

**PF3 Wants you to Know...**



## **Mental Health & Mental Wealth For Youth of All Ages**

**By Basil Savitsky**

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The month of May is Mental Health Awareness Month. Two steps that we could take this month to re-frame our approach to mental health would be to shift away from the stigma associated with thinking about mental illness and move toward promoting mental wellness. We could even go further and begin to talk about the difference between mental health and mental wealth.

One way to re-frame our social perspective on mental wealth is to think of it in terms of any other resource, such as cash. We tend to only address the mental wealth bank account when there is a deficit, when we, or someone we love, needs to come “up” from the deficit of an illness. Once functionality is re-established, we accept the base-line of zero. How much attention do we pay to flourishing and thriving, as opposed to just being functional?

Thinking of mental health in similar terms to physical health also works well. This is more than moving beyond judgments about behavioral health — an area in which we as a society are beginning to make strides. What if we thought about our minds and brains as having the same type of needs that our physical health requires, such as nutrition and exercise? On a nutritional basis, we find that the thoughts we “feed our head” are vital to optimal functioning and that a variety of sources in our cognitive diet goes a long way to supporting optimal intellectual performance. Likewise, if we exercise our brain by routinely moving out of our psychological comfort zones, then we are more likely to be mentally-fit, well-toned and flexible. And of course, volumes have been written on the bene-

fits of mindfulness practices on emotional resilience, stress reduction, physical health, and general conditions supportive of a fulfilling life.

If we focus on the mental health needs of our youth, we rapidly encounter some rather meaningful facts. First of all, even under the best of conditions and in the simplest of times, the teen years are incredibly stressful. The physical change of adolescence is compounded by new definitions of image and identity — and by a suite of challenges associated with relationships, with parents, peers, and prospective employers. During more than a decade of intense change, the following brain chemistry conditions should be taken into consideration:

- The teen brain undergoes a complete re-wiring, making it less an older version of a child's brain or a younger version of an adult brain, and more a distinctively unique "operating system."
- The pre-frontal cortex, responsible for executive brain function (and long-term decision-making associated with career and marital choices) does not reach a stable level of development until age 25.
- Pruning, or the destruction of non-essential brain cells, peaks during adolescence.
- Re-myelination also peaks during the teen years, which means that the coating around the connective tissue of the brain (think neural pathways) speeds up 3000-fold (not a typo) and those neural pathways associated with habits that are not re-myelinated are diminished — "use it or lose it."
- Changes in dopamine levels can be understood to create both a baseline condition of almost constant boredom and a desire to engage in novelty and intensity, leading to a predisposition to take risks.
- The teen brain has a dramatically increased sensitivity to alcohol, tobacco and other drugs which leads to an increased likelihood of addiction.
- 50% of mental illness emerges by age 14, and 75% emerges by age 25.

All of this points to a need for compassion, listening skills, and an ability to be responsive to any forms of mental health needs that might arise. So, I am making a pitch for a training on Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) — one of the BEST trainings that I have ever attended. This is an 8-hour public education program that introduces participants to the unique risk factors and warning signs of mental health problems in adolescents. The class builds understanding of the importance of early intervention and teaches individuals how to help an adolescent experiencing a mental health challenge. YMHFA is designed for adults who regularly interact with adolescents (teachers, school staff, coaches, youth group leaders, parents, etc).

The next training in Polk County will be offered June 30 at Steps to Hope. Go to the following website to register: <http://www.smokymountaincenter.com/events/calendar.asp>

Polk Fit, Fresh and Friendly (PF3) also invites you to get involved. The sole membership

requirement is an interest in promoting wellness in Polk County. To participate, our next general meeting is scheduled for noon on Thursday, May 26, in the Community Room of the Polk County Library.

PF3 is a group of more than 80 community members, community leaders and health professionals, all working together to plan and implement effective strategies to promote wellness in our community and the critical role access to health care plays in supporting wellness for everyone in Polk County. For more PF3 information, visit <http://www.polk-fitfreshandfriendly.org/contact-us.html>.