House has provided us with a framework and guidelines for a basic program, Introduction to Mental Fitness. In addition, based on the research and development of the Mental Fitness Seminar Series, we have a framework and guidelines for a second level program. Where do we go from here?

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS: Research and Program Development

### Research

Given that so many people are living longer, the area of lifelong learning and mental fitness and its relationship to healthy aging is a rich and important area for future research and program development. Of the many research questions, three are of great interest to us.

(1) How do we measure mental fitness?

We developed a mental fitness self-assessment scale that provides an indication of individual changes in the level of 10 key components of mental fitness. This is a subjective measure and is affected by changes in health, mood, feeling, etc. Clearly, much more investigation is required to develop a test of mental fitness that is more objective, valid, and reliable.

(2) What is the relationship between mental fitness and other aspects of health?

This question is one that we continue to explore. In the seminar series, participants were asked to rate themselves on a 10 point scale with respect to various aspects of health when the series began in October and when it concluded in June (7 months later). Average scores were:

	<u>pretest</u>	<u>posttest</u>
<b>Health</b>	<b>7.9</b>	<b>7.6</b>
<b>Physical fitness</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>7.0</b>
<b>Mental fitness</b>	<b>7.4</b>	<b>7.5</b>
<b>Memory</b>	<b>5.4</b>	<b>6.5</b>
<b>Confidence in Mental Ability</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>7.6</b>

Results suggest that while health and physical fitness may decline, mental fitness, confidence in mental ability, and memory can continue to improve with exercise.

(3) How do we create energy in a group?

One of the beliefs about aging that is widely held is that we have less energy as we get older, and as one participant in the introductory program said,

*We all want more energy to accomplish, to learn, to play, to meet more challenges, to do more, be more active, more productive, be prepared for emergencies, to look better, to feel better. More energy means greater mental fitness.*

Time and again, participants say they feel energized by the class; they speak about a "buoyancy" they feel; and people leave the class visibly more vital and energetic than when they came in. We know that people can give the gift of energy to others when they are mentally fit and enthusiastic about life. They give it, others feel it, and they get back more. When people were asked what gives them energy in a group, some observations were that energy goes down when you can't hear what is being said. Speaking in a louder voice creates energy, and so does enthusiasm. The question of how to generate energy in a group is another fascinating and important area for future research.

### Program Development

For the next year, October 1998 to May 1999, we suggest that Century House offer a monthly series to all those who have completed a basic introductory program, and we recommend that it be called the Mental Fitness Seminar-Workshop Series, reflecting the opportunity to both deepen discussion and work on achieving personal goals. We recommend that each session be 3 hours in length, and scheduled on a Friday of each month from 1 to 4 p.m. The suggested maximum enrollment is 25.

## Bibliography

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