

THE MENTAL FITNESS PILOT PROJECT

A Summary Report

by

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I used to believe that old age meant gradual decline in body and mind, and that I had to learn to accept my limitations in an uncomplaining way and look for the joy in nature and those things that endure. Now I believe that no matter what the future holds, there will be new goals and activities to challenge my mind and abilities.

~Eunice Ellis, Participant

I have a newfound energy that is enabling me to think more clearly. I am doing things I never thought I could because of this excitement I have. I am striving for things I never thought I could achieve. Perhaps it was the limiting beliefs that held me back.

~ Dot Josey, Participant

I used to believe that there were restrictions as one grew older, now I believe you should shoot for the moon -- you might end up on a star.

~Valentine Boida, Participant

MENTAL FITNESS PILOT PROJECT

During the past five years, Century House has played a leadership role in supporting innovative community research projects in the area of lifelong learning for seniors, culminating in the mental fitness pilot project. Research and development work is divided into three phases:

Phase I - Lifelong Learning Project (Needs Assessment)

Phase II - Mental Fitness Research Project

Phase III - Mental Fitness Pilot Program

During this third phase, the consultants' task was to develop, facilitate, and evaluate a series of 8 intensive all-day mental fitness workshops based on the components of mental fitness as outlined in the mental fitness research project; subsequently to offer a series of half-day workshops to introduce a second group of people to the fundamentals of mental fitness. This report focuses on the 8-week series of all-day workshops and provides an outline of the sessions, captures topics of interest, and recommends future directions for programming of a practical nature (e.g., memory skills) to help people keep mentally fit for life. Every attempt has been made to capture the experiences and voices of participants (actual quotes are italicized).

The Program

The goal of the mental fitness program is *a healthy mind in a healthy body*. Objectives were:

- (1) to develop knowledge and skills of mental fitness
- (2) to promote the attitudes of mental fitness (optimism, flexibility, confidence, self-esteem)
- (3) to promote healthy lifestyles that sustain mental fitness

To achieve these objectives, we planned:

- to introduce participants to the components of mental fitness;
- to design and use a variety of activities and exercises to stretch mental abilities, building on the smarts people already have;
- to stimulate and challenge people to think in new ways;
- to assist participants in developing personal goals;
- to encourage and support them in achieving personal goals;

- to explore practical strategies for maintaining mental fitness in the years ahead.

A variety of methods were used to document information about the program and to evaluate the extent to which it achieved its objectives.

Evaluation

The important questions to be addressed were: Is the program effective in developing a higher level of mental fitness? What health promotion behaviours are being learned and acted upon? What goals are being set? How have attitudes and beliefs changed? What changes to lifestyle are being made? How will people maintain mental fitness? The following methods were used:

- (1) Pre/post questionnaires (contained in the appendix) provided participant information and self-assessment of mental fitness skills;
- (2) A participant observation record of all sessions was used to record language, behaviour, and attitude change;
- (3) Take home questions prepared people to "speak their minds" concerning mental fitness and its benefits;
- (4) Focus group discussions addressed questions of attitude change and strategies for enhancing and maintaining mental fitness.

Participants

Eighteen people (3 men and 15 women) registered for the course and 15 completed the preliminary questionnaire. Attendance reflected a high level of commitment. Everyone attended all sessions with the following exceptions: one person was away for two weeks on a cruise; two people were absent the day their grandchild was born; two people missed classes because of the flu; and one woman missed three classes because she broke her shoulder and couldn't get her clothes on.

Profile. Ages ranged from 63 to 83 years with an average age of 71.2 years. Ten people lived alone; five did not. With respect to lifelong learning, every one has completed high school; 2 people identified vocational training, 9 had taken college and/or university courses; and one graduated from university. All have been retired for a period ranging from 1 1/2 years to 20 years, with the exception of 1 person who continues to work part time. Primary life occupations were: social work (2); teaching (2); business administration (2); nursing (2); homemaking (1); military (1); and ship's captain (1). People described their health as follows:

- excellent - 3 people
- very good - 5 people
- good - 6 people
- satisfactory - 1

Expectations. The most common reasons for taking the course were:

- to enjoy learning - 6 people
- to keep my mind active - 3 people
- for fun - 3

People said they expected to gain:

- more insight into themselves - 3 people
- better mental fitness - 3 people
- better insight/understanding of others - 3 people

Mental function. When asked if their mental functioning had *diminished* in any way since they were younger, ten said "yes", and generally felt that memory for names, dates and where they put things had diminished, e.g.,

- *Yes, my memory lets me down and because of it, I am not as self-confident when I am speaking.*
- *Yes, I have become lazy and haven't been pushing myself into new mentally stimulating experiences.*

When asked if their mental function had *improved* over the years, the majority felt that it had improved in the following ways:

- *I now make more of an effort to remember names.*

- *My outlook on life is more mature and I get more enjoyment and satisfaction out of life.*
- *I have less stress and a better idea of who I am and what I can accomplish.*
- *I have a greater depth and understanding of issues due to my experiences.*
- *Many experiences in life (and especially retirement) give opportunities to reflect.*

(Nb. These two questions suggest that mental function has *improved* in some ways and *diminished* in other ways over time). When participants were asked what they did to keep mentally fit, the majority described active social lives that included the following: involvement in activities, taking courses, reading, walking and talking with friends, crossword puzzles, bridge, hobbies, creating, repairing and improving things, women's networking groups, and retirement groups.

Mental and physical fitness. To keep physically fit, many people said they walked and/or took a fitness class 2-3 times a week. Two were active in square dancing, two mentioned tai chi, and one mentioned eating a healthy diet. Generally people said mental and physical fitness were very closely related, *intertwined* and *inseparable* and they *need both to be well-adjusted*. Some comments were:

- *one without the other is of little use;*
- *physical fitness raises your spirits and makes you think better;*
- *physical fitness without mental fitness is merely survival; mental fitness is a higher level of being and living.*

Beliefs and values. When asked what three things they valued most, the majority said, family, health, and friends in that order. Atypical responses were:

- *freedom of movement, speech, and opinion*
- *being able to communicate, being respected, my spiritual life*

Participants felt that the best thing about aging was the freedom to be yourself and to do what you want to do. Other responses were:

- *renewed self-esteem*
- *getting less opinionated, more experience, able to change my views;*

- *wisdom*
- *respect from grandchildren.*

And the worst thing about aging was:

- poor health - 4 people
- aches and pains - 2
- less energy - 2

Prejudice, loneliness, and loss of sight were also mentioned.

SUMMARY OF THE WORKSHOPS

Mental Fitness is a state of mind in which we are open to enjoying our environment and the people in it, having the capacity to be creative and imaginative and to use our mental abilities to the fullest extent. It's a willingness to risk, to inquire and to question; and an attitude of acceptance of other points of view, and a willingness to learn and grow and change.

The workshops were based on the components of mental fitness as defined by the Mental Fitness Research Project and encompassed the following topics: Goal Setting, Critical Thinking, Creative Thinking, Positive Mental Attitudes (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 longterm lifestyle changes. Puzzles, jokes, and brain teasers were increased in difficulty with each session.

Introduction

We discussed the framework for the course, based on the mental fitness research project. We spoke about a new old age and were introduced to current research on the aging brain that is hopeful and optimistic; research that tells us we can maintain and even improve our mental function as we age. The challenge was to become *mentally fit for the rest of our lives*. A theme throughout was -- out with the old and in with new:

Out with the old research and knowledge, and in with the new.

Out with the old beliefs, and in with the new.

Out with the old you, and in with the new.

Goal Setting

We explored why it is important to set goals and the reasons people don't set them. We participated in activities to develop skill at setting goals and achieving them. Achieving depends on one's motivation and desire. Desire and commitment were generated in the following ways:

- by identifying those things that have value in life;
- by developing personal goals;
- by participants convincing the group that they will achieve them;
- by supporting and encouraging each other in achieving goals.

Assignment: Identify something you have been putting off, act upon it, and report back to the group.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking was explored as a process and a skill. Critical thinking means out with the old beliefs and in with the new. This process involves the following steps:

- (1) becoming aware of limiting beliefs, identifying them;
- (2) challenging them; creating an argument within ourselves;
- (3) learning to think in new ways;
- (4) replacing limiting beliefs with beliefs that serve us well.

And we raised awareness and developed critical thinking skills by:

- identifying personal fears about old age and underlying beliefs
- standing whenever anyone made a limiting statement

- giving people erasers every time they made a statement based on a limiting belief (to erase the belief from their mind)
- changing the language of limiting beliefs to the language of limitless possibility

Assignment: Identify an old belief you hold about aging and a new one you are going to replace it with.

Creativity and Creative Thinking

The old research suggested that creative achievement declined with age: the new research suggests that people can develop their creativity well into later life. Participants said they were more creative than they used to be because they no longer thought of creativity as restricted to artistic expression and were now more free to "climb out of the box" (i.e., to think and act in radically different ways). We challenged creative thinking skills with:

- exercises and games;
- helping people become more aware of when they were "thinking out of the box;"
- reporting back to the group.

Assignment: Be aware of when you are thinking out of the box and bring an experience to relate to the class or bring something creative that you have made.

Positive Mental Attitude (PMA)

We discussed the importance of a positive mental attitude and the new research that positive attitudes can be learned. Participants completed the learned optimism test and we discussed how to change attitudes and become more optimistic. People reported on the positive things that happened to them during the week.

Assignment:

Someone has asked you about the course and now is your golden opportunity to convince them they should take it, too. In preparing your presentation to the class, please address the following questions:

- (1) What is mental fitness and why are you taking a course?
- (2) Should I be taking it, too? Why?

Speaking Your Mind

Session six offered an opportunity for people to speak their minds concerning mental fitness and its benefits. The assignment was used to assist people in preparing presentations.

Assignment: Write an original mental fitness poem for the following week.

Learning and Memory: Back to New Basics

While everyone is concerned about memory, few appreciate the intimate connection between learning and memory that the following phrase characterizes: "If you can't remember something, you probably never learned it." Facilitating adult learning is the teacher's responsibility. If one attends a lecture and can't remember what they heard, consider that the teacher may not have used effective teaching strategies. Learning new things causes the dendrites to grow and branch wildly, improving brain power. Research suggests that most benefits come from learning about something that is quite different from what has been learned in the past. If one has never taken piano lessons before, now is the time. Learning a new language has also been shown to have great benefit. Participants were given tips for improving their ability to learn new information. Mindmapping was introduced as a particularly effective technique for enhancing learning and memory, because it uses creativity to enhance both learning and memory.

Mentally Fit for Life

The final session focused on updating progress toward achieving personal goals, strategies for maintaining mental fitness, recommendations for followup sessions, and future directions for mental fitness classes in the centre.

Assignment: During the interim and in preparation for the followup class in January, participants were given specific instructions regarding how to improve their optimism scores and how to design their own mental fitness program and create a personal MF acronym.

EVALUATION

The evaluation included an assessment of both (a) participant learning and benefits and (b) the effectiveness of the program. Results provide evidence of learning with respect to mental fitness knowledge and skills, change in attitudes and beliefs, and change in behaviours.

Mental Fitness

Knowledge. When people were asked what was the most important thing they had learned, many mentioned an awareness of how their thoughts control their actions and a general shift from negative to positive thinking about themselves and others. (N.B. In many cases, the knowledge they gained was a new awareness of self and others)

Individual responses were:

- *I learned how limiting beliefs have controlled my thinking. Now I see how I can set aside those beliefs.*
- *I am able to change my perceptions of people and things around me and see them in a more positive way. I rather prided myself on my logical thinking and I discovered that's not all there is and I am learning to think differently.*
- *I learned negative language affects my whole outlook. I never realized what an enormous effect it had.*
- *I'm looking within myself with a new respect, and looking at others around me with a new respect for their ideas and perspectives.*
- *I have always looked from inside out. I used to be very logical. Now I am learning there are a lot of different ways of looking at things. I am listening to others and looking from the outside in.*

Skills. When people were asked in session six if their mental fitness had improved, everyone said it had. In fact, many people had experienced improved memory before the session on memory. Some responses were:

- *I have discovered that when I forget something and I don't say something negative and get in a panic, somehow I remember things better. I no longer accept that memory loss is inevitable. It's wonderful -- I'm telling you!*

- *I have a new mental energy. My energy is improving as a result of the excitement and I feel more creative.*
- *My mind is unblocked and I find I can concentrate better. And I feel generally better mentally and physically.*
- *I am enjoying my mind more. When I have ideas, I ask myself, "What else", and I'm having more fun with it.*
- *My self-esteem is up and I feel a lot better about myself. I know I'm worthwhile and I deserve the good things in life. And I still have a contribution to make.*

On the pre and post program questionnaire, participants were asked to rate themselves on a scale of 1 to 10 with respect to ten components of mental fitness. The table on page 13 compares the mean scores (group average) before and after the program. Of particular interest, note the following:

- The mean score increased on *every* item.
- The highest initial scores were in optimism, openness to new ideas, and flexibility.
- The lowest initial scores were in level of mental fitness, creativity, and memory.
- The least increases were in optimism, openness to new ideas, flexibility, and ability to learn new things.
- The greatest increases were in creativity, memory, and confidence in mental abilities.

MENTAL FITNESS SKILLS AND ATTITUDES

Comparison of pre program and post program means (group average)

LEVEL OF MENTAL FITNESS

pre program	6.8
post program	7.5

CREATIVITY

pre program	6.7
post program	7.5

OPTIMISM

pre program	7.7
post program	7.8

OPENNESS TO NEW IDEAS

pre program	8.2
post program	8.4

WILLINGNESS TO TAKE RISKS

pre program	7.3
post program	8.1

FLEXIBILITY

pre program	7.5
post program	7.9

ABILITY TO SPEAK YOUR MIND IN A GROUP

pre program	6.5
post program	7.1

ABILITY TO LEARN NEW THINGS

pre program	7.3
post program	7.5

MEMORY

pre program	5.5
post program	6.7*

CONFIDENCE IN MENTAL ABILITIES

pre program	7.0
post program	8.4*

• indicates statistical significance at $p=.01$

Attitude

As the weeks went by people appeared more positive, confident, and relaxed. The level of humour increased and the atmosphere was lighter, sharper, and more spontaneous. More importantly, the following written responses provide evidence that people are aware of powerful changes in their beliefs from negative to more optimistic and hopeful:

- *I used to believe old age was something to dread and that there was no way of avoiding it -- other than death. Now I believe the sky is the limit -- there's nothing I can't do. I intend to live my life to the fullest and live to at least 100, preferably 110!*
- *I used to believe that I would lose my energy as I grew older. I now believe with new interests and new thinking, that I can have more energy than ever.*
- *I used to believe that loss of mental capacities and memory was inevitable. I now believe that new dendrites replace damaged ones in the brain, and if I look after my physical and mental fitness this just isn't true.*
- *I used to believe the golden years were fool's gold. I now believe the golden years are whatever one wishes to create for oneself.*

It is interesting to note, how many people had come to believe that they are valued members of society with a continuing contribution to make. (i.e., mental fitness is a key to "productive" aging).

Behaviour Change

Goals. Everyone who participated in the class achieved the goal they had set for themselves (e.g., losing 8 pounds, quitting smoking, completing a painting/project, writing in a daily journal) and many said the support from the class had made it possible. Many people achieved their goals ahead of schedule; some had shortterm and longterm goals. The following responses describe what specific people had achieved in the class and what helped them to achieve it.

- *My goal was to use the language of possibility when referring to old age. And I have realized that I can be in charge of my attitude rather than drifting with the environment and responding to circumstances. I can feel an inner strength that is real, expected and permanent. It is*

not a self-analysis game, involving cause and effect. It just is. In fact, it always was, but I hadn't noticed. It is like a pillar of strength that is me. There is no pride in this discovery, no self-consciousness, just fact. A very humbling fact. It does not involve trying to be anything, trying to prove anything or competing with anything. It is a great big freedom to be myself and be happy about it. If one can be pronounced physically fit, can I be pronounced mentally fit? What has helped me is coming to the classes, all the people, the freedom of expression and that feeling that I could do anything here.

- *My goal was to play "Silent Night" on the piano on Xmas Day, and I am ahead of schedule. I learned that having house guests was an asset, because they were a captive audience. What helped me most was being very determined to do it, and all the practicing.*
- *My goal was to write in my journal every day and I have. I am struggling because I don't like writing -- it's a real challenge. But the encouragement and support of the group has helped me. Why do I do it if it's such a struggle? It's easy to do things that are easy, and things have always come too easy for me. But writing was never easy. Now it's time, and it is opening up doors in my mind.*
- *My goal is to be a nonsmoker and as of November 4th, I have stopped smoking for the very last time. What has been most helpful has been the assistance in saying it correctly, writing down all the advantages of not smoking, the preparation was what did it. I have stopped before but this time I have stopped for good. And I thank you and the rest of the class.*

Program Evaluation

When people were asked if the program had met their expectations, most people felt it had surpassed them, as the following responses attest:

- *Yes, I knew from past programs that this one would surpass them all.*
- *Yes, actually it went beyond my expectations because it was so new and innovative. Before the mental fitness project, I didn't even know what mental fitness was and had never discussed it with anybody. I think the subject of mental fitness is somewhat taboo, because some people are afraid to talk about it.*

- *Yes, it was more challenging and more fun than I could have expected. The support of the group and the teachers has been wonderful.*
- *I cannot see any way that these classes could be improved. Now we should be spreading the word and getting more seniors involved.*
- *Yes, it was more than I dared to hope. It helped me become less critical of myself, giving me more freedom to take advantage of the abilities I do have.*
- *Yes, my self-esteem improved remarkably, and I feel more at ease expressing my opinion and feelings.*

When they were asked how the program could be improved, they suggested that the learned optimism session be tightened up, homework assignments be clarified, and more time allowed for groupwork and discussion among participants. When they were asked what was most helpful to them, the majority said "the encouragement and support of the group" helped them to achieve their goals.

Individual responses were:

- *The facilitators never strayed from impressing on us that those things we wrestle with are not due to age*
- *the brilliance of the teachers and class*
- *positive optimistic thinking*
- *enthusiasm and acceptance*
- *The facilitators got me on track in dealing with a major life change*
- *input from facilitators and support from class*

STRATEGIES FOR MAINTAINING MENTAL FITNESS

To maintain mental fitness, the group suggested the following activities:

crossword puzzles	positive self-talk	bridge
jigsaw puzzles	talk to a friend	jeopardy
reading	attitude	exercise
painting	driving	conversation
hobbies	walking	dancing
tai chi	music	new learning
memorizing	listening	diet
loving and caring	teaching	setting goals
getting proper sleep	drama and theatre	public speaking
positive language	travel	accepting challenges

FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN MENTAL FITNESS PROGRAMMING

To develop and maintain mental fitness, the group suggested that Century House hold a series of 6 - 1/2 day mental fitness workshops three times each year; one series being the introduction.

Suggested topics for other sessions were:

- communication skills
- active listening
- expressing oneself
- self-esteem and confidence-building
- assertiveness
- memory
- journal writing
- current events
- goal setting
- assumptions

Conclusion

Participants in this class have made tangible progress. The change in the language was dramatic. People became not only more aware of every time they slipped into limiting language, they were changing the language *as they spoke*. There was an increase in energy, a buoyancy in the class that could be felt. Everyone was visibly more vital.

To complete this project there will be (a) two follow-up sessions in 1997 for the inaugural group and (b) a series of 5 - 1/2 day workshops to introduce a new group of people to mental fitness.

APPENDIX A

MENTAL FITNESS PILOT PROJECT

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONNAIRE

The following information is required for our records. We appreciate your thoughtful and honest responses. All information is confidential.

Name: _____ Age: _____

Do you live alone? ___yes ___no

Education: (please check)

high school grad ___ university grad _____

vocational training ___ college or university courses _____

lifelong learning courses (e.g, CH, community education) _____

Are you retired? ___yes ___no

(a) If no, what is your current occupation? _____

(b) If yes, how long have you been retired? _____

Primary life occupation: _____

How would you describe your health? (please circle)

excellent very good good satisfactory poor

Why did you decide to enrol in this program? _____

What do you expect to gain? _____

(A) MENTAL FITNESS

Do you think your mental functioning has diminished in any way since you were younger (i.e., in your 20's, 30's, & 40's) ___yes ___no

Please explain: _____

Do you think your mental functioning has improved in any way since you were younger? ___yes ___no

Please explain: _____

What do you do to keep mentally fit? _____

What do you do to keep physically fit? _____

What is the relationship between mental and physical fitness for you?

(B) BELIEFS and VALUES

(Please complete the following sentences)

Three things I value most in life are:

(1) _____

(2) _____

(3) _____

The best thing about aging is _____

The worst thing about aging is _____

(C) SELF-ASSESSMENT of MENTAL FITNESS

Rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest rating)

- _____ 1. Level of mental fitness
- _____ 2. Creativity
- _____ 3. Optimism
- _____ 4. Openness to new ideas
- _____ 5. Willingness to take risks
- _____ 6. Flexibility (mental)
- _____ 7. Ability to speak your mind in a group
- _____ 8. Ability to learn new things
- _____ 9. Memory
- _____ 10. Confidence in your mental abilities

Thank you

APPENDIX B

MENTAL FITNESS PILOT PROJECT

POST PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

We appreciate your thoughtful and honest responses. All information is confidential.

Name: _____

Did the mental fitness program meet your expectations?

Yes ___ No___ Please explain.

How would you describe your health? (please circle)

excellent very good good satisfactory poor

How would you describe your mental fitness? Please rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest rating)

- _____ 1. Level of mental fitness
- _____ 2. Creativity
- _____ 3. Optimism
- _____ 4. Openness to new ideas
- _____ 5. Willingness to take risks
- _____ 6. Flexibility (mental)
- _____ 7. Ability to speak your mind in a group
- _____ 8. Ability to learn new things
- _____ 9. Memory
- _____ 10. Confidence in your mental abilities

Comments: _____
