

MENTAL FITNESS SEMINAR SERIES

HIGHWAY TO 2001

OCTOBER 1998 TO MAY 1999



Summary Report

by

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Thoughts on the purpose of old age

*The purpose of old age is to develop your own sense of purpose. The people who don't have a purpose, sit back and fall by the wayside.**

It's interesting to me that up until now I have not focused on volunteering, and now I seem to have a real purpose to help younger people. I share my skills wherever they are needed.

My purpose has become my mission in life, which is to do everything I can to dispel the myth of declining mental abilities and to promote mental fitness and education for older people.

At 92, I am the oldest person in this class and I have never felt old at any time. Somehow, I just seemed to glide into old age and I don't feel it. . . . The main thing is not to think of getting older, just to continue your life.

My purpose is to use my experience and wisdom to the benefit of others.

*Italics throughout this report represent direct quotes of 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 SEMINAR SERIES

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MENTAL FITNESS SEMINAR SERIES: *Highway to 2001*

BACKGROUND

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

Phase I - Lifelong Learning Project (Needs Assessment)

Phase II - Mental Fitness Research Project

Phase III - Mental Fitness Pilot Project

Phase IV - Mental Fitness: The Continuing Experience

Phase V - Mental Fitness: Highway to 2001

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 all-day intensives are 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 was the focus of Phase IV.

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

PHASE IV: Mental Fitness: *The Continuing Experience* . . . (Cusack & Thompson, 1998) provided the needed programs for Century House and 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. With respect to (B), we addressed the following questions:

- (1) What format works? Once a month works well for the majority of people, and each session requires at least three hours to achieve the desired results: i.e., maintain and/or increase the level of mental fitness.
- (2) What are the appropriate topics for a seminar series? Everything that involves developing the mind is potentially good for one's 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 final analysis, it was agreed that any second level program or seminar series must include topics that relate clearly to the key components of mental fitness identified in the research project.
- (3) How important is homework? Reading assignments are more important in a seminar series than in an introductory program. Participants agreed that everyone needed to have an opportunity to prepare for and contribute to the discussion, and to be recognized for what they had prepared. Someone even felt there should be more pressure, What about the level of difficulty? Articles need to be challenging, but carefully selected for clarity and practical applications. Few academic articles are appropriate because they are seldom written for a broad audience. Research articles should be interpreted by our researcher.
- (4) How important is personal goal setting? Personal goal setting is a top priority in every Mental Fitness™ course.

PHASE V: MENTAL FITNESS SEMINAR SERIES (1998/99)

During the 1998/1999 season, Century House made a formal commitment through designation of funds for the seminar series to be continued through to the World Congress on Aging in July of 2001. All those who had participated in an introductory course were invited to travel the "Highway to 2001" together. The continuing series will be designed to:

- deepen and extend understanding and practice of the seven skill components of mental fitness;
- build on individual needs and interests of participants;
- take maximum advantage of opportunities to develop and promote mental fitness that arise in the centre and wider community.

The program evolved with the following schedule:

SCHEDULE OF SEMINAR-WORKSHOPS

SESSION 1: OCTOBER - Introduction and Planning.

SESSION 2: NOVEMBER - Learning and Memory

SESSION 3: DECEMBER - Goal Setting

SESSION 4: JANUARY - Goal Setting

SESSION 5: FEBRUARY - Critical Thinking

SESSION 6: MARCH - Creative Thinking

SESSION 7: APRIL - Speaking Your Mind

SESSION 8: MAY - Mentally Fit in a Society for All Ages

MENTAL FITNESS SEMINAR SERIES: *Highway to 2001*

ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

In response to participants needs and opportunities that arose, a major focus was on activities related to three specific skill components, Goal Setting, Memory, and Speaking Your Mind. A fourth focus that emerged as an extension of goal setting was on intergenerational activities in response to the theme of the International Year of Older Persons (IYOP) theme: *A Society for All Ages*.

GOAL SETTING

*You always need a map to get where you want to go . . .
otherwise how are you going to get there?*

Goal setting is a critical component of a Mental Fitness course. When participants were asked in the first session for an update on what mental fitness goals they were currently working on, they said "*positive thinking, improving and expanding my vocabulary, getting rid of stress, improving concentration, staying as physically fit as I can, improving memory, and maintaining the current level of mental fitness for the rest of my life*". Goals were general and nonspecific. One woman who was able to identify a specific, somewhat ambitious goal said, "*I want to present a five minute osteofit program on national television*". (N.B. While she did not complete this specific goal, she did take a number of risks and achieved some amazing results that you will read about). Four people did not have goals they were working on when the group reconvened after the summer break, and many assignments throughout the eight week seminar series were related to setting and achieving personal goals. The following is a sample:

Assignments

- (1) Activity: To develop a strong mental picture of personal goals, participants were instructed to gather pictures that related to their goals and bring them to class.

- (2) Reading: Sister Constance's paper What does a 94 year old have to look forward to? Only turning 95? was assigned for reading and class discussion focused on what people had learned from the reading and, in particular, to comment on the notion that you don't have to be a sister to have a calling. Participants were asked, what was Sister Constance's legacy?
- *The message is whatever your mission in life, to continue it on into old age, just as we are doing.*
 - *Part of Sister's legacy is her inspiration.*
 - *I enjoyed reading this material because this was a person speaking about her own life -- now this is something I want to read.*
 - *I liked the idea that she was naughty as a child -- and all through her life she has been taking risks.*
 - *The message for me is, What am I going to do to make the world a better place?*
- (3) Activity: In an activity that combined creativity and goal setting, participants were asked to create their own homework assignment, and these are some of the achievements:
- *I wrote seven short plays.*
 - *I'm taking a comedy course that will culminate in a performance at "Laughlines", a local comedy club. The first class was sobering, everyone was 40 years younger than I am. This is one of the scariest things I have ever done.*
 - *I wrote out everything I could remember for my son about his Dad. I sat down and typed for three days and he was pleased.*

Individual Achievements

When people were asked at the end of the series what they felt they had achieved, these were some of their responses:

- *I have read 15 books in the past five months. I have also been exploring places I have never been before, driving different places, starting more birding, knitting more, doing puzzles and crossword puzzles. I have also gone to quite a few seminars at the high school.*
- *I have focused on setting goals and developing positive thinking, and I am satisfied with the results.*
- *I recently graduated as a peer counsellor and have my first client. I continue to research computer learning and classes that I can attend with my learning-disabled son.*

- *I have become a stand-up comedian and have accepted five comedy appearances. I prepared and presented a keynote address at a major event, developed the spread sheet and mail out for my class reunion, and I have registered with a cruise employment agency.**
- *I have published one poem, translated four psalms from Danish into English for a new hymn book, and have written several short plays and some songs.*
- *I finished the first part of one of my goals -- I have entered over 200 people into a genealogy program, written articles about the lives of several of my predecessors and my father-in-law's experience in leaving Ireland for the new world.*
- *I have arranged for a video to be produced by the Knowledge Network about my Masters research entitled, "The Pangs of Something Lost", about woman obtaining university degrees in later life.*

(* This is the woman who initially wanted to present an osteofit class on television. She also flew to Toronto to appear on National Television on a show that focused on body image -- she served as the model of "the older woman" and underwent a physical transformation).

One member of the group in her 80's enrolled in a theatre workshop, which led to her "*moment of glory*" on the stage. This is how she told her story,

I recently attended the Playhouse performance of "The History of Things to Come", and when they asked for volunteers from the audience, I didn't bat an eyelash. I went up on stage and they put me into a long gown with a big collar, and the leading man whispered "don't you worry about a thing" and he marched me onto the stage. I couldn't see the audience -- it was probably just as well. There were five men onstage and they started asking me all sorts of questions and I had a response for every one. I think I probably got too smart -- at that point, I was led off. It was a moment of glory -- a moment in the limelight.

When people were asked at the end of the series, what had helped them to achieve their goals, some responses were:

- *The old work ethic -- and also the frequent praise from mental fitness classes.*
- *Stimulation received in class, belief in the program, determination and the continual encouragement from the leaders.*
- *The stimulation and examples of the mental fitness courses over the past three years.*

- *Attending this class has been an inspiration. I might have done as much on my own, but not with the same confidence.*
- *I am learning not to overstress myself, giving ample time to prepare, to gather information from people who are experts, and to have confidence in myself.*
- *The idea that I can undertake any project that interests me.*
- *This class, writing goals down, and the expectation by class leaders that we would work toward our goals.*

MEMORY

We get caught in a vicious circle. First, we are preoccupied, and we forget things . . . then we worry . . . then we forget even more.

The focus on memory came early on in the program in response to an extraordinary opportunity for the class to spread the word about Mental Fitness. Eve Savory, CBC Television reporter, asked to observe a class in action. She was preparing a documentary on memory and aging for CBC national television, and wanted to include the Mental Fitness class in her documentary. At Eve's request, the November class focused on the topic of memory and it became an important theme throughout subsequent weeks. An article on memory was assigned for homework (see references), a memory quiz was developed (see appendix D), and participants were instructed to keep a memory log throughout the program and during the summer break.

CBC National Television

Eve Savory's visit to the class was successful, and she left with plans to return with a camera crew. However, in the end, the producer in Toronto pre-empted Eve's request to film and include Mental Fitness in the documentary, which was aired in January on CBC National. Eve requested feedback on the video from the group, and these were some of their critical comments:

- *The documentary gives us the clinical picture and looks a bit too much on the negative side of things.*

- *It says that we start to lose our memory at 30. There is none of the new research here that we have been learning about.*
- *It gives you the impression that there is no hope.*
- *It presented some frightening statistics about Alzheimers.*
- *The emphasis on overcoming memory loss was on taking pills.*
- *It gave the impression that there was no hope, no room to change or to empower people to make change.*
- *I would have preferred more emphasis on normal aging, and a focus on some of the positive aspects.*

Assignments

- (1) **Reading:** A short research article from Experimental Aging Research, "Brief Communication: Memory skills elders want to improve", was assigned for reading and participants were asked to consider how accurately the article reflected their own experience, Does this cover it? What are the typical things you have trouble remembering?
- (2) **Memory quiz:** Participants took the memory quiz at the beginning, midpoint, and end of the series (results are on p. 21).
- (3) **Homework:**-- Participants were asked to keep a daily memory log -- a record of every time they forget something.
- (4) **Challenge activities:**
 - (a) Exercise to remember names of group members
 - (b) Participants were asked to make a point of meeting someone new over the Christmas Holidays and report in by phone to one of the facilitators.

Participants became more aware of what and when they were forgetting and gained valuable insight into how to improve memory, especially remembering people's names. The key to remembering is more effective learning.

When people were asked what they had learned, they said:

- *What we need to do is cement the name into memory and then we never forget.*
- *I learned with this exercise that my problem is that I don't think of the face and expression -- and it's easier to remember the name if you can picture the face.*

- *It is helpful to pick out a striking feature and make the association between the name and an unusual feature.*
- *I recently had the experience of looking at a photograph of people in a group that I used to belong to many years ago. In order to provide the names of people, I had to go through an exercise to put the people into a context before I could remember their names.*
- *I learned that I really have to apply more effort if I really want to remember names.*

When participants were asked if the memory log was helpful, they said:

- *Focusing on memory helps us become more aware and documenting will be helpful in developing strategies.*
- *I was really amazed. There were not many things that I forgot.*
- *I was forgetting things every day -- one day I forgot to take a pill. One day I lost my keys. I found it quite interesting to see how many things that I do forget. How often I am in a world of my own with my thoughts -- preoccupied. Many things I forget are things that I haven't paid much attention to. Keeping a log gives us clues as to what we need to be attending to.*
- *The trick is -- don't worry about it so much. Memory loss is not connected with age -- it's common with people of all ages. Older people have a very different attitude toward memory. Young people don't approach it as we do -- they aren't concerned, whereas we have become perfectionists.*
- *When I make a list or develop a strategy, then my mind is cleared of all the details.*

The Alzheimers Project

During October, the Western Gold Theatre Company's production of *Strangers Among Us*, a play about victims and caregivers premiered in Vancouver. Participants were urged to see it, and special group rates were available. However, only two people in the group attended the play, and reasons (excuses?) for not attending were given as follows:

- *I read the review and it wasn't good.*
- *I have personal experience -- I know all about it.*
- *I have two friends who have it and I didn't feel I was emotionally strong enough to see the play.*
- *The subject is so depressing -- and I don't want to be depressed.*
- *This disease is what brought me to a mental fitness class. I have a fear of getting Alzheimer Disease, and when I dwell on it, I think I'm getting it.*

To the contrary, one person felt it was important to see the play (even though he didn't) and claimed that it was necessary to look beyond the fear in order to see something positive. Fear begins with the myth that our memory goes as we get older. Once we no longer believe the myth, then we can overcome the fear.

Assignment

Later in the series, the Alzheimer Project Report (see references) was used as an assignment and participants were asked what they had learned from it, and if they would attend the play if the opportunity arose in the future. Everyone felt more hopeful after reading the report, and the vote was unanimous -- no one would hesitate to see the play if another opportunity was presented.

SPEAKING YOUR MIND

The most common feedback from any mental fitness workshop is "not enough time for discussion." Group discussion is the hallmark of third age education and an important aspect of every seminar series. A decision was made in the first session to focus on developing effective speaking skills and provide more opportunities for open discussion and debate.

Activities

- (1) Participants worked on developing Group Guidelines for Discussion (see appendix C)
- (2) Facilitators emphasized discussion and dialogue, and were careful to allow sufficient time to discuss the questions from the reading assignments.
- (3) At the group's suggestion, participants were encouraged to book the time to make a short presentation to the class (4 people took advantage of the opportunity).
- (4) The facilitators were committed to ensuring that everyone had equal opportunity to make a contribution. Nevertheless, there were still a few who were less vocal. As one woman explained it,

I always feel that I'm on a different wave length, but when people express themselves well, I think "Why didn't I say it?"

The quality of the discussion improved as everyone felt more comfortable speaking their mind, and this was reflected in the increase in scores on the mental fitness scale. (NB. p. 20: Average scores on item #7 went from 6.9 to 7.7).

MENTALLY FIT IN A SOCIETY FOR ALL AGES

The fourth focus on making a contribution to society emerged in response to the theme of the IYOP: "A Society for all Ages". Activities which the class undertook included a CBC radio broadcast, hosting university students, and marching in a community parade.

Activities and Events

(1) CBC Radio Presentation with Yvonne Gall: CBC radio planned a special week in February 1999 of broadcasts to commemorate the IYOP. Yvonne Gall was given permission to visit and tape a Mental Fitness class, as well as an hour of interviews with participants. Four hours of tape were edited to six minutes and the tape was reviewed in class. Participants applied their critical thinking skills to critique the tape, and the consensus was "a good experience for all". Yvonne Gall deserves congratulations on an excellent editing job, and she is welcome to come again anytime.

(2) Hosting Simon Fraser University Students: In the spirit of the International Year of Older Persons, the Mental Fitness seminar group invited SFU students to join them at Century House for Session 7. Seven students from Education 351, Teaching the Older Adult, attended the class on March 26, 1999, to both observe an older adult education class in action and participate in discussions. In particular, their assignment was to observe closely and be able to answer the following questions with respect to effective group facilitation:

(1) How do you encourage people who are reluctant to speak up?

- (2) How do you control people who try to monopolize the discussion?
- (3) How do you keep people from going off on a tangent?
- (4) What can you do to inject energy into a group when people seem tired or bored?
- (5) If someone is doing something distracting, how do you change the behaviour without embarrassing the person?
- (6) How do you deal with inappropriate comments and language?
- (7) How do you plan when you are facilitating a group?

In preparation for the combined class, which focussed on the topic of creativity and creative thinking, both seniors and students were assigned the first chapter of Think Out of the Box (Vance & Deacon, 1995). They came prepared to address thought-provoking questions about what it means to be "in a box"; how we get "boxed in" and how we get "out of the box". Hearing different perspectives from people at different stages of life added a new dimension and deeper understanding of the topic. In conclusion, one of the senior students said, *"I hope the students are going to take away some different attitudes and assumptions"*. And they did. As one said, *"To be with a group like this gives me a vision of where I would like to be when I am older -- I appreciated their experience and enthusiasm and energy."* And one of the senior students felt that students should visit more often, because the class was more stimulating and the seniors more brilliant than ever before.

(3) Reading assignment: An article on volunteerism by President Jimmy Carter (see references) was assigned, and these were some of the responses to the question, What is the purpose of old age?

- *You are the same person. Just because you are older, doesn't mean you are going to change. If you have never volunteered, you're not going to when you are older.*
- *But some people do. First of all, when you get older you have more time. You can also be forgiven for certain things -- there isn't the same stress.*
- *The purpose of old age is to develop your own sense of purpose. The people who don't have a purpose, sit back and fall by the wayside.*
- *To have a purpose is to live that purpose. It may be as a volunteer. I have great respect for people who take care of others through their*

volunteer work. But that's not the purpose to old age, because you have to have people on the receiving end.

- *It's interesting to me that up until now I didn't focus on volunteering and I now find myself having a real purpose to help younger people and the family. I share my skills wherever they are needed in the family.*
- *Now I have much more purpose than I ever did.*
- *Older people do contribute without being volunteers. In Jimmy Carter's article the emphasis is on doing lots of productive volunteer work. I think we should get rid of the word, "volunteer."*
- *I think there's more than happiness -- I know lots of people who aren't necessarily happy -- but they are leaving a legacy.*
- *The only thing about happiness -- there are people who are happy to sit in front of the TV. I think people need to contribute to their families -- give a sense of history to members of their family.*
- *Happiness isn't exactly the right word -- it is often fleeting. To be feeling good, to be smiling. I don't think we bring happiness to others. We have to be careful with using the word "happiness" because it is such a fleeting thing.*
- *I still feel when you are communicating with people, you can radiate the feeling and you can affect others. Contentment isn't enough. Happiness is contagious.*
- *I think the purpose of old age is to take advantage of the freedom -- that should go in the school books.*
- *Too often academia focuses on the downside of age -- and people should concentrate more on their potential and what is possible.*
- *I think we've said it all. We all give of our knowledge. And as long as you are happy and you are spreading that around, that's really what's important.*

(4) Participating in the Hyack Festival: Once a year, the City of New Westminster hosts a Hyack Festival and one of its main events is a parade in which groups and organizations in the community participate. In the spirit of the International Year of Older Persons, a group of people in the class decided they would like to march in the parade to spread the word about Mental Fitness. Six members of the group (3 in their 80's) marched the more than two mile route wearing mortar boards and signs, pushing one of their peers in a wheelchair. (They are depicted on the covers of this report). Everyone enjoyed the experience and felt energized by the responses of the crowd.

Assessment and Evaluation

Participants

21 people (18 women, 3 men) committed to travelling the "highway to 2001" re-convened in the Fall of 1998. These people had originally taken one of three introductory classes offered at Century House during 1996 and 1997 and had chosen to continue to exercise their mental fitness by attending the continuing seminar series. In assessing the effectiveness of the 1998/99 seminar series, participants rated themselves (a) on the first and last day on the Mental Fitness scale and (b) on three occasions on the memory quiz.

Assessment of Mental Fitness

Three group mean scores were compared: the average score of the group on (1) beginning a mental fitness introductory course (pre); (2) the first day of the 98/99 seminar series (1998) and (3) the last day (1999). With reference to table 1 below, it is interesting to note that (with the exception of item #4) every score is higher in 1999 when compared to pre MF scores. The biggest gains are with respect to item #6 (mental flexibility), item #7 (ability to speak your mind), and item #10 (confidence in mental abilities). Given the emphases on setting goals and speaking your mind, these are not surprising. The biggest gain (an increase of 1.2) was flexibility, and this was reflected in discussion and verbal feedback such as, "*When you hear different perspectives, you get a chance to consider just how flexible and open you really are.*" Item #5 (willingness to take risks went up .8) -- and this willingness to take risks was borne out in the many risks the class actually took that had positive results (e.g., hosting students, marching in costume in the parade, having CBC celebrities visit the class). Of interest, while memory rose .7, the group score remains relatively low at 6.7. In fact, it is the lowest score despite all the work and the emphasis placed this year on developing memory skills. This suggests memory warrants further work. Table 1 on the next page compares the ten items at three different points in time.

Table 1. A comparison of mean scores on the Mental Fitness scale on beginning the introductory course (pre), at the beginning of this series (1998), and on the last day (1999).

| | <u>Pre</u> | <u>1998</u> | <u>1999</u> |
|--|------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1. Level of mental fitness | 7.5 | 7.5 | 8.0 |
| 2. Creativity | 7.0 | 7.2 | 7.4 |
| 3. Optimism | 8.4 | 8.4 | 8.5 |
| 4. Openness to new ideas | 8.8 | 8.6 | 8.7 |
| 5. Willingness to take risks | 7.1 | 7.1 | 7.9 |
| 6. Flexibility (mental) | 6.5 | 7.2 | 7.7 |
| 7. Ability to speak your mind in a group | 6.8 | 6.9 | 7.7 |
| 8. Ability to learn new things | 8.0 | 8.2 | 8.1 |
| 9. Memory | 6.0 | 6.4 | 6.7 |
| 10. Confidence in your mental abilities | 7.5 | 8.0 | 8.4 |

In the final analysis, if we consider that these people are now approximately three years older than when they were first introduced to Mental Fitness, then **simply maintaining the same level of fitness over time challenges the myth of inevitable decline with age.**

Assessment of Memory

The memory quiz, developed in consultation with the group, was used both as a tool for raising awareness and for identifying specific challenges that warrant further attention and skill development. The quiz (testing the eight items identified in the research article, Brief Communications) was given at the beginning, midpoint and last session. Participants were instructed to use a 5-point scale (1 - never ; 2 - seldom; 3 - sometimes; 4 - frequently; 5 - always) to record their "forgetting scores" on the 8 items. Table 2 shows the average group scores on each item. (Nb. The higher the score the greater the challenge: lower scores represent less forgetting -- i.e. improvement in memory)

Table 2. Mean scores on 8 items representing categories of things people tend to forget.

| | | | | | |
|-----|---------|---|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| (1) | I _____ | Forget where I put a household item (scissors, tape, etc.). | <u>pre</u> 2.7 | <u>mid</u> 2.9 | <u>post</u> *2.6 |
| (2) | I _____ | Forget an important date. | <u>pre</u> 1.9 | <u>mid</u> 2.0 | <u>post</u> 2.1 |
| (3) | I _____ | Forget what went on at a meeting or event. | <u>pre</u> 2.8 | <u>mid</u> 2.8 | <u>post</u> *2.6 |
| (4) | I _____ | Forget to keep an appointment. | <u>pre</u> 1.7 | <u>mid</u> 1.9 | <u>post</u> *1.6 |
| (5) | I _____ | Forget an important piece of information or fact. | <u>pre</u> 3.2 | <u>mid</u> 3.5 | <u>post</u> 3.2 |
| (6) | I _____ | Forget to take vitamins and/or medication. | <u>pre</u> 1.8 | <u>mid</u> 1.8 | <u>post</u> 2.0 |
| (7) | I _____ | Forget someone's name. | <u>pre</u> 3.8 | <u>mid</u> 4.5 | <u>post</u> *3.7 |
| (8) | I _____ | Feel that I need to improve my memory | <u>pre</u> 4.3 | <u>mid</u> 4.1 | <u>post</u> *4.1 |

*These scores suggest small improvements

The scores indicate minimal improvements on five items. People still frequently feel they need to improve memory and this suggests the need to continue with memory skills and strategies in future sessions. In particular, strategies for remembering names and important pieces of information warrant further attention.

Program Evaluation

In addition to assessing the effectiveness of the program with respect to attitude and skill development by means of pre and posttests, focus group discussion was used to elicit ongoing feedback. Participants collaborated in every stage of the evolution of the program, identifying their individual needs and aspirations in response to opportunities and challenges that arose. For example, this phase (1998/99) drew inspiration from the theme and media promotion of the International Year of Older Persons.

Discussion is the hallmark of third age education and of every seminar series, and the scores on the self-assessment and focus group discussion confirmed the benefits from the focus on Speaking Your Mind. We heard comments such as, "*I particularly enjoy hearing other people's opinions*" and "*I don't usually share my personal views with others, here I am learning to*". And "*when you hear so many different perspectives, you get a chance to consider just how flexible and open you really are*". People said they appreciated having thought-provoking, timely materials assigned as homework. This gave them "*time to digest the material and focus our thoughts*".

The most obvious evidence of success lies in the attendance, which demonstrated the commitment of participants. From a maximum of 21 people, the average number attending each month was between 17 and 19. Absenteeism was invariably because people were on vacation -- absence due to illness was rare.

These were some of the final comments in focus group discussion at the end of the series:

- *No matter what the outcome of these mental fitness classes are for me, attending them has been a source of constant pleasure.*

- *I will be entering the 4th year of mental fitness and I still have an anticipation, excitement with what is ahead and the challenge to meet it.*
- *I believe helping and volunteering is satisfying and boosts self-esteem and keeps me active.*
- *I have looked forward to every class and come away mentally stimulated and energized.*
- *This class has meant a lot to me -- meeting such wonderful friends with their open minds and warm hearts is something I look forward to each and every month.*
- *I find the group work interesting. Usually I do not speak about my ideas or beliefs in social situations -- and here I do.*
- *I have enjoyed the challenges that seem to keep me going. 2001 does not seem more than a few months away.*

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Participants in the seminar series are committed to participating in the World Congress on Aging in 2001, and seminars during the next two years will be designed with that goal in mind. During the coming year (1999/2000), Century House will also sponsor another introductory course. When people in the seminar series were asked whether they would like to invite this new group to join the seminar series, everyone agreed they would welcome new recruits, *providing the class did not become too big*. As one person observed, *"If we didn't include new people, it would mean we were going back into the box"*.

When the issue of a special IYOP event was raised, the group became excited about the possibility of hosting a forum, and these were some of the comments:

- *I like the idea of a mini-forum. We could present what has changed in our lives, what we have gained from Mental Fitness and what we have given.*
- *Mental Fitness is an experience -- and we need to allow others to experience it.*
- *We know so much about the brain now. There is so much new information we could share with people.*
- *This is a good room for a seminar -- a good size for us to get our feet wet.*
- *It works well to plan in class -- with lots of support.*

- *It will give us a goal -- something for us all to work toward.*
- *This is new to me, and it is on the right track. I'm looking forward to it.*
- *I'm ready for a challenge.*

Based on our experience and the assessment of the 1998/99 series contained in this report, we recommend a continuing focus on memory and on Speaking your Mind. However, first consideration will be given in the next phase to the planning and preparation for a Mental Fitness forum, which has been scheduled for November 26, 1999.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A: Pretest

Appendix B: Posttest

Appendix C: Group Guidelines for Discussion

Appendix D: Memory quiz

appendix a

MENTAL FITNESS SEMINAR-WORKSHOPS
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

Name: _____ Age: _____

What do you do to keep physically fit? _____

What more could you do? _____

What do you do to keep mentally fit? _____

What more could you do? _____

Do you have a mental fitness goal? ___yes ___no. Please
explain: _____

YOUR 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

appendix b**MENTAL FITNESS SEMINAR-WORKSHOPS (1998/99)****FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS**

Name: _____

Age: _____

YOUR MENTAL FITNESS

How is your mental fitness today?

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

What mental fitness goal(s) have you been working on this year?

What have you achieved? _____

What has helped you achieve your goal(s)? _____

Comments: _____

appendix c**MENTAL FITNESS SEMINAR SERIES 1998/99
DISCUSSION GROUP GUIDELINES**

- The leader facilitates discussion -- and does not allow anyone to hog the floor.
- Whenever possible, participants should know what they will be discussing so that they can be prepared.
- It is important to ensure that everybody speaks -- although we don't all need to speak every time.
- Be aware of people who don't say very much -- it might be someone's goal to speak more.
- When people know the topic in advance and come prepared -- they feel more confident.
- Respect everyone else's opinion.
- Don't interrupt people.
- Don't criticize other people's ideas or put anyone down -- offering a different opinion is not the same as criticizing people for their views.
- Relax and don't feel threatened.
- Keep an open mind -- be flexible.
- Be willing to take risks.
- Stay on topic -- the leader's role is to help keep the group on topic.
- Always speak to the group, not the leader.
- Use people's names whenever you can.
- Listen attentively when someone is speaking.
- Always speak loudly and clearly.

appendix d

MENTAL FITNESS SEMINAR-WORKSHOPS
A FOCUS ON MEMORY

Name: _____

Age: _____

The following is a list of the common memory challenges that people of all ages experience. In each case, we'd like to know how often this happens to you? Please score your answer on a scale of 1 to 5 according to the following 5-point likert scale:

- 1 - never
- 2 - seldom
- 3 - sometimes
- 4 - frequently
- 5 - always

- (1) I _____ Forget where I put a household item (scissors, tape, etc.).
- (2) I _____ Forget an important date.
- (3) I _____ Forget what went on at a meeting or event.
- (4) I _____ Forget to keep an appointment.
- (5) I _____ Forget an important piece of information or fact.
- (6) I _____ Forget to take vitamins and/or medication.
- (7) I _____ Forget someone's name.
- (8) I _____ Feel that I need to improve my memory

What specific memory concerns do you have? _____

Comments: _____

