



MENTAL HEALTH MANIFESTO

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MAY 1, 2022
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Life's Difficulties

You have undoubtedly experienced difficult issues in your life. Loss, disappointment, failure, betrayal and many other circumstances may have been part of your experience. Perhaps you have even been the victim of physical and/or emotional abuse, greed, prejudice, misogyny, gun violence or other personal, social or political challenges to your well-being.

How do you deal with issues when they arise?

Perhaps you attempt to ignore the problem, medicate it out of awareness or seek costly diversions to avoid it. You may feel frustrated if you have no idea as to how to remedy aversive situations.

Broad-based remedies may not help you personally. Legislation that might help may be nonexistent, irrelevant or ineffective. Admonitions to act differently are easily discounted or ignored.

To the extent that solutions to difficult issues are possible, a fresh approach is needed.

Basic Premise and Goal

The *premise* of this manifesto is that *compromised mental health* contributes to many of the difficult issues encountered by individuals. Since no one has perfect mental health, issues are inevitable.

The goal of this manifesto is to suggest how to minimize the extent to which difficult issues occur by developing *healthy mental health*. Anyone can improve their mental health, enabling a clearer vision of the bright side of living!

Mental Health Requires a Clear Definition

I was licensed as a Mental Health Counselor in Florida for over two decades. At a conference of the American Mental Health Counselors Association (I forget exactly what year) a colleague threw out an intriguing question to a small group over coffee: “What is mental health?”

Since we were all mental health counselors, we certainly should have been able to answer the question. But I was not satisfied with the answers offered as they dealt only with the mindset and behaviors exhibited by a mentally healthy person. They did not define what mental health **is**, they only suggested what it **does**. Recognizing this, and not having any better definition to offer, I simply passed when it came my turn to answer.

Thus began an extended search for a useful definition in the literature and on the web. This search has been totally unsuccessful! To this day, defining mental health in terms of mindset and behaviors is all that can be found. These operational definitions offer no insight on the nature of mental health itself or how to improve it. ***What mental health is and what flows from it are two entirely different things!***

Think what it would mean to have a clear-cut, understandable definition of mental health. It would provide...

- directions/goals/guidelines/roadmaps/starting points for improvement,
- it would be a standard for evaluating the quality of one’s mental health,
- improving compromised mental health would become apparent and
- obstacles to change would be easily identifiable, thus simpler to deal with.

Compromised Mental Health ≠ Mental Illness

Before considering a definition of mental health and how to improve it, think about the distinction between *mental health* and *mental illness*. Mental illness generally involves a physical malfunction in the brain such as

in Alzheimer's disease. On the other hand, mental health depends solely on mental processes in a physically healthy brain.

This distinction is important because the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of mental illness is in the province of physical and/or mental health professionals while every individual is capable of improving his/her own mental health. Considering someone with compromised mental health as mentally ill... and treating them as such... does them an injustice. Approaches designed to improve mental health should be entirely different from those employed for mental illness.

Mental Health Defined... Not!

Understanding the definition of mental health presents an extraordinarily difficult problem because it consists of two unfamiliar terms! Each term is a component of mental health and until you are familiar with both, any definition would be useless.

The two components are:

- **inbornintentions** and
 - **basic beliefs.**

With a clear understanding of these, a whole new world of healthy mental health becomes achievable! Let's examine them carefully.

The First Component of Mental Health: Inbornintentions

Robert G Olson in his book, *An Introduction to Existentialism*, (1962, Dover Publications, Inc.) credits humans with having four intrinsic values. I have taken the liberty of reformulating them slightly and coined the term *inbornintentions* to group them for easy reference.

Every human being is born with inbornintentions or *four intrinsic behavioral goals* and it is in our nature to strive towards establishing a positive relationship with each. The four goals are 1) to respect human

dignity, and 2) to exercise freedom of choice, 3) obtain a sense of accomplishment and 4) experience love.

Human dignity

We possess human dignity because we enjoy a number of qualities and characteristics *in excess of any other species*. These include consciousness, spoken and written language, rational as well as abstract thought, dexterity in making and using tools, the understanding and manipulation of numbers, the capacity for a wide range of feelings and emotions, a conscience, a sense of aesthetics, a basic concept of time and space, the capacity for introspection and an awareness of eventual death.

Nothing that varies between individuals has any bearing on human dignity. Male/female, young/old, nationality, beliefs, economic status, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, hair/eye/skin color, healthy/sick, behavior, attitudes, feelings, thoughts... none of these add to or detract from human dignity in any way. Disrespecting *the personhood of an individual based on any variable* is a sure sign of compromised mental health.

Freedom of choice

Freedom of choice is our innate desire to choose freely among alternatives. It is essential to make choices in order to function, maintain control and develop. We would like to do so with as few restrictions as possible.

Sense of accomplishment

Sense of accomplishment stems from the necessity to acquire food, clothing and shelter. Today there are innumerable other ways of satisfying this intrinsic goal and we enjoy the sense of accomplishment when we successfully complete any task, large or small.

Love

Love, in the sense used here, calls for seeing self, others and the outside world in a positive, affirmative and healthy light. It means having a positive world-view. Additionally, it means accepting positive feelings and behaviors directed towards us.

The Second Component of Mental Health: Basic Beliefs

Following every significant experience, the subconscious mind retains three components: content, feeling and meaning. Content is the *memory* of what happened, *feelings* are the associated emotional attachments and meaning is the *basic belief* resulting from the experience. It is what one believes about the topic. Every basic belief has been learned; we had none at birth.

Basic beliefs filter every new sensation and determine whether it is 1) a danger/threat, 2) significant or 3) insignificant. Those that fall into the latter category are simply ignored. The brain does not have the capacity or need to treat every incoming sensation with a comparable amount of attention.

A critical role of a basic belief is to determine if the incoming sensation is a threat. If so, a defense mechanism is initiated instantly without conscious intervention. We act before we think. This is crucial because if we had to take the time to think to determine whether or not that rustling in the bushes was a saber tooth tiger bent on having lunch, we might not live to be aware of the answer.

Finally, if the new sensation is significant but not dangerous, we act accordingly. This makes basic beliefs the source of our thoughts, feelings, attitudes and behaviors. Although we have free will, we are still restricted by what we have come to believe, thus making us prisoners, for better or worse, of our own experience. Developing healthy mental health is the key to escaping this prison!

Mental Health Defined... Finally!

With a clear understanding of its two components, consider this definition:

Mental health is the state of mind determined by the relationship between intrinsic inborn intentions and learned basic beliefs. When basic beliefs and inborn intentions are compatible with each other, one enjoys healthy mental health. When a basic belief is contrary to an inborn intention, mental health has been compromised.

Obstacles to Improvement

The path leading to healthy mental health is littered with obstacles, so traveling this course requires patience, fortitude, persistence and concentration.

Anxiety Is an Obstacle

Our brains function differently when we are calm and when we are anxious.

When we are free of anxiety, we have at our disposal all of the thinking, reasoning and rational capacity that is within our nature. When doing so, we are using our *thinking mind*, the marvelous condition that plays a large part in determining our humanity.

However, when anxiety strikes, the thinking mind is hijacked in favor of the *feeling mind* that takes control of thoughts, feelings, attitudes and behaviors! As wonderful as it is to think clearly, it is even more important to stay alive. Therefore, when there is a threat, self-preservation becomes paramount and the body automatically initiates a defense mechanism.

In most instances, this is done without conscious thought before any reasoning takes place. In certain circumstances, this can be altered, but in the vast majority of times we act before thinking. Prove this to yourself by recalling the last time that you said or did something while anxious that you later regretted.

This is important to understand because the process of change required to improve mental health begins with processing in the thinking mind. If the feeling mind is in control, progress becomes problematic.

Commitment to One's Personal Truth Is an Obstacle

We acquire basic beliefs throughout life. They provide direction, guidance, restore order out of chaos and tell us where to go, how to act, which way to turn and what to do. This makes them an extremely important component of our existence; therefore, they must be true. We could not function if we did not believe in our truths, our basic beliefs.

Consequently, we have a firm, almost unalterable adherence to our beliefs. Since we believe something to be true, any alternative must be false and we

are loath to embrace it. If we were to embrace a new belief, it would imply that previously we believed a falsehood, which is not an easy admission to make.

It takes an open mind and a willingness to change in order to overcome the obstacle of our commitment to our own personal truth.

The Sheer Number of Potential Difficulties Is an Obstacle

Since you have numerous basic beliefs relating to each of the four inborn intentions and the number of possible interactions with the environment is unlimited, the potential for difficulties is infinite. Therefore, perfectly healthy mental health with regard to three of the four inborn intentions is impossible.

There are societal restrictions on your *freedom of choice*. Laws abound that restrict how you might otherwise choose to behave.

Your *sense of accomplishment* may be limited due to insufficient resources, faulty knowledge/information, lack of cooperation by others and a myriad of other possible impediments.

Love relationships face innumerable difficulties. Lack of reciprocation, insufficient resources to support a relationship. Besides, love is notoriously fickle.

The common denominator for problems relating to these three inborn intentions is that other people over whom you have no control are inevitably going to be involved. So, even holding positive basic beliefs will not always guarantee success. Best practices call for holding positive beliefs regarding these three and dealing with difficulties as they occur.

But it's different with *human dignity*.

There is no power on earth outside yourself that requires you to hold basic beliefs that negate or compromise your awareness and acceptance of your own human dignity.

Although your human dignity can be insulted, ignored or negated by others, you do not have to believe them. You can maintain belief in human dignity despite any provocation.

The most important basic beliefs you hold are those relating to your human dignity. When they are positive, your thoughts, feelings, attitudes and behaviors relating to the other three inborn intentions will function smoothly. Conversely, if you have a negative self-concept, it will color your attitude towards everything else in life.

Other Obstacles

Other obstacles include:

- lack of guidance on how to improve,
- self-sabotage,
- unwillingness to accept personal responsibility,
- inability to recognize or acknowledge compromised mental health,
- lack of motivation/complacency/reluctance to change/inertia and impatience,
- rationalization and
- stigma.

With all these factors working against adaptive change, it is no wonder that compromised mental health is so prevalent. But it does not have to be so. By having a clear understanding of the definition of mental health, overcoming obstacles and changing problematic basic beliefs, healthy mental health is within your grasp.

Every small improvement in your mental health makes the world a bit better place!

How To Improve Your Mental Health

Difficult issues are experienced as thoughts, feelings, attitudes or behaviors. Other than instincts and reflexes, these stem from your basic beliefs interacting with environmental stimuli. If your belief was different, a particular difficulty would not exist!

Recall that mental health is determined by the relationship between learned basic beliefs and intrinsic inborn intentions and that the greater the correlation between these two the healthier one's mental health. From this follows a clear-cut, simple process to improve. This is a joint-venture between one's conscious and subconscious minds since the problem lies in the subconscious but the solution must originate consciously.

Since basic beliefs regarding human dignity are the most important ones you hold, let's assume for the purpose of illustration, that you have a less than perfect self-concept. Hopefully this is an invalid assumption, but it will illustrate the process of any change you wish to make.

Step 1:

Identify a subconscious basic belief related to your poor self-concept.

Using introspection, ask yourself:

- What do I think about myself?
- Why do I feel this way?
- How long have I felt this way?
- What was the experience(s) that happened when I first began thinking this way?
- If indeterminate, what past or present experiences confirm my self-concept?
- How empirically valid is this belief about myself?

Your answers to these and similar questions express your basic belief regarding your human dignity.

Step 2:

*Consciously construct a **positive** statement that*

- 1. is contrary to the problematic basic belief and*
- 2. is consistent with an inborn intention.*

- My human dignity exists since I possess the intrinsic and immutable qualities that make human beings human.
- No if's, and's, but's or mental reservations.

- Nothing in me that's different from anyone else has any bearing on my human dignity.

Step 3:

Practice behaviors consistent with this positive statement.

- Because I respect my own human dignity, I use best practices regarding diet, rest and exercise.
- Since my human dignity is absolute, so is that of every other human being. As such, I accord everyone the same respect that I expect for myself.
- I practice behaviors relating to freedom of choice, sense of accomplishment and love that are consistent with the human dignity that is inherent in self and others.

Continue practicing these behaviors until they become automatic. At that point, the conscious statements have become subconscious basic beliefs and are now generating their own thoughts, feelings, attitudes and behaviors that reflect your healthy mental health!

Apply this process when you experience a difficult life issue related to any inborn intention. To do this consistently is to practice the Art of Living.

Mental Health Basics at a Glance

Mental health defined: The relationship between two factors in the brain determine an individual's mental health: **basic beliefs** and **inborn intentions**. The higher the positive correlation between the two, the healthier one's mental health and vice versa.

Basic beliefs are truths acquired through experience and stored in the subconscious. They are learned, true for the individual, and retained throughout life unless replaced. Basic beliefs are important because they determine one's thoughts, feelings, attitudes and behaviors.

Inborn intentions are four *intrinsic behavioral goals* toward which humans naturally strive. They are 1) human dignity, 2) freedom of choice,

3) sense of accomplishment and 4) love. Inborn intentions are immutable and common to every human. Individuals relate positively or negatively to them according to their basic beliefs.

Obstacles prevent progress. Minimizing anxiety and remaining open to changing a strongly held truth (a basic belief) will overcome these two major obstacles.

One pathway to improvement is by replacing a problematic basic belief with one that is consistent with an inborn intention. Accomplish this by: 1) bringing a problematic subconscious basic belief up to consciousness through introspection, 2) formulating a cognitive belief that is contrary to the problematic one just identified and is consistent with an inborn intention and 3) deliberately practicing behaviors consistent with the new cognitive statement until it becomes a subconscious basic belief.

Mental health awareness is the process of evaluating the quality of one's own mental health and taking steps to improve. Even the most compromised mental health does not imply mental illness. No one has perfect mental health and improvement is always possible.

What are you going to do with what you have learned?

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