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Achieving Optimal Mental Fitness in Later Life

by Sandra Cusack

*To assume limitlessness has [practical] advantages. If, indeed, I am truly limitless, and I believe that I am, then I may discover this limitlessness. On the other hand, every limit that I assume I have prevents me from discovering whether that limit is, in fact, real. The most [productive] assumption, therefore, is that I am limitless. — Will Schutz, as quoted by Abe Arkoff in *The Illuminated Life* (New York City: Prentice Hall, 1994)*

Ten years ago, productive aging was the theme of the fall issue of *The Older LEARNer*, which featured an article by Arnold Scheibel titled “Challenging the Brain to Stay in Shape.” We were just beginning to learn about the physiology of the aging brain and shape the concept of mental fitness. It’s amazing to think how far we’ve come not only in our knowledge of the human brain but also in our understanding of ways to promote brain health and achieve optimal mental functioning as we age. A lot of that progress has been due to the commitment to lifelong learning and mental fitness for elders shown by leaders and members of LEARN.

For example, MindAlert, a joint program of MetLife Foundation and the American Society on Aging, has played an important role in sponsoring distinguished scholars who have presented the latest research on the aging brain, including Arnold Scheibel. MindAlert also recognizes outstanding mental fitness programs and makes training and resources available to groups and organizations across the United States. As winners of a 2005 MindAlert Award, my colleagues and I are truly honored that our Mental Fitness for Life program is now part of another ASA tradition of excellence.

Mental Fitness for Life is an eight-week series of three-hour workshops for adults ages 50-plus that has been translated into a personal mental fitness program in a new book I coauthored with Wendy Thompson, *Mental Fitness for Life: Seven Steps to Healthy Aging* (Boulder, Colo.: Bull Publishing, 2006). The program and the book drew on a decade of research and development to design a comprehensive program that gives a total workout for the mind.

Each workshop session or step in the book integrates the latest strategies, homework assignments, warm-up exercises, quizzes and puzzles designed to exercise the seven key components of mental fitness: goal setting, power thinking, creativity, positive mental attitude, learning and memory, speaking one’s mind and staying mentally fit for life. The program introduces the steps in order of increasing difficulty, with each step building on the previous ones. The final step is the goal of the program: putting the workshop participant or reader of the book on a sustainable personal mental fitness program.

Over the years, the program has been tested with more than 400 older adults ages 50–92 who have shown documented changes in knowledge, attitudes and behaviors. Workshop participants consistently showed improvement in all of the seven steps, with statistically significant increases in self-esteem, optimism, self-confidence and memory. Of particular interest to researchers and clinicians were documented reductions in participants' symptoms of depression.

Even more important than the outcomes are the stories of what participants in the program have been able to achieve by continuing to exercise and improve their mental fitness. One participant became a standup comic at age 67 and is now in great demand as a performer. Another lost 70 pounds and has maintained a healthy weight for more than five years. Still another participant describes her experience with the program in the following words:

The opportunity to participate in a well-organized, safe, pressure-free, fun-filled classroom experience was a dream come true. After each session, we left with the assurance of a limitless potential destined to materialize. Indeed, I am about to launch my first published book at the age of 85½.

Since the 1995 issue of *The Older LEARNER* on productive aging, aging itself has continued to present challenges for all of us, both individually and collectively. And productive aging emerged once again as a theme at the 2005 ASA–NCOA Joint Conference, but with new perspectives and new challenges. Marc Freedman, president of the San Francisco–based Civic Ventures and a presenter at the conference—claims that we in the United States are experiencing a social and political revolution as a result of a healthier, better-educated society.

A key aspect of that revolution is our reframing the meaning of the human life cycle with the emergence of a new stage of life—the second half of life. The current generation of people ages 50-plus isn't looking for a life of leisure in retirement: They want to embrace the second half of life as an opportunity to discover their passion while contributing to the betterment of society.

A PERIOD OF CREATIVITY

The second half of life is rich, fertile ground that can be a period of tremendous creativity. Yet one of the biggest barriers preventing people from embracing the notion of productive engagement in later life is ageism—both in the workplace and in society. This gap between how older adults view themselves and a culture that hasn't caught up must be addressed. We need to create a new language, build a new culture and envision a new future for ourselves in an aging world.

In the 21st century, the age of the continuously developing mind, we as educators of older adults must focus on developing mental fitness as the most vital component of a healthy, productive lifestyle. This task requires a unique, provocative kind of education that builds on the strengths of older adults and encourages them to achieve their full potential in the second half of life.

As cited in *The Illuminated Life*, Abraham Maslow, one of the founders of humanistic psychology, said, "If you plan to be less than you are capable of being, then I warn you that you'll be deeply unhappy the rest of your life." Taking a cue from Maslow, I ask the following questions: What would you really like to do if you knew you couldn't fail? If you knew your potential was limitless? Think about it—our aging brains are up to the challenge! ■

Sandra Cusack is a research fellow and mental fitness consultant at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada. With Wendy Thompson, she is coauthor of Mental Fitness for Life: Seven Steps to Healthy Aging (Boulder, Colo.: Bull Publishing, 2006). For more information about the Mental Fitness for Life program, contact Cusack at (604) 291-5177 or scusack@sfu.ca.