



# DR. BILL'S MONTHLY MEMOS

Exploring Habits That Support Mental Fitness



Dr. Bill Howatt

**Howatt HR Consulting Inc.**

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# Foreword

I share my mental fitness journey through Dr. Bill's memos and provide practical tools and insights to help you reframe or rethink what encourages you to support your mental fitness journey. A mental fitness plan doesn't make you happy; it provides the mental and emotional energy to deal with life's stresses and charge your cognitive battery.

Practicing mental fitness daily creates positive thoughts and emotions to live your best life. Many are distracted by unpleasant feelings and thoughts that prevent them from having the mental and emotional energy to live their best lives. We all must define what living our best life means. However, physical and mental health allows us to thrive and live life to its fullest.

I believe there are so many mental health challenges because many lack coping skills. This motivated me to write *The Coping Crisis* and my recent trilogy series on mental fitness that focused on fear, authentic connections, and regret. I also believe it doesn't take much to improve mental fitness. It requires intention and focusing on what's holding us back and what can charge us.

Learning and discovering new insights that help me reframe and rethink what I can control has inspired my mental fit-

ness journey. I've learned that information is useless. Creating habits that support my mental health requires intention, practice, and reflection. What I like most about my mental fitness journey is that my choices directly influence how I think and feel daily.

I work on my mental fitness plan almost all the time, as there is no perfection. I discovered that following my plan at least 90% of the time positively impacts my mental health and outlook. I get at least eight hours of sleep daily, focus on nutrition, and take my vitamins. I drink at least 64 ounces of water and get 10,000 steps. My physiology practice of taking a cold plunge, journaling, meditating, and deep breathing train my mind and body to relax. I engage in at least one passion activity, like walking with my bulldog Link, golfing, skiing, curling, boating, reading, or taking a course. These activities generate positive feelings and are easy to do. I just need to make them a priority.

Each chapter represents one year of personal reflections and observations supporting my mental fitness journey. I hope you will recognize there are no shortcuts to mental fitness. We each have choices over what we do to create habits that promote health. — *Dr. Bill*

# Contents

Foreword .....	iii
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## **Chapter 1**

<u>Memo 1: Being OK starts with me .....</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Memo 2: Childhood experience can influence who we are today .....</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>Memo 3: Renaming unresolved conflict as a new opportunity .....</u>	<u>6</u>
<u>Memo 4: The power of positive emotions .....</u>	<u>9</u>
<u>Memo 5: Breathe; Change is slow .....</u>	<u>12</u>
<u>Memo 6: Authentic friends are gold .....</u>	<u>15</u>
<u>Memo 7: The fun factor .....</u>	<u>18</u>
<u>Memo 8: Our choice and self-fulfilling prophecies .....</u>	<u>21</u>
<u>Memo 9: Acceptance is an emotional literacy critical skill .....</u>	<u>24</u>

## **Chapter 2**

<u>Memo 1: Discovering mental (behavioural) health through taming emotional wakes .....</u>	<u>26</u>
<u>Memo 2: Neurodiversity: The next workplace inclusion priority .....</u>	<u>31</u>
<u>Memo 3: Exploring the road to emotional maturity .....</u>	<u>34</u>
<u>Memo 4: Trauma-informed workplaces .....</u>	<u>38</u>
<u>Memo 5: Benefits of moving towards living a positive life .....</u>	<u>42</u>
<u>Memo 6: Benefits of focusing on habits versus goals .....</u>	<u>46</u>
<u>Memo 7: Regret is not necessarily all bad; it's often an opportunity .....</u>	<u>50</u>
<u>Memo 8: Change lasts when we have clarity .....</u>	<u>52</u>
<u>Memo 9: Discovering your good .....</u>	<u>55</u>
<u>Memo 10: Our follow-through influences our credibility .....</u>	<u>58</u>
<u>Memo 11: Savour moments that matter to create positive emotions on-demand .....</u>	<u>61</u>

## Being OK starts with me

**B**EING human was hard before COVID. It has gotten harder. I believe it's important for folks who listen to people like me who make their living talking about mental health to know we are far from perfect; we're still human. We also have emotional ups and downs, even with all our knowledge and skills in mental health. Living with a mental illness means experiencing the world differently than others, and dealing with personal emotions is challenging.

Let me share my most recent emotional upset. Without a master plan or even trying, I lost a dear friend. How? From my point of view, a misunderstanding and emotion. My intentions were pure and defensible. I would welcome an opportunity to present my facts to the world emotional court. But there is no such court. Just two human beings doing the best they can.

Yes, I tried to fix it a few days later, with no success. Attachment theory and choice theory teach that all I can do is own my part, apologize, and be willing to fix and discover how to mitigate future emotional upset.

**OK, so what now?**

Our mental health influences our day-to-day experience. I happen to believe that mental illness is real. It's never an excuse; we own our behaviour. I filter the world through challenging neurological wiring called ADHD (i.e., hyper-focus), auditory dyslexia (i.e., difficulty keeping up to the meaning of words under emotional pressure) and challenging random, unconscious thoughts and emotions under pressure (i.e., worry) fueled by a general anxiety disorder. Plus, I'm living alone during COVID-19, with lots of life challenges.

None of this is meant to be an excuse. It's just my reality — no different than someone who is blind or in a wheelchair. I have a disability and there's nothing wrong with me. Of course, if you don't have empathy or believe mental illness is real, I suspect by times a person like me is a mystery. Most of us are good souls, who can get lost in emotions when we're fearful, confused, or don't feel psychologically safe.

I don't like failing. This last emotional upset is an opportunity to grow and dig into advancing my mental health.

There will be a next time. So perhaps with some work, I can learn not to shut down or to manage my thoughts and feelings better when under personal emotional pressure.

Leveraging my ADHD hyper-focusing gift, I will focus on what I can control; that's all I can do. Over the next 90 days, I will add the following to my mental fitness plan and then re-evaluate:

- Work with my psychologist to explore how I can grow from this painful experience.
- Ensure my business partners know I realize my mental health is off, but they don't need details. Also, ask them to call me out on any "poor me" behaviour.
- Focus on my self-talk and catch any "poor me" thoughts as early as I can.
- Dig into my daily journal and track my emotions.

- Increase my social connections activity (e.g., catch up with friends and family with more intention).
- Increase my exercise and focus on physical health — and no alcohol, period.
- Allow myself time to grieve without judgment.
- Focus on the good and the fact that 89.9% of this relationship was positive.
- Use this experience as a spark to deal with an unresolved conflict I have been dragging my heels to deal with. Now feels like a good time.

This experience has inspired my next book and I am so pleased my publisher is excited, too. My motivation is how many of us wake up each day with no intention to upset others but do. I'm pretty sure I'm not alone, mental illness or not.

# Childhood experience can influence who we are today

**I**N last week's memo, I discussed my plan to learn and grow from an emotional setback. This event has caused me to pause and look inward. Why? Because the person mattered to me. Every relationship has two parts, and I can only own mine. I want to explore what I can learn to help me in the future, as there may be a next time with this person or someone else in a similar situation.

When coping with any relationship disruption, you can do nothing or something. The something can be positive or negative. I want to focus on what I can do to prepare myself for, similar situations. I also want to own my behaviour and be open to fixing what I can.

To reduce my risk of being taken over by emotions and old programming, I need to be open and vulnerable to self-discovery, which can be scary.

In my book [\*Stop Hiding and Start Living\*](#), I shared my life story around failure and learning from when I failed grade two. I introduced the F-IT model to move from failure to flourishing as a mental fitness framework to impact mental health positively.

Following my recent incident, I started a conversation with my psychologist to do some self-discovery, learn how to manage my emotions better, and turn off old programming when stressed.

As she listened to my story, she began asking questions. Pretty quickly, the questions focused on my childhood experiences around parenting styles and early trauma. I asked why she was asking those questions. She said lots of programming happens at an early age and can shape how adults engage in personal and professional relationships. I have never put much thought into my childhood. I am too busy most days navigating the challenges of my work and personal life.

My psychologist asked me about being adopted and what impact I thought that may have had on me. Since I do not think about my adoption, I said, "None that I know of; my adopted parents were amazing." Her response: "Really? OK, do you ever worry about others rejecting you? Do you ever worry about being liked? Do you ever worry about if others value you? Do you struggle with letting people get close to

you? Do you need constant reassurance that you are accepted by the people closest to you?”

I was caught like a deer in headlights. I froze and did not know how to answer these questions, as they shut me down. She smiled and said, “OK. All these questions are signs of a person who has experienced some attachment challenges. If these are tough for you to answer and you can see these relate to you today, then it is highly likely you have some unconscious programming running you are not aware of that is impacting how you interact with others.”

She went on and said, “You do a lot of research. Take some time to review the literature on attachment theory and adult relationships. There are other things we will talk about; this may be a good place to start.”

## SO, WHAT NOW?

Now I was interested in learning more about attachment theory because it was frightening how accurate it is on the surface. This conversation led me to explore attachment theory I had not read much about. I had heard about it but never related it to my situation. I was blown away at how it pegged me to a

*Attachment theory provides a lens into how our childhood experiences shape our mental working models of the world.*

tee — especially in personal relationships I value and want most. I am starting to see in a different light the anxiety I live with daily and how my mind works. The best news is that I can have a positive impact with some hard work.

I suggest you have a trained professional when doing this kind of work, as they can help you avoid making assumptions and see a path forward. I can

see mine now and know it will take some work. It's so exciting on a personal level to see that I can rewrite flawed, old programming with some intention.

Attachment theory provides a lens into how our childhood experiences shape our mental working models of the world. These are mod-

els of self-worth and how we interact under emotional pressure with friends, work, and relationships, from platonic to intimate.

The four styles of attachment in adults:

- **Secure** – Find it easy to become emotionally close with others. Tend to have a positive view of themselves.
- **Anxious-preoccupied** – Want to become emotionally close with others but struggle to let people close.



Constantly worry if they are valued or accepted. Tend to have a less-positive view of self.

- **Dismissive-avoid** – OK without emotional relationships, independent, self-sufficient, and dependent on self than others. Tend to have a positive view of self and a negative view of others.
- **Fearful-avoidant** – Uncomfortable getting close to others, worried

about being hurt, and finding it difficult to trust others. Tend to have mixed views of self or others.

Mission number one for me is to focus inward on things I enjoy and that are in my control. Luckily, I love my work. I'm starting a new book, have some personal fitness goals, am connecting with lots of old friends, and my English bulldog Link and I enjoy our time together.

## Renaming unresolved conflict as a new opportunity

**I**N last week's memo, I shared a bit about attachment theory. Some of you may think I am out to lunch, but I have found it a user-friendly way to discover how we show up. It helps to explain some behaviours we run automatically in personal and professional relationships that can create undue hardship.

I will spend some time on attachment because I am interested in discovering and changing old programs. It got me thinking about the benefits of suggesting to new couples looking to bond and develop long-lasting, loving relationships when they feel there may be some chemistry and connection, to pause, explore, and discuss how their attachments may show up and how to support each other as much as their love language. Oxytocin will get you only so far.

I am very happy with who I am; I just want to learn to be better at managing my anxiety and emotions.

In that spirit, I decided to confront one unresolved conflict in my business life. We file people and our experiences

with deep, unconscious sub-directories with powerful emotions. These emotions, when fired off, influence our behaviour and, if we are not aware, impact how we show up and deal with situations in ways that may not be optimal. The good news is that we can learn to change these sub-directories and make decisions grounded more in logic than emotion.

In my business relationship, I am keenly aware that I have been struggling for about six months with a constant belief script saying, "Why is this being so hard?" Of course, I have also been blaming the other person for their poor communication style and lack of transparency. And to make things worse, I have been attaching my fantasy thinking, "If they only ... things would be ... ." With each negative interaction, I was firing emotions that were wiring my brain that this business relationship is not good and things are not what I want.

But I want it to work out, so here is the rub. When beliefs and emotions are in control, they can create the illusion

that we do not want something we want. Of course, this is not a path to success.

Because of this, I had anchored negative emotions associated with this project and this person. My big “holy cow!” for this week is the truth that my concern and emotional turmoil have nothing to do with the person. They have to do with my beliefs and expectations regarding how they should behave. Somehow, over the years, I have created a default in my subconscious brain that people will often let me down and not do what they say. As bizarre as it sounds, my unconscious fear of abandonment and some faulty coping skills have let me down more. My rule about what they are supposed to be doing did not consider their side or what they may be experiencing. I was focused on me. Can you relate? Have you done this, by chance?

Because I have constantly been running this program deep in my unconscious mind, outside my awareness, it has impacted how I was filtering this situation. The way forward with this relationship is for me to focus on changing my flawed program by changing my beliefs. That is on me, not them.

*I can control my intentions and how I want to experience the world.*

## SO, WHAT NOW?

I have a choice. I cannot control them, but I can control my intentions and how I want to experience the world. I want collaboration and peace; I do not want negativity and turmoil. It starts with me being clear on what I want and do not want. This is called a boundary. It's good to set boundaries and be clear on what they are.

To start setting my boundary, I want to remove judgment and emotion to ensure my old programming in a business relationship no longer attaches emotions that are not remotely proportional to my reality and risk. As Dr. William Glasser, someone I deeply re-

spect, once said to me on a speaking tour, “We make choices every day. It is our responsibility to be aware of the impact of these choices on ourselves and others.”

### **My three-step plan to move past this unresolved conflict:**

1. **Evaluate the situation for what it is, not within me.** I have concluded that it could be an interesting business opportunity, provided I can set clear boundaries and how things will move forward. Moving

forward begins with changing beliefs and expectations on collaborating by making appropriate tweaks to be fair to them, myself, and yes, my next opportunity I may not know of yet. Then set a clear boundary on the opportunity and accept that it is not worth proceeding further if this boundary is not adhered to. I have now framed this situation within and have removed emotion.

2. **Forgiveness.** We can be hard on ourselves and others. Moving forward and rebuilding requires more than a few emails and bullet points. It is important to deal with regret and resentment to get to a collaborative mindset. It begins with forgiving myself for my emotional blunders and decision-making and then forgiving any of their blunders that may have negatively impacted me. In this case, their lack of sharing their thoughts with me created secondary issues I suspect they regret. People often do things out of fear, not hate, so being open to this possibility can help put things into perspective. I

spent a couple of hours thinking about a heartfelt apology for any stress and asked for their forgiveness. Whether they do the same does not matter; this is about me releasing my internal conflict. What matters to me is we agree on clear boundaries. Without these, there is no future.

3. **Adopt a collaborative mindset.** It is OK to say no and not want to move forward with a deal or a business relationship if the terms do not feel fair and there are no clear boundaries. I am now clear on the mindset I want to adopt as I move forward. It must be collaborative, positive, and have clear boundaries that hold all involved accountable. Most importantly, I want to be aware of my beliefs, thoughts, and emotions and how they are influencing how I show up. Because at the end of the day, no business opportunity is worth my happiness, health, and sleep. I have learned from this experience that getting values aligned with beliefs is helpful.

## The power of positive emotions

**I**N last week's memo, I discussed how I dealt with an unresolved conflict. This week, I begin exploring how I can experience more positive and fewer negative emotions.

Through personal conversations with friends, family, myself, and my psychologist over the last month, I am gaining more self-awareness, particularly around how my daily self-talks, expectations, and reactions to others have robbed me of opportunities to experience more positivity.

I opened myself up to look at these things called negative emotions. This led to a few deep conversations and uncovering of a personal blind spot. I have not dealt with a fear I have been carrying for most of my adult life. The difference between knowing and naming is profound. Once I name it, it is mine to do something with. I have lots of evidence that ignoring it has not been helpful.

What is neat is when you suspend judgment and consider how the mind works on a practical level. In my case, my conscious mind says this fear is silly and makes no sense. But my uncon-

scious mind has for years created and reinforced faulty programming. When triggered, my subconscious releases a flood of negative emotions that drive my behaviour to avoid this fear. The negative emotions associated with this fear that shuts me down for self-protection are not rational. But emotions are not rational; they are chemicals.

I suspect I am no different than many males. I have not made space to slow down to deal with this fear. I have taken the route where I have been for years just ignoring what is happening. Clearly, I have not fully comprehended the impact this fear has had on my happiness. Since fear is linked to negative emotions, when in fear, we see the world much differently.

I have concluded this fear and its negative emotions have been managing me more than I want. Because I am motivated to improve my mental health, I am now also motivated to take on this old fear. Time for it to go away. I am clear that this irrational fear has negatively influenced some of my relationships, and my preference is for it to no

longer be part of who I am. The news headline for this week's memo could read, "Avoiding personal fear and negative emotions is dumb." However, since I am working on being more positive, I went another way.

Like my memo # 1, emotional management starts with me. Emotions are not something abstract, spiritual, or random. All human emotions have a purpose and trigger. Emotions shape how we show up for ourselves and others. We require no training to experience any emotion, from happiness to sadness. Our brain is a powerful drugstore that knows how to make every emotion. The key that turns on negative emotions can begin with our conscious mind. However, it often comes from our subconscious mind that is below the surface and outside our awareness.

### SO, WHAT NOW?

In my newest book, *The Cure for Loneliness*, I talk about unlocking mental traps. This is what I will be doing with this old fear. Because it has been a part of me for so long, I am going to work with my psychologist to ensure I do the work needed to move past this one fear. My goal will be to do the work and take as long as necessary to unlock this fear. I have a level of conviction I have never had for my mental health. I will beat this fear. I do not expect it to be easy,

*Emotions shape how we show up for ourselves and others.*

but getting a university degree was not easy for me either. So where does it say getting rid of fear is supposed to be easy? I am motivated to fire off new

wiring, and through repetition and new positive emotions, I will leave this fear behind in time. When I think about my future and what it will be, it is exciting to realize my opportunity.

Now I need to do the work, as unlearning takes time.

### The five-point plan I have added to my development plan I am practicing daily:

- **Self-awareness** — When I notice the fear, I name it every time. I also observe and journal at the end of each day what triggered negative coping behaviours and emotions. Self-awareness is a powerful self-accountability tool.
- **Body scan** — This looks beyond self-awareness. It is about noticing the negative emotions as they arise, what thoughts are happening, and how I feel inside. Taking a moment to notice the emotions can tamper them down. I name them (e.g., seems like I am feeling ...). Doing this without judgment is a form of self-empathy. This alone may not stop the negative emotions, but I am now awake and not on autopilot.

- **Stick with Plan A** — This may sound too simple, but it is starting to work for me. I know that Plan A is what I want to think about myself and what I want to feel. Now when Plan B turns on, because my subconscious brain is not yet with the program, once I start to feel the negative emotions, I do all I can to avoid taking the bait and say to myself, “Thanks, but I rather Plan A.”
- **Replays create new opportunities** — When the above does not work, my next action is to replay in my mind how I could have handled the situation differently, this time mentally rehearsing the desired outcome and with the associated positive feelings. Knowing I cannot change what happened and there will be a next time, it is helpful to practice.
- **Recognize progress, not perfection** — I have only had the old fear for over 50 years. The chances the old programming will go away overnight do not exist, but I believe that over the next 200 days I will be in a better place than today. I am seeing a bit of progress that feeds my hope. I do not want to be naïve. I will be tested, and only time will let me know if I have gotten rid of this old program. Self-compassion, patience, and being realistic set the stage for building new habits, as they take time and intention to install. Slips and failure are part of learning, so I have baked that in.

## Breathe; Change is slow

**M**Y reflection this week is simple though profound. Mental health requires giving ourselves space to process and decide what we want and who we want to be and then accepting that just because we decide what we want, it may not happen by next Tuesday.

I had an amazing session with my psychologist last week, followed by calls with three friends who all said basically the same damn thing. They all wanted to know who Bill wants to be each day and how he wants to show up. I said, “That is simple to me: kind, caring, positive, and a happy person.” I also said I am clear that my worrying can make me come off as negative more than I want. They all agreed, though they all made a point to remind me I am a kind and caring person, which was a lovely acknowledgement from those who know me.

For this memo, I will take some liberties to summarize their coaching to me. “Bill, you are a problem solver, and you like to solve problems. Be clear that your happiness will not be the result of reading 10 new books or taking another course. If it were, you would be happy

by now. You need to slow down and just be comfortable with yourself. Focus on who you want to be each day and enjoy.”

As you can imagine, my head was spinning with OK, got it, so what should I do? I wanted to know the steps I needed to take to get from point A to point B. This week, the penny dropped for me. Things are fine; all I need is some time and I will discover if I am committed to my process. I am OK, as I am the end. Holy cow! What if it were that simple? Being kind to oneself creates an opportunity to have what we want. My big aha! for this week is to treat myself how I want others to treat me. For example, if I want others to have positive thoughts about me, then I must have positive thoughts for me.

I can now see a path that my clinical brain was in the way of time and space with myself to unlearn old patterns and learn new ones. With all my complaining to myself and others about COVID, I am laughing now at what has become a blessing for me. How? I can no longer run from me. As I write this memo, I am feeling happier than I have for a



long time. There is no fixing. There is nothing wrong with me. All I need to do is be OK with me and in time my mental health lens will continue to become more consistent, which will help me to show up the way I want to be.

Two of my friends in last week's chat asked me if I have a book called *The Four Agreements*. An insightful book by Don Miguel Ruiz, it is now on my list. If you are not familiar, ask yourself how you are doing with the following agreements daily:

- Do not make assumptions.
- Do not take anything personally.
- Be impeccable with your word.
- Always do your best.

I am scoring 50% success on this list every day. I am kicking numbers three and four; lots of work to do on numbers one and two. I like how easy this is for me to monitor and improve a bit each day.

Now that I am clear on who I want to be, it is up to me to monitor my beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and micro-actions. Each action is a step either toward or away from the person I want to be.

My key message is when you want to make a change, breathe and be patient with yourself. I am not trying to just

lose 20 pounds. I am trying to shape new habits as to how I show up each day for myself and others. The adage "two steps forward, one backwards" is sage wisdom.

I caught myself this week getting some bad news from a team member about a client's concern. My reaction was automatic and defensive. Hmmm. Where did that come from? Years of old programming designed for self-protection that have kept me from new learn-

ings. Feedback is information. We do not have to take it personally. Now my goal is to learn how to not do so. I also will give myself a break, as I am not perfect and never will be. I caught myself after my reaction and thought about it. I went back to my team member and said, "You know, I showed up not how I wanted to. I am going to fix this with the client myself." Progress!

After six weeks, I can tell you I am not only awake and focused on improving my mental health to a new level. Because, if the truth were told, I have been working on it for years. I am just digging in with more intention now on some old attachment issues and programming I want to remove. I no longer want anxiety or worry to have as much power over me in my personal life. I am blessed to have friends and family who care about me. I am also

*Feedback is information. We do not have to take it personally.*

learning the value of staying in touch with them and being more active with my social network with no agenda or reason other than just being. This being happy thing may not be as elusive as

some think, as it is not a destination; it is an acceptance that things are OK from within.

Have an amazing week, one positive thought at a time. That is my plan!

## Authentic friends are gold

**I**N last week's memo, I discussed when making a personal change, it's beneficial to accept that change is a process and real change takes time.

Over the past six weeks, I have been reminded of the value of authentic friendships for supporting mental health. An authentic friend is one you don't need to talk to daily but is there when you need them and are happy to speak with you. I have intentionally begun to engage my friends for support. I have found it interesting how reconnecting with more intention has reminded me how valuable and beneficial it is to connect with people you value and enjoy talking with.

I feel blessed to have a lot of friends. What I have not been is an active friend. I haven't been reaching out or setting up times to chat. Life moves fast, and often we use the excuse of time to avoid taking a few minutes to reach out to chat with a friend.

Because I made reconnecting a part of my plan, I took responsibility to reach out and set up times to chat. It was incredible for the eight people I reached out to using text to check in to

see if they would like to catch up. The responses were encouraging and validating; they all were happy to hear from me and keen to chat.

I've been chatting with most of them weekly for the last few weeks. A couple of us have set up calls to chat at the same time every week, which is super, as it gives me something to look forward to.

### SELF-REFLECTION

As I reflect on the past few weeks, I've made a few observations on how caring, authentic friends can help you feel supported and enjoy being human.

All eight were interested on the first call and wanted to know what was new and what challenges I have. They each listened carefully, which I needed, as I reflect now. The second calls were mostly reviews of the first, about what I'm doing and how I'm coping with living alone in Ottawa during COVID.

Then I noticed that the magic of talking with authentic friends is the randomness of each call. However, as I reflect, I see three core factors. That's wonderful and why I'm going to con-

tinue to put more effort into engaging with friends through check-in calls:

- *Laughter* — listening and telling each other stories and laughing
- *Sharing* — sharing stories and showing up for each other in a way that helps us process life challenges, as well as acknowledging and celebrating wins and accomplishments
- *Learnings* — discussions ranging from global economics to COVID, favourite books, courses, and articles. The opportunity to discover is present in almost every call.

*The power of authentic friendships is the reward of friendship.*

### SO WHAT'S NEXT?

I'll continue to reach out and connect to people I haven't chatted with for months and sometimes years. My goal is to discover how they are and reconnect for the sole purpose of reconnecting. The power of authentic friendships is the reward of friendship.

Like physical health, maintaining friendships requires intention. The past few weeks have reminded me of the value of purpose and the benefits of investing some mental energy and time in reconnecting.

Reconnecting with friends has me thinking about the benefits of authentic social connections and what are a few

more things I would like to do to enhance them:

- **Research and connect** — I played football at Acadia for five years and coached for 10, so I know a ton of people through that activity and my work experiences. I'm going to pick a couple of names that pop into my head each month and, through LinkedIn or the internet, see if I can find them to send a note to say, "Yeah, been a long time; let's catch up."
- **Social network** — I like meeting new people, so I'm considering where to expand my social network. I'm a boat club member and love golf, so I will focus more energy on meeting people, provided it's safe.
- **Mindful activity** — A neat way to meet people is to suspend expectations. For example, make a date with me to go to the bookstore, Starbucks, or a restaurant and plan on having some quiet time. I'll be open to meeting someone and striking up a conversation. Again, provided it's safe with all the COVID rules. Vaccines will be here soon!
- **Link and friends** — My bulldog Link is super-cool. He loves people, and there are walking parks and clubs where I can take him to play and meet neat folks.

- **More time just being Bill, not Dr. Bill** — I have spent so much energy focused on work, writing, and education I'm concluding I've done enough. I want to continue my work, as I love helping. But now it's time for me to focus on just being Bill. I'm a kid from PEI trying to figure out this thing called life. I'm realizing it's OK not to have a plan for everything and every moment. Not there yet, but I'm aware! I've been processing and realizing that I like my own company. Being alone in April is way easier than in

August 2020. Why? The lens I'm now looking through.

Having a meaningful relationship with friends is critical. However, I have been reminded of the value of having a positive relationship with oneself. In the last few weeks, the penny has dropped. The more we look to enjoy our own company with a positive mindset and focus on what's good, the more we'll attract the energy we want. We don't need to be perfect; we just need to be aware of who we want to be. This will help influence our experience with ourselves and others.

## The fun factor

**I**N last week's memo, I discussed the importance of having healthy and safe friendships and the need to not take them for granted.

This week, I am going to discuss the fun factor. Life is demanding, and with COVID, many of our customary ways of having fun, such as travel, sports events, concerts, and dining, have been disrupted. We are moving into year two of this new world and still very much in COVID. However, with all the strain and drain, this is perhaps why we need to take a moment and check to see if we are having enough fun.

We cannot fake fun; we feel it in our bones. When we are laughing, playing, and being silly, it is because we are engaging in conversation or activities that we define as fun. Fun does not need to be structured, nor does it need to be dependent on others. Sometimes, the best fun is spontaneous. But for this to happen, we must allow it to occur.

Fun begins with a positive attitude and a desire to have fun. Of course, since we cannot fake fun, we need to be authentic with ourselves and mindful of what we find and do not find fun.

As a part of my development plan, my goal over the next few months is to amp up the fun factor. The first step was making a conscious decision to spend more time and energy allowing myself to have more fun. This may sound a bit silly; of course, we should have fun. However, it is not for me, as I am a bit intense and focused on getting stuff done. Though I enjoy it, I have not prioritized the idea of relaxing and having fun. I have made my work my priority. I have created some automatic programming that has me constantly driving myself toward achieving professional goals.

I enjoy writing articles and books, but is it fun? It is not super fun; it is more therapeutic and meaningful for me, as I find it a helpful strategy to stay current and learn. I find writing calms my ADHD mind. It puts me in the present and stops all the noise in my head.

Adding more fun to my life will require shifting my priorities to allow me to relax my goals. I will admit I work too much. COVID and living alone have been an excuse to stay distracted by work. It does not help that I also re-

ally enjoy my work; yes, there are fun moments. However, as I decide where I want to go in my life, I am becoming clearer that my fun factor is something I want to lean into more. I have a bucket list of fun things I want to do.

I know that adding more fun to my life is not rocket science. Adding fun requires micro-adjustments to daily priorities and defining how to schedule more fun times.

A teacher can come in all forms to help us find more fun in our life if we are open to it. My nine-month-old miniature English bulldog

Link has opened my eyes to how a walk can become a funfest in moments if I am open.

Link loves to play. He will attack a branch and a leaf blowing by with gusto. He will chase a ball as if his life depends on it. In winter, he would dive into a

snowbank as if looking for gold. Even having a bath, he loves dancing around the blow-drier.

I realize that every time I take Link for a walk is an opportunity to have some fun. Now, that may sound odd. It is not; it is a mindset. My mindset was to ensure he got his exercise, used the bathroom, and met other dogs. I am slowly discovering it is not always moving from A to B. It is the space be-

tween A and B that creates our experience.

I know that Link is a gift. He attracts people to chat, as he is so cute. These micro-visits often result in a few laughs and meeting new people. He wants to have fun, and I am learning I need to slow down, open my mind a bit, and have way more fun just by hanging out with Link.

### SO, WHAT'S NEXT?

Besides tapping into Link's fun zone, I am focusing on adding more fun to my life. I refuse to allow COVID to contin-

ue to wear me down.

Yes, I am sure I will have moments, but I realize I can choose how I want my moments to go.

When I was thinking about how to pump up my fun factor, I looked at each of the following areas:

- **Sports** — I enjoy playing and practicing golf and riding bike trails by the water here in Ottawa. I am not sure walking with Link is a sport, but when he plays fetch, it feels like one. He is moving fast with lots of intensity, so this one is going into the sports column. I am also thinking Mustang convertible. It is always fun to get out for a ride on a warm day with the top down.

*Adding fun requires micro-adjustments to daily priorities and defining how to schedule more fun times.*

- **Friends** — I am planning more activities with friends, from watching a friend race his race car to cottage weekends and getting a friend out boating.
- **Travel** — I am planning a few trips, one a golf trip to Florida in October. Just thinking about this is exciting. I am also planning on visiting friends in North Carolina, where I lived for a time; a visit to New York City, where I worked for 12 years, to see friends; and a visit to my best man in Florida to hopefully catch a Tampa game. Of course, these trips depend on vaccines and open borders, but they are fun to discuss and plan.
- **Pick humour** — There is a radio show in Ottawa that does what they call phone taps, and every time I listen to these in the morning, I laugh my ass off. I am starting to watch more movies that I find funny and a lot less news. I love watching comedians. Having HBO, there is a bunch of funny ones I can watch on demand.
- **Family** — I have a granddaughter I have not seen much because of the travel restrictions. I am exploring moving back to Nova Scotia in the coming months to provide more opportunities to see her, my brothers, and my children. Until then, I will continue watching videos of her playing. They are such a treat.
- **Spontaneous** — I had a friend call the other day and ask what I am doing now. Of course, I said, “Working.” They asked if I wanted to come over for dinner. Before, I would have paused and thought about it. With a new lens, “I said, you bet; see you in 15 minutes.” My key learning is fun is attitude and to have it we must create space for it.

My key learning from focusing on the fun factor is I have a lot of fun in my life now. I just need to allow it to happen. I am also reminded of how good fun is for my brain. I will pay attention to my fun factor over the coming months.



# Our choice and self-fulfilling prophecies

**I**N last week's memo, I shared some thoughts on the fun factor. This week, I will get back into some of the work we often find hard to do, that being looking inward.

Have you ever wanted something or someone so badly that you believed you would do anything to get it?

Most of us can relate to this question — for example, a job or a special person. Most have had something we believed we wanted, and it became our number one priority.

Now I find, upon personal reflection, the word anything interesting. If you think about the question, most consciously or unconsciously think that what we get in life depends on what we do. However, what we are willing to do is determined by what we believe. Thoughts come from beliefs about ourselves.

A personal aha! moment in last week's therapy revolved around a self-fulfilling prophecy. One way to define a self-fulfilling prophecy's effect is the degree we predict our actions and ability will achieve a desired outcome, such as a job or a special person.

At the core of self-fulfilling prophecies are the beliefs we run in our heads. Consider how a belief is shaped by two effects:

- The [Pygmalion effect](#) is a psychological phenomenon wherein high expectations lead to improved performance in each area.
- The flip side is the [Golem effect](#), where low expectations lead to decreased performance outcomes.

How these two effects can play out: Imagine or focus on a person you love. Now consider how the Pygmalion effect versus the Golem effect could impact behaviour and confidence. If you have high confidence, are mindful of the other person's needs, and have open and honest communications, the relationship success will be much higher.

If, however, you believe that you will fail and something will happen to the relationship, this may be due to believing that you are not good enough. It does not matter how good you are; running this negative effect impacts your success. Believing that you will fail or be rejected is a negative, self-fulfilling prophecy.

In his bestseller, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale teaches that our thoughts create our reality and what we allow our mind to focus on often will germinate.

For me, the “so what?” is the importance of noticing what we believe to be true compared to what we want. In the case of the relationship, wanting someone and not believing they would want you is more accurate than many may like to admit. The Golem effect is a by-product of negative self-talk. I am becoming more aware of how negative self-talk can be almost invisible. To stop it, we need to shine a light on it as it happens.

**SO, WHAT FROM HERE?**

Being awakened to what thoughts are rolling in my head and examining them with curiosity would be helpful for me to do more. I am much more motivated by being aware of thinking, as I want to focus on what I want versus what I do not want to happen for things I like and people I care about.

One approach is to set higher expectations for what I want to think daily. This will reduce the risk of allowing negative self-talk to shape my day-to-day experiences. A few things I can focus on to create more positive expectations:

*See what you want to happen. Focus on the desired outcome instead of what you do not want to happen.*

- **Positive daily programming** — The things we say to ourselves matter. Have a script as to say to yourself as you wake up each day. It can be simple: “I am a good person, I am loveable, I am a caring person, and I am a positive person.” This has been a neat way to start my day, as it helps fire up my mind with encouragement. I want to learn to turn down that critical voice in my head.
- **Positive visualization** — See what you want to happen. Focus on the desired outcome instead of what you do not want to happen. This

will shape your belief system for whatever you want to accomplish or that special relationship you want to nurture. Pay attention to where your thoughts go when you think about the future. If you notice you are focused on any negativity, be aware that is a choice. You also

can choose to focus on what you want to happen. If you cannot find any positive, maybe what you are wanting is not really what you want.

- **Intentional asks** — Most of us understand that prayer is about being intentional with what we are asking to happen. When we fill the space in our minds with hope and ask for

what we want to happen, we can help create our future. I like what Dr. Peale says when he teaches the notion of being careful what you think may happen, meaning if you think negatively, you are attaching

more negatively. However, if you think positive things about what you want, it may happen. My take-away is being clear that what you are praying for is what you want.

# Acceptance is an emotional literacy critical skill

**I**N last week's memo, I explored self-fulfilling prophecies.

This week, I am exploring the stages we go through when we focus on something we do not want to happen, but it happens. Here is the deal: thoughts are powerful. We need to be careful what we allow ourselves to think because it may happen.

When our subconscious level is constantly running fear about something we care about, like an important relationship, this behaviour often results in a loss of confidence in the authenticity of the social connection. When you think about something you do not want to happen, you are training your brain to become insecure, resulting in random, unpleasant emotions that consume a lot of mental energy.

A part of my journey has me focusing on emotional literacy, which is becoming more in tune with my emotions. I'm taking a neat online course, *Managing Emotions in Times of Uncertainty & Stress*, provided by Yale University with Dr. Marc Brackett. Along with this course, I'm using a mental health app called Mood Meter.

A helpful practice I am paying more attention to when it comes to unpleasant emotions (e.g., rejection) is simply noticing them. Now I will admit when my therapist asked me to just notice and not fix them, I was a bit confused. That provided evidence as to why I need to do more work on emotions to answer a simple question, "What emotion are you now experiencing?" I now do this randomly throughout the day and track it in my app. It is a pretty neat experience.

With my therapist, I have spent time discussing emotions and how to leverage acceptance to deal with unpleasant feelings that are not necessarily bad; they just are what they are. The goal of accepting unpleasant emotions is to learn how not to get stuck in them. I enjoyed how my therapist helped me notice how much unnecessary time I have worried or focused on unpleasant emotions, only strengthening their hold.

The following five steps of the **Acceptance Model** can help you get unstuck, stop resisting unpleasant emotions, and learn how to better cope with them:

1. **Resisting** — not accepting what has happened, looking for a way to avoid unpleasant emotions.
2. **Exploring** — accepting and explore thoughts around unpleasant emotions by becoming more curious about them. This can gently help determine if the thoughts are helpful. No judgment, just observing.
3. **Tolerating** — understanding unpleasant emotions will come without notice. Realize they can be tolerated.
4. **Allowing** — accepting that unpleasant emotions come and go. Without judgment, just notice them. Focus on being just an observer.
5. **Be-friending** — become open to the possibility that unpleasant emotions can have valuable learnings when viewed from different perspectives.

### SO WHAT FROM HERE?

I look forward to discovering the benefits of emotional literacy for my mental health. I am already finding this process interesting after a week, as it brings to my awareness the benefit of noticing where I am in a moment. When your head is connected to your body, it is an interesting experience because you are in the moment. The world feels still, and a sense of calm comes over your mind.

### TIPS FOR IMPROVING EMOTIONAL LITERACY:

- **Leverage Mood Meter daily** — I will use this app to help me become more in tune with my emotions.
- **Emotional literacy practice** — as a part of my Mood Meter daily tracking, I will pause and do the following three steps for each emotion. This is to help me develop how I connect with my emotions.

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
<i>Discovery question</i>	<i>Label emotion</i>	<i>Acceptance check-in</i>
“What emotion are you feeling at this moment?”	Is this a pleasant or unpleasant emotion?	What is your acceptance level of this emotion? Resistance Exploring Tolerance Allowing Befriending

# Discovering mental (behavioural) health through taming emotional wakes

ONE of my most profound insights during my 2021 mental health journey was my discovery of “emotional wakes.” I will provide a few bullets for the context of what I mean by the term.

## UNDERSTANDING WHAT AND HOW EMOTIONAL WAKES OCCUR

Emotional wakes can result in intrapersonal and interpersonal emotional disruption.

- **Emotional interpersonal wakes disruption** result from overreacting to perceived stressors from an interaction with another person. Gaps in coping skills to deal with perceived threats are the root cause. How interpersonal wakes occur:
  - ◇ You experience a negative interpersonal interaction (e.g., your partner suddenly says they don’t trust you).
  - ◇ Because of a skills gap in regulating emotions, an automatic thought is fired off to escape unpleasant emotions (e.g., rejection) triggered by the comment.
  - ◇ Without adaptive coping skills, your unconscious ego steps in to

protect and win. Your ego never considers others’ emotions, only yours.

- ◇ The ego is highly reactive and drives automatic protective actions that are not always factual or rational. This can result in doing and saying things that worsen a situation and lead to future regret and remorse.
- ◇ The impairment for mental illness is constantly living in unpleasant emotions that, unfortunately, drive interpersonal disruption.
- ◇ Though we may think the challenge is outside, the cure begins with looking inside, which I explain in more detail below.

Perceived expectations are a challenge for a professional person living with a mental illness: “They should be able to ... .” There will be disappointment when there is a gap between reality and expectations.

Unfortunately, this is where stigma continues to be a challenge. The nervous system getting caught in a cycle of dysregulation with an active fight or flight system can dramatically impede

the person's functioning potential. But once calmed down and moved to pleasant emotions where they feel safe, they can return to high functioning quickly. Like a person with diabetes whose sugars are off, it's scary during the crisis, but things can improve dramatically promptly with a small intervention. The sad reality is I have lost relationships that matter, not because I didn't care but because I didn't have the skills.

### **MY WORK THAT IS A PART OF MY MENTAL FITNESS PLAN**

- I discovered that to move forward, I had to confront my past and deal with parts of me that I never nurtured. Childhood trauma is real. I always knew it and have helped hundreds of people with abuse issues. Since I was not experiencing PTSD-like symptoms, I assumed I must have been fine. I never figured this all out by myself. Without my psychologist team and MD, I couldn't have discovered who I am and what parts needed to be supported.
- I have always been able to build relationships but keeping them when I was not happy has resulted in a few significant speed bumps.
- I learned that it started with self-forgiveness and daily practice (e.g., journaling and visualization) that promotes self-affirmation and self-compassion.
- I accept that I am accountable for my behaviours, and I will not be perfect.
- I aim to train my ego to be less reactive as a core strategy for controlling my emotional and behavioural systems.
- Funny how messages come when we're ready. As I was thinking about this memo on LinkedIn, I noticed a video by Deloitte CEO Dan Helfrich that landed well for me. It helped me create an intention valuable to me and my interpersonal relationships.
- Helfrich shared his wisdom of some attitude challenges he wants to see improved in his culture. He pointed out the juxtaposition between REALITY and REPUTATION and how, when not managed, they negatively impact team members' attitudes about each other.
- I agree with his point 100%. Too many judge people based on our last experience, which becomes the unconscious bias used to define their value. Helfrich reminds us that no one is perfect, and we are all learning. His coaching is to confront negativity head-on with something like, "Interesting. When was the last time they did X, and what are they doing now?"
- Reputation is shaped by experience. With tolerance, we can accept that no one is perfect and all make mis-

takes. So, let's do better and judge people on how they show up today, as this is the reality and what matters.

**MY TAKEAWAY: I WILL CONTINUE TO FOCUS AND PRACTICE**

Helfrich's wisdom is a reminder to focus not only on controlling my reactivity but also to do as he teaches, acknowledge others are not perfect and learn that we all have difficult emotional moments. I want people to give me a break for my interpersonal disruptions. It makes sense that I also focus on my reactivity and be open to the possibility that others have challenging moments which do not define them or their potential. I know this to be true because I live it, and I know I am capable and skilled. I accept my life challenge is always to manage my unpleasant emotions constructively.

*I accept my life challenge is always to manage my unpleasant emotions constructively.*

**ONE PLACE TO START TO IMPROVE INTERPERSONAL DISRUPTION**

One path for decreasing your emotional interpersonal disruptions is to tame interpersonal disruption. I found this my most significant piece of work in 2021. After being on this planet for more than 50 years, I know I am good enough as I am. It doesn't matter what anyone else

thinks. Internal peace comes when we care more about our value and worth than anyone else. Society, social media, and competition to attend a particular university have resulted in my view of the culture of fear of not being good enough, preventing too many from enjoying life's journey. We each have 1,440 minutes each day, and we never get them back. It's amazing when we learn how to enjoy ourselves today. I became more skilled at enjoying each

day by facing the interpersonal disruption that I figure will be like my physical fitness — something I need to do daily to be healthy.

• **Emotional intrapersonal wakes disruptions** originate from a perceived failure, setback, or fear from a

lived experience or automatic thoughts. How intrapersonal wakes occur:

- ◇ Much like interpersonal wakes, they occur because of a skills gap. In this case, the inability to engage in rational, fact-based thinking drives adaptive coping that gets facts but doesn't react. The goal is to look for a solution based on facts, not emotion, and if unsure what to do, engage in help-seeking behaviours.
- ◇ Because of this skills gap, the



person is left with learned maladaptive coping (reacting to stress to stop it and feel better). This can result in self-soothing behaviours like engaging in food, alcohol, or anger to push people away to avoid the situation, followed by passive-aggressive protest behaviours (e.g., making a person wait by not returning a text).

- ◇ Intrapersonal disruptions often happen because of faulty unconscious belief systems filled with limited thoughts (e.g., I'm not worthy, I'm not good enough, I'm not loveable). When these are activated and generate unpleasant emotions, there is a risk of engaging in maladaptive, feel-good behaviours (e.g., eating for pleasure when not hungry) to escape unpleasant emotions instead of dealing with them.

## **WHERE TO START TO TAME INTRAPERSONAL DISRUPTIONS**

- **Self-awareness** — Regardless of our past and situation, feeling better requires a decision to move towards it. I said I was not going to figure this out myself. If I were, I would have done it many years ago. So, it was time to engage a professional and plan. I needed support to plan and normalize my situation, as I knew my ego was stopping me (what would others think if I needed help?). I was at the point I didn't care; all I cared about was I wanted

to feel better, learn how to regulate my emotions better, and not live in a constant state of reactivity when I felt threatened. Whether you need a professional is your choice, but the first step is to own what you can and learn how to manage your behaviours, thoughts, and emotions.

- **Build and work your mental fitness plan one day at a time, accepting there is no end line** — I created a plan that took me several months to notice any changes. Sometimes we need to go backwards to go forward. I was focused on resolving some past issues and practicing how to support my brain by feeding it a new diet of thoughts. I focused on my physical health during this process, resulting in lifestyle changes and losing 37 pounds. My best buddy Link and I have carved out new habits and morning rituals to support mental fitness. Once I built up my resiliency, I set personal and professional boundaries. I'm not sure why it took me 50 years, but I have gone on medication for my ADHD. I admit that one was a game-changer for my executive functioning and ability to process information. If you think you have ADHD, get tested by a professional who specializes in this and if you are, work with your MD to explore medication. I believe it's akin to insulin. My body doesn't allow

enough dopamine to lie around between neurons for executive brain functioning.

My mental fitness journey motivated me to create the Howatt HR Mental Fitness Journey, a product we are piloting and developing. I am convinced that the future of workplace mental health to

prevent workers' mental harm and promote mental health will happen only when employers and employees work together to facilitate personalized mental fitness. No two employees need the same plan. The environment, supports, and experiences are critical for promoting employee fitness.

# Neurodiversity: The next workplace inclusion priority

I share some of my learnings through my memo series as I move through my mental fitness journey. My mental health success is impacted by biology, my sense of belonging, living my values, and moving toward my purpose.

When working with a group, some struggle to feel a sense of belonging and often feel misunderstood or rejected because of how they process and filter the world. Being different can create friction and challenges.

Similarity bias is the preference or tendency to appreciate people who believe and act the same. For some, fitting into a group may feel impossible because they don't think or behave like other team members. The challenge for a worker in this situation is understanding why. The opportunity to gain support for the team has little chance of happening unless the team understands and is open.

As the concept of psychological safety and inclusion grows in the future of work, neurodiverse workers are becoming more focused on who needs support to thrive. Over the last year or so, I have noticed a growing movement

around neurodiversity aligned with inclusion.

Judy [Singer](#), who lived with autism, coined the term neurodiversity in the late 1990s, to describe the natural difference between people. This concept implies that some people have certain developmental disorders in the brain that can bring challenges and strengths. A [neurodiverse](#) worker typically has different interests and motivations and often is better at some things than non-neurodiverse workers.

Common causes of neurodevelopment conditions include physical trauma, nutritional factors, immune disorder, infectious disease, trauma at birth, and genetics. It is [estimated](#) that between 30% and 40% of the population is neurodiverse.

[Neurodivergents](#) tend to be high-energy, out-of-the-box thinkers. They do well helping others solve crises and are outstanding problem-solvers. However, they often struggle to navigate workplace cultures and politics and fit in with teams. When not understood, they can appear disruptive and challenging to deal with. Their [thought](#) pro-

cess and delivery being different than what non-neurodivergents are used to can create interpersonal challenges.

I live with ADHD and dyslexia. I often tell people that dyslexia has led to the shame of not feeling good because I could not read and write like others around me. However, I figured out how to get by with mentors and support. ADHD, on the other hand, has been my biggest challenge and strength. I am creative, passionate, and think out of the box. I recently had a lovely note from a CEO I worked with in the New York financial district saying my success was due to looking at things much differently than others. On the other side of the

coin, I can be unorganized, change my mind quickly, and act impulsively under stress, which can be perceived as a challenge.

I'm learning that I am accountable for my behaviour and discovering the benefits of surrounding myself with people who care about me and understand that I process the world differently than they do. I can do many things others can't, and others can do things I can't. Neurodivergents can thrive by playing to their strengths and support-

ing each other. I think and process the world differently than others, and that's OK.

Neurodiverse people often spend large amounts of energy and time trying to fit in in the workplace and social norms of the culture and team. Teams often perceive how they prefer things to be, and a worker who doesn't fit in might risk being rejected.

Attempting to conform can put neurodiverse workers at increased risk of experiencing mental health concerns like anxiety and depression. From an inclusive perspective, expecting a person whose brain works differently to think and behave like so-called normal workers is unfair.

Without education and conversation, there's little chance of knocking down bias and stigma walls. A movement is afoot to create more informed and inclusive workplaces to remove stigma and support neurodiverse workers to feel safe, welcome, included, and positioned to demonstrate their strengths. Focusing more attention on neurodiverse workers' strengths than weaknesses sets the stage for them to thrive and feel a sense of belonging. Many workers with neurodivergent

*Too often, the neurodivergent are noted as under-performing. Feedback is often focused on what the individual needs to do in order to improve, instead of looking at environmental factors which could be limiting their ability to be successful.*

*— Helen Needham, Me. Decoded*

conditions [thrive](#) with repetition, predictability, and clear boundaries to feel safe and in control. Leaders and workers must be [coached](#) on the value and benefits of practicing tolerance, patience, and support to create an inclusive workplace for neurodiverse employees. Leveraging their strengths can positively influence an organization's success.

### **TIPS FOR SUPPORTING NEURODIVERGENT WORKERS**

- Create a psychologically safe workplace where they feel comfortable sharing and disclosing their needs. Provide a structure to share ideas and ensure predictable expectations around meeting agendas and timelines.
- Provide support and coaching to help them discover how to share and express their needs. When they feel overstimulated or overwhelmed, let them know how to ask for space, quiet, and time to process and think before they must respond.
- Help them discover and focus on their strengths.
- Train workers who are non-neurodiverse on what to expect and how they can support their neurodiverse peers. Some neurodiverse employees may struggle to read others' emotions, suggesting they don't care about others, which is seldom the case.
- Educate the [workforce](#) when communicating with neurodivergent workers to have empathy for typos and spelling mistakes.
- Share information that matters in meetings rather than emails.
- Incorporate neurodiversity into your inclusion training.
- When onboarding, encourage neurodivergent workers to disclose their condition and what works for them and be open to creating accommodations to help them succeed.
- Keep in mind that no two neurodivergent workers' needs are the same. Do not assume. Design a plan that meets their needs and helps them excel within their work culture.

## Exploring the road to emotional maturity

I recently finished reading *How to Do the Work: Recognize Your Patterns, Heal from Your Past, and Create Your Self* by Dr. Nicole Lepera. I enjoyed the read and recommend this book highly for those interested in learning how the body-mind-emotions work together. I now follow her on Instagram with millions of others.

This memo is my reflection on one chapter that hit a core and created a moment of pause for me.

My mission in life is to become what I teach. I am grateful that I have learned that living life is not about happiness but about being aligned to core values. I am focusing more energy on surrounding myself with authentic connections and avoiding unhealthy ones in my personal and professional lives.

I am putting energy into relationships with people who trust and accept me and my imperfections, demonstrate they care about my best interests, and challenge me to become the best version of myself. Of course, I will do the same for them, creating a win-win. Moving away from negative drains and manipulation sounds logical but re-

quires emotional maturity. Failure to do this is why many are stuck in terrible relationships that add little value.

When faced with unpleasant emotions, we all make life decisions because of our core values and emotional maturity. Nowhere does it say life is supposed to be easy; it can be hard. I am working daily to stop reacting to negative emotions on my journey to discovering and improving my emotional maturity. This is an essential first step to being aware of reactivity and accepting that our emotions do not control us; they only inform us. We can learn to move from reaction to observing unpleasant emotions with support. Making important life decisions when upset often results in hurt feelings for self and others.

I related to Lepera's book because of how vulnerable the author was in sharing her imperfections and periods of her life when caught in deregulation. This term refers to when your physiology, feeling, and thinking have been "neuro hijacked," as Daniel Goleman would describe. Remaining in fight or flight due to stressors and fear results in

a reaction Lepera refers to as “survival mode.”

I found it interesting that we both are helping professionals who are much better at helping others than we are. Over the past two years, I learned how Dr. Bill and Bill were living two different personas. With a lot of support, therapy, and practice, I discovered the path to align them.

That has been amazing, as I am living more for today and for me. Not perfect and a work in progress, but at least I am aware of the emotional maturity journey. Investing in my happiness and peace of mind is OK, not what others think or expect.

The first step was setting boundaries to what I will and will not tolerate for myself and others. It has been a challenge to set clearer boundaries regarding the people I allow around me. Until we discover we are worthy and good enough as we are, we risk wanting to be liked by others, hoping that somehow will help us like ourselves.

In *The Cure for Loneliness*, I discuss the value of discovering how to love ourselves first. I believe this big social gap in our society is perhaps why so many struggle and end up being around people who do not value them, only

what they can do for them.

The world has many takers-in who prey on insecurities to get access to money and ahead in life or claim to care but have another agenda that does not include another person's emotional well-being. These are not necessarily bad people. Many come from trauma,

are discouraged, and often struggle with their emotional maturity, which has them living in survival mode. That means another's well-being is not a consideration, only their own.

I recently was counseling an emotionally immature person in a relationship with another emotionally immature person who felt guilty about the finances they took from the relationship. I asked, “If the shoe were on the other foot, what would you want to believe this person ever valued, you or the relationship?” They said, “To

acknowledge what they took and keep is not practical based on the relationship maturity, and to offer to pay back the money.” I said, “Interesting. From my experience, giving money to others and feeling used is painful. But ultimately, it is a cancelled cheque. What I appreciate about your response is it sounds like it is more than money. It is about feeling the relationship was never valued.”

*The first step was setting boundaries to what I will and will not tolerate for myself and others.*

Most of us have experienced low moments when we felt used or taken advantage of. This is where emotional maturity and its opposite, emotional immaturity, are critical factors in our lives. After 25-plus years of clinical and personal experience, I am convinced that many adults, including myself, often make decisions that we regret or act in stressful moments because of emotional immaturity. We cannot control what others do, and thinking about it does not change it. Ultimately, it is not the stressful event that defines us; it is how we respond.

Emotional immaturity is when we struggle to cope and tolerate emotions like anger, resulting in protest behaviours from acting out to shutting down. The pain of dealing with unpleasant emotions and the inability to regulate emotions result in behaviours that push people away or avoid them.

In this emotionally immature state, it is common not to acknowledge or even consider the other person's experience or reality and focus internally. The lack of skills to tolerate emotions drives emotional immaturity. Lepera provided an excellent reminder that emotions are

nothing but neurochemicals that do not directly control our thoughts or behaviours but can manipulate them.

Lepera reminded the value of the "90-second rule" for emotions. This rule implies that all unpleasant emotions run on their own for about 60-90 seconds and turn off as the body wants to reset

to its homeostatic balance. The spin is created when an unpleasant emotion triggers thoughts that loop in the mind, keeping the emotion activated. One significant emotional event (e.g., traumatic breakup) can last for days, weeks, or years because we replay it. The brain does not know the difference between a live event and a replay. Both activate emotions that

impact our mood and emotional state. Many do not realize we create our reality because of ineffective thinking habits that bring unpleasant emotions and often maladaptive coping (e.g., eating when not hungry to feel better).

Maladaptive coping can become problematic and result in addictive behaviours. Emotional maturity benefits from adaptive coping and soothing behaviours that support mental health and avoid at-risk behaviours (e.g., drinking alcohol when feeling stressed to feel

*Emotional immaturity is when we struggle to cope and tolerate emotions like anger, resulting in protest behaviours from acting out to shutting down.*



better). At-risk behaviours are selected to move away from unpleasant emotions by numbing them instead of understanding they have a purpose and signal external risk. Their benefit is muted when we trigger them from our thoughts.

As I learn more about my neurodivergence and trauma, I understand why and how my go-to soothing behaviour was to get lost in work, writing, and education. If I was super busy, focusing on the outside, I never had to concentrate or deal with my inside parts that were not secure.

It is clear how my unconscious and conscious emotional immaturity negatively affected my career and personal life. I could not tolerate the stress and made decisions that amplified situations in those moments.

One motivation for my newest book [\*No Regrets\*](#) came from discovering what it takes to improve emotional well-being. Regret is a powerful, unpleasant emotion that can trigger an opportunity to learn from mistakes, dust off, and find the courage to move forward. Lepera clarifies that emotional maturity has no goal line, and we have moments we cannot tolerate because we are human.

We can learn how to regulate our emotions and improve our mental fitness, but we can be overwhelmed and slip emotionally even with the best training and preparation. My daily mental fitness practice allows me to create habits such as [deep breathing](#) to calm my body and mind. These habits prepare my capacity to tolerate stress by building and maintaining [social connections](#).

## Trauma-informed workplaces

**T**HIS may be my most awakening memo that has helped me understand the emotional floundering I experienced in the past year. I am grateful that I am comfortable being vulnerable, as I know I am good enough. What motivates me to share is I know how blessed I am with my financial resources, support systems, and family. But with all my supports, I have struggled, and I know many less fortunate are struggling more. My mission is to become what I teach. Becoming a resilient and emotionally healthy person is a lifelong journey with no goal line. Getting context and putting things into perspective can help this journey along.

For those reading this as a first memo, I started the Dr. Bill Memos to share my mental fitness journey. A significant emotional event in February 2021 rocked my emotional foundation. It opened the door for me to gain insights into how I am wired, how I react, and how I deal with the world.

The February trauma got me into therapy. Once I was stabilized, I discovered it was not the event that was my problem; it was how I had been living

my life based on early trauma. I discovered this event during COVID-19, when living alone in a new city opened a flood of early childhood events. As the founder of Gestalt Therapy, Fitz Peals, taught, one troublesome event can trigger a string of pearls. The event opened the door to traumatic events from my childhood that shaped how I cope and self-protect. My childhood traumatic events range from failing grade two to adoption and emotional neglect that I had buried. Against this background is the trauma of being dyslexic. Every time I write an email, I am reminded that I am not good at writing.

Over the years, my trauma programmed me unconsciously that I was not good enough. I needed to become better so I could be accepted. Trauma is why I am an introvert, why I do not let people close to me so they cannot hurt me, and why I have become a people-pleaser who struggles to say no in my personal life. My professional life had lots of fights and pushback — perhaps too much — out of fear of being taken advantage of. The event that happened to me a year ago February resulted in

self-loathing for trusting and allowing someone close to me. The good news is that this event was not the real issue; it was how I was naming and processing it.

My trauma resulted in a world of trying to prove I am good enough. Why does a person get eight degrees, and write hundreds of articles and over 50 books? It comes from a part of me doing all it could to prove I am good enough. Trauma shaped my life and who I am. I have developed coping skills that may not be ideal. I hope this memo can help others recognize that many workers experience trauma, stuffing it and overcompensating to escape the shame of not being good enough. We can't demonstrate empathy to others and ourselves when caught in shame. I now understand why I often never felt anything in a conflict. I was experiencing shame because I believed I should have anticipated the problem.

I am awake at the wheel now and know what has been and is going on. My work is not done and there is no cure for my trauma. There is the task of developing new skills, moving towards the person I want to be, and discovering there will be stress, and I will make mistakes. Regrets are opportunities to

move forward. They do not have to be anchors holding us in a state of not being worthy or good enough. Writing my Dr. Bill Memos has helped me accept that I cannot change what happened. I can only deal with the present, as this is where I live and learn.

### TRAUMA-INFORMED WORKPLACES

*We can't demonstrate empathy to others and ourselves when caught in shame.*

Trauma is a personal experience that creates mental harm. Thirty-plus years of clinical experience supporting critical events from robberies to deaths, treating individuals with PTSD, and researching occupational stress injuries,

knowledge does not make me immune from my trauma.

The necessity to create trauma-informed workplaces is gaining attention in psychological health and safety. COVID created an opportunity for more conversations on workplace mental health. Workplace trauma comes in many forms: racism, micro-aggressions, domestic violence, bullying, and harassment.

A trauma-informed workplace establishes a strategy, programs, and policies and prepares leaders to be psychologically safe to protect workers from mental harm and promote mental health. CEOs and leadership understand that employees' experiences can wear them

down. This knowledge underlines the importance of looking for red flags like anxiety, fear, anger, worry, irritability, inconsistent cognitive reactions like memory gaps, and forgetfulness. Behaviours like restlessness, uncooperativeness, self-isolating, and uncooperativeness must also be monitored.

Employers must understand that trauma can be caused by work and experience with other workers, leaders, and customers. It can also happen outside work. A new World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) study found that 70 percent of people across 24 countries have experienced trauma, with an average of 3.2 traumatic events throughout a lifetime. A trauma-informed workplace understands that at [least 6%](#) of the workforce is at risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to personal or work-related trauma at some point in their lives. This risk has grown. [A US report](#) indicated the risk of post-traumatic stress (PTS) is 83 percent higher than pre-pandemic levels.

I believe I was looked at as a jerk or uncaring. I learned I had been caught in a traumatic response from age three. I did not know what was going on and why I could show up differently in my

professional life than in my personal life. In the last 12 months or so, I learned that it is not about finding a cure to trauma; it is about learning to manage symptoms.

### EMPLOYERS CAN SUPPORT WORKERS AND MITIGATE TRAUMA:

- **Get the correct data.** Understand what psychosocial factors (e.g., harassment) negatively impact the workforce and what psychosocial hazards (e.g., fear and stress) are draining workers' mental health. This knowledge provides insights into workforce trauma risk. The [Mental Fitness Index \(MFI\)](#) can get employers this important data.
- **CEO, board, and senior leadership should make psychological safety a priority.** Employers are learning to focus on creating psychologically safe workplaces to protect workers, which requires ongoing support and follow-through. See [A CEO's Playbook for Workplace Psychological Safety](#).
- **Commit to a psychologically safe workplace.** Organizations should plan to create psychologically safe workplaces (i.e., adopt or adapt the CSA Z1003 National Standard on Psychological Health and Safety).

*Employers must understand that trauma can be caused by work and experience with other workers, leaders, and customers.*

- **Plan for trauma response.** Include a plan in the mental health strategy to support trauma (e.g., resources and programs).
- **Understand the traumatic risk of operations management.** Leadership must understand and accept that how work is organized, red tape, policies, and targets can create stress and trauma.
- **Train leaders in trauma-informed workplace basics.** Provide leaders with an understanding of basic physiology like the fight or flight system and identifying emotionally-overwhelmed workers. Include racism, micro-aggressions, trauma basics, and supporting workers at risk.

## Benefits of moving towards living a positive life

**W**HAT does living a good life mean to you? This is a question Martin Seligman asked in his newest book, *Flourishing*. My response is learning to focus on what I can control and stop worrying about things I can't control. I have been challenging myself for the past year to focus more on moving toward what I value and gives me a sense of belonging and reward. I have spent too much of my life trying to prove to others I am good enough.

I am now focused on learning how to live a good life. It's a lot easier living a good life than thinking about it. However, we need to become aware of the options and obtain the knowledge and skills for self-discipline. Think about anyone skilled at anything, from Michael Jordan to Bill Gates. They became brilliant at what they do because they put in the work and practiced. Learning to live a good life requires practice; there are no shortcuts. Quick fixes often lead down dark holes with addictive disorders and a life of regret.

Because of Seligman's initiatives and insights, we now have the field of positive psychology. In this must-listen-to-book, he shares how modern-day psy-

chology and psychiatric treatment are effective only 65% of the time, and there is no cure for mental illness, only relief from symptoms. Seligman believes humans find more peace and fulfillment by learning how to live a positive life by discovering what actions within their control they can take daily.

When I started my 30-year mental health professional career, I focused on moving patients away from the pain of anxiety, depression, trauma, and all forms of addictive disorders. I learned that some people needed to develop knowledge and skills to create more pleasant emotions by going back to school, volunteering, and engaging in passions. This is why I am so invested in promoting mental fitness today. Like positive psychology, mental fitness is about learning how to live a good life and accepting that we can live well, even in the hard times.

Seligman's [PERMA™](#) theory of well-being suggests five factors that drive flourishing:

- *Positive Emotions* — These can be created by practicing gratitude, savouring positive memories, and fo-

cusing on hope and optimism about what could happen in the future. Traditional micro-skills like journaling, acts of kindness, meditation, and mindfulness create pleasant emotions. So can going to a movie or taking a walk in the forest. The point is learning how to do things on demand that create positive feelings.

- *Engagement* — Engaging and getting lost in a passion or task allows you to leverage your strengths, often resulting in getting lost in the mental state of flow. These on-demand prosocial behaviours like writing and playing music bring good feelings.
- *Relationships* — Positive relationships that bring a sense of belonging are sources of kindness, empathy, and teamwork. Humans need authentic social connections. I was reminded of this recently by listening to [The Cure for Loneliness](#) audiobook. Listening to one of my books provides a feeling of accomplishment for this person with dyslexia.
- *Meaning* — contributing to something bigger than the self that provides purpose. Workplace mental health is a major challenge, considering the leading cause of premature death is depression. My work gives me great meaning as I want to

help more people like me with a mental illness or who are stressed and worried about life to learn how to live a good life.

- *Accomplishment* — comes from a sense of mastery, success, or domain knowledge. The joy is the pursuit more than the feelings; accomplishments can come through dealing with setbacks but feed purpose and a sense of worth. For me, it is not the number of books or degrees. It is when I hear from a client that what I am doing matters and is making a difference. My number one validation is that my work matters to others.

This model has been researched and found to be an evidence-based way to live a good life. The higher a person scores in each of the five factors, the more likely they will flourish and live a good life.

What is critically important to grasp about this model is it is not about fixing. It is about learning and growing by creating habits through self-discipline and grit that can result in learning how to spend more time living in positive emotions.

It's also about accepting that when stress and unpleasant emotions happen, the path to feeling better is through engaging in positive habits that create pleasant emotions rather than trying to get rid of the stress.

## MY JOURNEY LEVERAGING POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

A key step in my mental fitness journey is developing a daily routine of habits that promote well-being. Let me share my 10 habits that create calm or pleasant emotions on demand. Notice how each is aligned with the PERMA model. I did not do this

consciously. Now that I am more familiar with the PERMA model, it seems to have happened through trial and error. I have been looking at leveraging this research in my mental fitness work. Mental fitness plans lend themselves to focusing on positive emotions.

However, we also must ensure we are aware that living a good life is holistic and ingrains all we do daily with intention.

## HABITS THAT CREATE POSITIVE EMOTIONS

- Morning routine (**P**) — Get up, get my water and lemon, and black coffee, sit on my couch with my bulldog Link and spend a minimum of 10 minutes with my daily journal, reflecting on what kind of day I want. I make a practice of providing some positive self-affirmations and reflecting on what I am grateful for.

*A key step in my mental fitness journey is developing a daily routine of habits that promote well-being.*

- Nutrition (**P**) — I make a point to eat healthy at least 90% of the time. I feel well when I eat well. I am not perfect, but I have learned that a salad and protein are more enjoyable than a pizza.
- Ball time with Link (**R**) — We play ball for 20 minutes. This is an exciting time for Link. We take two balls. I throw one, and he sprints to get it. He brings it back, and when he sees I am about to throw the next one, he drops ball one to go after ball two. This playtime always brings joy to both of us.
  - Walk (**P**) — Every day the weather is OK, I enjoy taking a walk for 30-50 minutes, depending on the temperature. I often listen to an audiobook like *Flourishing* to fill my mind with new information and topics I find interesting.
- Social connections reach-out (**P**) — Every day, I reach out to at least two social connections and send a note via text or make a random call.
- Exercise (**P**) — I have a session with a personal trainer three times a week. On off days, I do some form of exercise, often low impact, like plank or Stairmaster.
- Sleep (**P**) — I make sleep a priority



and go to bed most nights by 10:00 PM. I sleep until at least 6:00 AM, making sleep important.

- **Prayer (M)** — I pray every day. I am not overly religious and do not attend church regularly. I have discovered internal peace by praying for forgiveness and guidance.
- **Passion (E)** — I am fortunate that I find my work a passion, giving me a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment. My mission is to become what I teach, and I have much work ahead and growth to do so. However, I love the process of learning and writing. Every day, I do something, from writing a blog or article, researching, thinking about a concept, reading, or delivering a service. All these help me become a student of workplace mental health. I want to help more workers discover and learn how to flourish or find

more positive emotions.

- **Daily reflection (A)** — I take a moment at the end of each day to reflect on what moved me one step closer to what I teach. I hope my work will help people discover how to live with more positive emotions.
- **Volunteer (M)** — I give time to CSA to support standards and do pro bono research on workplace mental health. I present free community talks on mental fitness and volunteer with boards focused on mental health.

The more I discover about mental fitness, the more I conclude that it is easier doing mental fitness and getting lost in the actions than thinking. I encourage employers, leaders, and workers to develop mental fitness plans that create positive emotions and help them live lives that give them purpose, meaning, and a sense of belonging.

## Benefits of focusing on habits versus goals

**M**Y mental health and spirits continue to improve as I persist with my daily mental health journey. This month I share an observation about adherence to habits I made recently.

Adherence can be [defined](#) as “the extent to which a person’s behaviour corresponds with the agreed recommendations of a health care provider.” In the case of mental fitness daily habits, the purpose is to promote and protect emotional well-being. Adherence in this case can be measured by the degree one engages in their daily mental fitness plan habits selected to generate positive emotions, regulate life stressors, and promote emotional well-being.

A neat experience in the past few weeks sparked this memo. Because I have been feeling much better, I had become lax about daily mental fitness plan habits without realizing it. I had to have this experience to notice why. I slipped because I was feeling better, and my unconscious mind saw an opening to relax.

Somehow, my unconscious mind convinced me not to worry about some daily habits and relax the daily disci-

pline because I was feeling better. This is a mental relapse. When we stop thinking about the why and purpose of daily health habits, we are at more risk of thinking about engaging in old habits that did not serve us well.

As a bartender’s son, I have been around drinking my entire life. I enjoy a few beers with friends and going out to eat and enjoying a glass of wine. With summer and an expanded social circle, I have focused more on having fun. The change I began to rationalize was it was OK to break my rule of allowing myself to have only a couple of drinks on Friday night. After a week of visiting, I realized I did not follow any of my daily routines and was not feeling energetic when I returned home. I did not beat myself up; I just sat with my truth about what I wanted. I want long-term health, and I do not need to have a few drinks several days a week.

With a background in addictive disorder treatment and supporting many people through lapses and relapses, I know how quickly a healthy period can be eliminated by being overconfident or rationalizing that things are different

now. This mindset can create an opportunity for old habits that are remembered as feeling good to take hold. The risk of behaviour habits slips or relapses often happens when we stop thinking and doing the things that got us well. This experience reminded me of the importance of making behavioural changes and creating new habits. Focusing on a habit as a lifestyle choice with no goal line versus a goal is beneficial.

*Adherence is the holy grail of mental fitness plans to create emotional well-being.*

### **HABITS MATTER MORE THAN GOALS**

Through my daily mental fitness habits, I spend much more time flourishing than languishing. That is not remotely close to where I was 15 months ago. I have noticed without shame that I was not focusing on my daily habits, perhaps because my unconscious mind feels I achieved my goal of feeling better. Goals have unconscious criteria that set a target that can create the faulty assumption of completion. For example, think about how many people you know wanted to lose 20 pounds and once they did, put on 25 pounds a year later. How did that happen? It happened because the focus was not on creating life habits but on achieving a goal.

Adherence is the holy grail of mental fitness plans to create emotional well-being. My experience reminded me of the power of creating habits, and an im-

portant piece of research by [Lally](#), who found it takes an average of about 66 days to create a new habit and, for the majority of people, anywhere from 18 to 254 days. Being focused and committed to a 12-week program can have a profound, positive impact on creating positive, lasting change that supports mental health and emotional well-being.

### **TIPS FOR STICKING WITH HABITS**

Creating healthy habits is not easy. But it is possible when a conscious framework and strategy train the brain to do something that may not be natural or easy with as little emotional pain as possible.

- **Start.** Creating a new health habit requires doing something versus thinking about it. The key to behavioural change is picking something simple and starting. A positive outcome requires repeating small micro-decisions over and over. Improving your nutrition is not about choosing one healthy meal choice. It is about understanding it is about doing this 100 times, so it becomes a habit. Focus on starting a habit and accepting there are no magic shortcuts. Change is a process. It can feel challenging, but it is always possible when done with intention and a plan.

- **Pick something you want and could enjoy.** Whatever new health habit you have decided to start, be clear on why you picked it. Believe you could soon learn to enjoy doing it. For a new habit to have a chance to stick, you must understand its health benefit. The challenge with any habit is it can be either a good or bad one. Mental fitness' purpose is picking healthy habits that charge your emotional battery and protect your mental health. Some actions promote physical health, meaning, purpose, and positive emotions and social connections. Creating positive feedback and experiences can help anchor daily practices until the new behaviours become automatic. There is no goal line and no ending with habits. Living a healthy and fulfilling life requires healthy daily choices and building up resiliency for the hard times so you can live a good life when not feeling well.
- **One new habit at a time.** When I teach mental fitness, I encourage doing one thing at a time until you have a routine, and do not break this rule. There is no rush. I coach all my clients that change is a process, and I rather they master one habit at a time so that it sticks. For many clients, their first three months can be as simple as focusing on learning how to get a good night's sleep consistently. This may result in changing habits like reducing caffeine and sugar.
- **Begin with small chunks of time.** When creating a new habit, begin with a 10-minute expectation. I often coach clients when starting a mental fitness journey to plan to spend 10 minutes a day for 10 days. New habits must fit into daily routines and cannot feel overwhelming if life is already busy. Start small to create space and intentions in engaging in the new habit to create more positive emotions. Spending a few minutes a day working on a gratitude journal is a micro-skill that can have a big impact over a few weeks.
- **Notice your thoughts.** What you tell your unconscious mind it will believe to be true. If you say what you are doing is painful, you tell your unconscious mind this habit is painful and not worth the effort. Negative thoughts result in negative feedback that diminishes the habit's perceived value, putting adherence at risk. That can open the door to considering replacing the new habit with an old feel-good behaviour with less value for long-term emotional well-being.
- **Do not break the three-day rule.** A new habit can take time to build and minutes to three days to break. When learning a new habit, be ac-

countable to the three-day rule. This rule can help create tension to forgive slips, reset, and get back on course. Slips happen. They do not mean failure; they are often just distractions. Lock in life happenings, and no big deal if you miss a day or two. But promise that you will get back on track within three days so you do not lose focus.

- **Create an accountability plan.** We all have periods when we feel drained and down, putting us in a mental state where we are more interested in engaging in old feel-good behaviours. An accountable plan (e.g., accountability partner) can help fire the courage and energy to push through the hard times by reminding you of your mental

fitness plan's why. [Research](#) evidence suggests that accountability can help with adherence.

- **Rewards.** Some evidence suggests that rewards can assist with adherence as they provide an incentive. However, when [rewards](#) are focused on the goal versus the habits, the opportunity for adherence appears to be diminished. For example, allowing yourself a special meal once a week for completing a mental fitness plan may not support behavioural change if the motivation is going through the motions versus experiencing it. Developing new habits requires discovering the internal health benefits and rewards of living a good life.

## Regret is not necessarily all bad; it's often an opportunity

**W**HAT is one thing you wish you could have done differently?

We all have one of those things in our lives. One emotion often attached to this kind of memory is regret. There are two types of regret: 1) making a mistake and 2) not trying something we value (e.g., going to college). In essence, regret comes down to something we wish we did differently or tried to do.

Many spend energy trying to avoid unpleasant emotions. I recently finished a book called *No Regrets* that will be released globally in October. In it, I write that it's impossible to live without regret, but it is possible to learn how to move past regret. Regret is a powerful, transformational emotion that can help us learn from our mistakes.

Regret is a natural consequence of being human. It's not good or bad; it just is. Most of us do not wake up each morning intending to make mistakes that drive unpleasant emotional pain. We try our best to enjoy life the best we can. Regardless of how much we try, we cannot control others' actions, only our own.

I recently watched Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson share a story on TikTok. He talked about not making the NFL, after his short career in the CFL. He was cut after his first game. He told how painful this experience was as he had focused for years on becoming a professional football player.

I could relate to his story. I failed grade two.

The Rock is where he is today because he decided to have no regrets and become a better version of himself. He learned how to move past unpleasant emotions to believe he was good enough to become something worthy, which helped him live a good life.

Context can be helpful for relating to The Rock's story. How many have gone through a painful breakup? A relationship may have ended because one person was perceived to have done something wrong. The person who made the mistake might have felt a sense of regret if they valued the relationship. Mistakes can fall on a continuum from small to big. Regardless of the degree, the mistake triggered the breakup. The intensity and duration of

regret are often associated with the value of the loss.

The Rock's story is relevant for any regret. For The Rock, getting cut from the NFL and losing his dream was, in his own words, "The best dream to have never come true." He had a choice to continue feeling sorry for himself or replay and think about all the things he could have done differently or perhaps better. He chose a different path. His key learning for all to consider is life happens and in painful moments, think about the possibility that losing something important can create space for something better.

Regret becomes a transformation when we take the learning, accept our part, grow, and improve from our mistakes.

In *No Regrets*, I teach what regret is and provide options to learn to cope with this unpleasant emotion. All unpleasant emotions, whether regret, shame, or guilt, serve a purpose. They are a part of our DNA makeup and influence behaviour. Though not necessarily bad, they are part of being human.

The gap many have is never being taught how to manage unpleasant emotions and accept that they only provide information; they do not tell us what to do or think. Regret can hold us in the

past or create the energy and motivation to become a better version of ourselves.

One part of my mental fitness journey was writing this book to help me move past a loss I deeply regretted for many months. I am now starting to discover how to set better personal boundaries and make decisions that enable me to focus more on my emotional well-being. I have found that regret or another unpleasant emotion is not the problem; they come and go like pleasant emotions. What I can control and do ultimately define my mental health. So yes, I want to live without regrets, but I am fully aware that regret will happen.

The Rock was able to take his failure and any feeling of loss and regret to believe he could learn how to reinvent himself and learn from this life setback. Through his drive and incredible work ethic, he developed from being a football player to a WWE superstar, which put him on the road to becoming a business leader and movie star.

For Bill, I am learning from focusing on my mental fitness that life is not about perfection. It is about learning how to live better with unpleasant emotions. Because there is no escaping them, they will always come, and I have a choice regarding how I react to them.

*What I can control and do ultimately define my mental health.*

## Change lasts when we have clarity

**W**HAT I find fantastic as I discover more about my mental health is the power of clarity. When we decide to make a change, we benefit from ensuring we're clear on the desired outcome and testing how it will help us live the life we want.

Many set goals for personal change, such as losing weight, engaging in some activity, or volunteering without pausing and wondering about the purpose and value of making a change to help live the life we want.

I concluded that living a good life to its full potential requires defining what a good life looks like. Mental health is a major want for me, having been riddled with anxiety and worry about being good enough for most of my life.

A day without my mind running and racing and fear driving my behaviour is a golden day. I'm having many more of these days since I began focusing on and practicing mental fitness.

But to be clear, I still have bad days. I'm learning more and more about the value of living well even when feeling unwell. I'm also learning the power of

cleaning my closet of regrets and worry. All I can control is what I choose to do next. I can't change the past. I can only live for today, and what I do today helps create a better tomorrow.

When you create a mental fitness plan, there are many opportunities to make changes.

This memo aims to help you learn from my mistake. During the last year, I set mental fitness goals without thinking about their value and why I was pursuing them.

For example, I enjoy journaling first thing in the morning. Because COVID seems no longer an excuse for not doing anything, I was super busy traveling this summer. I like my routine and space in my condo to journal with my dog Link. I slipped doing my daily journaling during August. I felt guilty, but the guilt didn't help me go back to journaling; it only made me feel bad.

What hit me is journaling is a scheduled task. It helps me create positive emotions and feel better. But I didn't take the time to name clearly how journaling helps me create the life I want. I



realized that my outcome of journaling is how it helps frame the kind of day I want. It's a platform to define what I want and am prepared to do first thing in the morning to help ensure I live the best day possible.

I noticed that when I didn't journal and reflect, I wasn't as organized, settled, or clear on what would happen each day. I was just reacting to the day.

The result was getting on a few mental treadmills of worry I perhaps didn't have to get on if I had taken time in the morning to think about what challenges I had coming in the day and my options for coping with them.

*Making any change requires intention and clarity on what you want to change, why, and how.*

Making any change requires intention and clarity on what you want to change, why, and how. I tell my clients that thinking about change is harder than doing something that supports mental fitness.

Mental fitness aims to create habits that promote mental health and create the desired emotions to live the life you want. To move forward, explore whether any of the following anchors may be holding you back from making changes to create better mental health.

**THREE REASONS MANY FIND IT HARD TO MAKE A BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE**

- **They live in a comfort zone and**

**resist change.** They don't like change and get stuck in their day-to-day routines. Even if they don't like the routines and they feel like they're living with a rock in their shoe, it's safer than trying to do something different.

- **They look for the path of least resistance.** They want change to be simple, immediate, and easy. There

are no shortcuts or magic bullets for creating good mental health. Creating a mental fitness plan requires learning and practicing habits with clarity of the benefits. My journaling slip helped me anchor why journaling is super helpful. It got me back

on track because I'm clear on its purpose and value for helping me live the best life possible.

- **They have developed learned helplessness.** They believe their life is what it is, and there's no way to change it. After 30-plus years of working with mental health clients, I know we can teach people how to move from learned helplessness to learned optimism that can positively impact their emotional well-being. It begins with accepting that there are no shortcuts and requires clarity and practice. For example, the daily practice of gratitude can

help people notice more of what's good in their life than constantly focusing on what's not working the way they want.

Once you're clear you want to change and know what anchors have been holding you back, the next step is to focus on who you want to become. This may seem a big question, but it doesn't need to be. Who do you want to become in your life? A loving partner? Self-acceptance of who you are?

Only you know what parts of your life may be in place and what parts are holding you back. My mental health has been a barrier to fulfilling my potential. Learning how to better deal with ADHD and anxiety has drastically improved my quality of life.

I have accepted there is no perfection and no end line to maintaining my quality of life. I'm now clear that my men-

tal fitness plan and practices are critical.

I want to continue to change and learn how to live my best life. To do that, I need to be clear each day on what I'm doing to promote my mental health, so it doesn't feel like work; it feels like an opportunity. Mental fitness is about accountability, learning, and living a life filled with more positive than negative emotions.

Everything in this memo depends on one simple concept: you must want to change and move toward the person you want to be. Only you can decide that, and if you don't know how to do it, engage in help-seeking behaviours and get support to get on the right track. Nothing will change in your long-term mental health outlook without a commitment and clarity on what you will do.

## Discovering your good

**O**NE challenge I've discovered with mental health during my mental fitness journey is being clear on your good. Your good refers to feeling comfortable doing what you need daily to live a good life. This includes emotions, thoughts, behaviours and, of course, meaningful, authentic relationships.

A good life seldom is defined by stuff. However, a good life needs to feel secure with the ability to live, meaning money plays a role. How much money is required is personal, but enough to be secure is essential, as it's difficult to live a good life worrying about food and shelter.

Ultimately, good mental health is learning to live well even when unwell. It's been beneficial to understand what good is for me. I moved through a process that took time to do this. It started with answering what does a good life mean to me?

If you haven't answered this question in writing, it can be a neat experience. For many years, I looked for validation from others about what good is. Through a lot of reflection, it often

comes down to feeling we're good enough for others. The challenge is my emotions were always at the whims of others.

I created boundaries and expectations about what I want and don't want by deciding what good means. Following are tag lines I use to help me live a good life. I'm sharing only a few to make the point that finding good can come from dealing with personal challenges and deciding what you will stop and start doing.

- **I want to be around people who take but also give.** These are words that work for me and make sense. One of my Achilles heels that held me back and I've been working on in my mental fitness plan is feeling used by others. I felt I was giving others what they wanted and when I took an honest look, it was often motivated by wanting to be accepted and prevent them from rejecting me. This flawed approach resulted in much stress and heartbreak because I felt I gave more than I got. This was my faulty perception, and perception is often wrong, accord-

ing to Daniel Kahneman. I accepted and learned that what I was doing was not the problem. It was my mindset. I decided that my good would require changing this mindset and behaviour. It resulted in some drastic actions to move away from people I felt were not adding value to my life. I'm talking about relationships I allowed in my inner circle, personally and professionally. My good is feeling the people around me give me as much as I give them. My key learning is that to be secure, I must trust my gut and surround myself with people who care about me and help me be my best self. A relationship is good when I feel safe saying what I think without fearing rejection.

- **Own my behaviour and leave it at that.** For years, I felt a need to be liked and concluded I will not be everyone's "jam," meaning not everyone will like or value me as much as I like them or want to be around them. My good has brought me to the point where I have accepted there are so many wonderful and cool people I haven't met, and there will be people for whom I am their jam. That's normal and OK. However, my good also means that to be

*My good is feeling the people around me give me as much as I give them.*

congruent with my values and speak my truth, it's prudent to own my behaviour even with people I'm not their jam, especially those I value. I read something that inspired me to lead and influenced me to go first. I was thinking about someone important in my life and felt there was some stuff I did not have a chance to say or didn't like how our last conversation went. Even though we don't talk, I felt it was of value to clear my mind and ensure I'm living my good. I wrote a note to let them know I appreciated them and took ownership of my behaviour. Why? My good is to accept that I'm not perfect and own it when I feel I'm wrong. This is even more important for those for whom I am their jam. I must own my behaviours and accept that I may create upset unintentionally. No need to defend it as much as to pause, try to understand and own it, apologize, and move forward.

I focused on my health, relationships, stuff, career, friends, learning, passions, pets, and community to find my good. By exploring each part, I defined my good and wrote it out. I found that exploring and defining my good helped me move towards more positive emotions. Good mental health is influenced

by how much time we spend in positive versus negative emotions. Perhaps my biggest takeaway from defining my good is that it's up to me to define it, and it's nothing more than what I define as my good. As I look forward, a part of my good is spending more time creating experiences that bring me joy. It's not stuff, as I think I have enough. I have no desire for some stuff others may want; my good is health, purpose, and peace of mind. I'm living my life to my good daily.

By now, I hope you have figured my good may be coded and hard for someone else to understand or relate to. But it does matter because it is my frame of reference for what good is for me. All I can tell you is that the more I define my good, the more I learn to live my best life.

If you haven't tried spending time and patiently framing what a good life means to you and what you need to stop and start to achieve it, I suggest you start.

## Our follow-through influences our credibility

**H**OW do you respond when someone doesn't follow through on what they say they will?

I struggled for years when others did not follow through. We all keep a scorecard of what others do and do not do and choose what we will and will not accept.

I'm becoming more aware of those people in my life whose lack of follow-through I have excused. Contrast is interesting when we think about an issue that bothers us in the relationships we want in our lives. For example, I've been told I'm high on the follow-through scale. If I say I'll do something by a specific time, there's a good chance it will get done. I get a sense of pride from doing what I say I will. However, I've noticed when I do that for a person who doesn't respond in kind, I take it personally because I don't have a clear set of boundaries.

I now realize that someone not following through is not my problem; it's theirs. Perhaps they don't value me, or it may have nothing to do with me. When a person doesn't follow through on their word regularly, it's normal to

question their credibility.

In my mental fitness journey, I've been setting boundaries and accepting that I trust others. If I keep trusting someone who doesn't follow through and trust my gut that they're not credible, it's not their problem; it's mine. I don't have to keep trusting someone who has lost credibility. I have the right to say, "I don't trust you will follow through for the following reasons ... ."

Whether we're aware of it, we train people how to treat us. When we don't enforce our standards, we open ourselves to frustration. I'm discovering that mental fitness is not only what I do to charge my battery. It's also how I engage with others to mitigate my risk of being drained.

I can't control another person, and it's not to my benefit to care about an outcome more than they do. For example, if I agree to help someone I care about and they don't follow through on their end of the agreement, before getting mad, frustrated, or stressed, I realize we both made a choice.

I can neither make them do something nor want the outcome they have

agreed to do more than they. Based on their credibility, I can say no the next time they ask for something that I expect them to follow through on. I didn't take away their credibility or trust. They did it, and earning it back is their burden, not mine.

Our credibility with others is directly impacted by how well we follow through. A recent article reminded me that we can set our follow-through standards. Relationships are critical for our mental health, as are trusting the people we interact with to do what they say they will.

*Our credibility with others is directly impacted by how well we follow through.*

We can make excuses for why we're late, forgot to do something, or chose not to follow through. The degree we value another person can influence our behaviour and follow-through. Though we may not be able to control others' behaviours, we can maintain the standards we set for ourselves and others.

Others' actions or inactions can positively or negatively impact our mental health. My mental health journey is affected by what I do and by what others I surround myself with do. No one is perfect; I know I'm far from it. However, the degree we follow through on our commitments matters in defining our credibility.

My biggest insight on this is I don't

have to feel bad for another person's choices. Here's the coaching I provide to others when they ask me about setting boundaries on follow-through:

- **Set clear expectations on follow-through** — Life happens, and sometimes others can't do what they say they will. However, it's not fair to you if they don't give you a heads-up and let you know

they're behind or won't follow through. Make it clear when you agree to a deal that requires two-way follow-through that you expect if there is a delay, the other party will provide a heads-up

of when and how they will follow through. Make it clear that their challenges are not yours and that your responsibility is not to fix them.

- **Listen but don't own others' excuses** — It's natural for a person who doesn't follow through and struggles with taking accountability for their actions to place blame on something or someone and expect you to accept their excuses or even help them fix their situation. Setting a clear boundary and accepting that others' excuses are not your problem is OK, as is allowing others to experience natural consequences. Giving them a break and excusing their behaviour may train them it is

OK not to follow through with you. Hold a standard for those close to you as you would anyone else.

- **History speaks volumes; listen to it** — We may tend to have a short memory for the people we care about. We may feel guilty if we don't give them more benefit of the doubt that they will do better the next time. I've discovered patterns matter and speak to a person's credibility and the degree to which they care about how their lack of follow-through impacts you. We can dream who we want the other person to be, but ultimately it's their accountability and choice. If you're unsure and question if a person will follow through and have trust issues, it's

OK not to trust them. I'm learning it's OK to speak your truth and allow the other person to figure out an alternative until they can prove they've learned to be credible and follow through. I engage in transactions and deals with people I care about only when I trust they will do what they say. I would be helping neither them nor me by not holding them accountable for their actions.

Our mental health is greatly influenced by how we allow the people around us to treat us. Setting clear expectations that are discussed openly is helpful.

Expecting follow-through and people doing what they say they will have been meaningful learning and growth for me.



## Savour moments that matter to create positive emotions on-demand

AS we wind down session two of Dr. Bill memos, I'm reflecting on how many positive things happened in 2022. This year brought a few challenges, but that's life; it will never be a perfect ride. I'm grateful for how much better my mental health is than in 2021. It's allowing me to enjoy the miracles of each day. As I get older, I'm becoming keenly aware of how blessed I am to have lived as long as I have and to have the health I enjoy. I plan to focus more on my health in 2023 because, without it, I have nothing.

I promote workplace mental health and the benefits of mental fitness because I know firsthand how beneficial developing a mental fitness plan is for well-being. It doesn't have to be complicated. Even 10 minutes a day can profoundly impact overall mental well-being.

### **THE HOLIDAY SEASON IS A CHALLENGING TIME FOR SOME**

The holiday season is an energy drain for some because of past experiences or current circumstances. The season should be a time for reflection and family. However, it's painful for some be-

cause it brings up unpleasant memories or emotions due to circumstances like being single and living alone with no family or friends to celebrate with.

Our mental energy matters as it impacts our daily experiences and moments. When we feel mentally drained, we feel flat and don't enjoy times like the holidays. We have positive energy and engage enthusiastically with others when we feel charged.

### **SAVOURING IS A MICRO-SKILL THAT CAN CHANGE YOUR MENTAL STATE**

Mental fitness has taught me that the more I engage in what I want to believe and think, the more I gain control over my thoughts and feelings. It's not magic. What works is accepting and believing where we choose to go our mind has no choice but to follow.

Where the mind goes, so go our emotions. Savouring moments that matter is a micro-skill that works for me. There are many ways to do this. I enjoy savouring moments that mattered to me in the past year when I'm doing my morning journaling. I've spent more time thinking about my university football days and how amazing the brother-

hood and bonds were. I also have been thinking more about my children when they were small, looking at pictures of magic moments. Every morning as I take my dog Link out for his walk in the park where he can walk off-leash, I see him play, turn, and smile at me as if to say, "Come on, Dad, keep up." Many moments matter to each of us that can trigger a good memory or experience.

Moments that matter are times we objectively reflect on and accept how fortunate we are. They can fire off positive emotions that bring powerful neurotransmitters that help us feel calm, at peace, and content.

*Moments that matter are times we objectively reflect on and accept how fortunate we are.*

Savouring is powerful, whether it's about something that happened five minutes or 50 years ago. Our brain chemistry doesn't know the difference; we get the same benefits in real-time. If you're struggling through the holidays and are caught up in many unpleasant emotions, instead of trying to numb them with alcohol or hide from them, accept and name them. Practice allowing yourself to savour positive experiences and your brain to believe this hard time will pass and good things are on the way.

To move toward this opportunity, you must be open to the possibility it will provide hope. Acknowledge that just

because now may not be your preference, the future is as pure as snow. Trust me; I know firsthand.

Bryant and Veroff explain that savouring is attending, appreciating, and enhancing positive experiences that occur in one's life. It's a practice of acknowledging the experiences between a

person and their environment, where the focus is on things perceived as positive. The benefit is this meta-awareness allows the mind to relive a positive experience and the positive emotions associated with it over and over on demand.

**TYPES OF SAVOURING**

- Savouring the past, also called reminiscence. For example, remembering funny moments with friends.
- Savouring the present or the moment. For instance, enjoying a new meal by drawing your attention to its flavours and smells.
- Savouring the future, also referred to as anticipation. For example, thinking about a holiday weekend with your partner.

**TIPS FOR FACILITATING SAVOURING MOMENTS THAT MATTER**

There's no magic; you need to do something to obtain the benefit. Using neuroplasticity, your brain can build

neural pathways that replace less-helpful ones. You can train your brain to spend more time in pleasant than unpleasant emotions. This isn't about being positive all the time; that's impossible. It's about learning to take a mental break and charge your battery. Think of savouring as a free way to plug into energy. You need to make the connection often enough to train your brain to savour. Like any skill, it takes practice to master it.

- Create an inventory of your top five positive life experiences. Write them out and note why they were positive, so you have a catalogue of things to focus on when you want to practice savouring.
- For seven days, commit to taking 10 minutes first thing in the morning to focus on positive life experiences and replay the thoughts and emotions. Allow the story to play out. This is a wonderful way to kick off each day.
- Take 10 minutes before going to sleep each night to reflect on a positive experience that brings up good memories. Hold the context of that moment you enjoyed and how blessed you were to have that experience.
- For three weeks, commit to writing out two things at 8:00 p.m. that went well in the previous 24 hours. Be objective. Health, a warm bed, and healthy meals are things others don't have. Focus on the two things and lean into why you're grateful for these moments. This can help train your brain to notice the good things in life — no matter how small — that too many take for granted.
- Take 10 minutes every Sunday morning to reflect on the accomplishments you are most proud of over the past week. Be objective and understand that success and living your best life doesn't mean winning awards. It means feeling you have accomplished something of purpose and are grateful for the opportunity you have been given.
- Take a few moments as you eat your lunch at noon each day to reflect on random acts of kindness you have noticed, facilitated, or experienced. Performing acts of kindness is good for emotional well-being, as is reflecting on them. It can reinforce the benefit and anchor the motivation for future acts of kindness.
- My daily walk is a personal savour when I notice all the calm in nature. I cherish these walks with Link and look forward to them every day. Walking is a powerful and proven method to calm the mind, get fresh air, notice nature, and experience the joys of the moment. Savouring

these moments can bring many positive emotions.

- Visualizing two things you would like to have happen tomorrow and seeing yourself being successful can help you believe you can do what you focus on. Self-confidence is easier to obtain when your brain has positive emotions flowing.
- Notice how many little things went right for you and acknowledge them, no matter how small. I have

discovered that so many good things happen each day, like not falling while walking on a slippery surface, driving home from work without an accident, and power staying on in a storm. Not only what happens to us matters, but also what doesn't happen. Celebrating how many things have gone right each day has become a simple way of finding positive charges versus taking things for granted.

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