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Health is a top priority for almost everyone. However, rarely does the topic of mental health get brought up outside the context of chaotic events and deranged criminals. This sadly shows that as a society we do a poor job at conceptualizing the meaning and definition of mental health.

How can society work to improve and prevent mental illness if we struggle with understanding what mental health is?

Curiously, in this country most people older than 6-years-old can tell you how to improve their physical health and shape. We have done a remarkable job of educating the public and embracing the idea of getting into good physical shape, understanding that this improves physical health and stamina. In fact, you can hardly walk a city block without seeing more than one health club, fitness facility or yoga salon.

Surely good mental health and happiness is more than the absence of mental illness, just as good physical health is more than the absence of illness. The brain is the most medically complex organ in our body and given mental illness is so prevalent, it is sad that there is almost no emphasis on prevention of mental illness through actively improving mental health. Understanding our society, however, it comes as no surprise since fixation on health in terms of how it improves our external appearance is really what drives most people to stay fit. Unfortunately, a mental health workout produces no difference in how we superficially appear to the world; therefore, it is simply of little value to many.

It's difficult to take personal responsibility for developing and maintaining good mental health and happiness for yourself and your family, but change has to start somewhere. Parents hound their kids about diet, exercise and homework but what about actively improving their mental health? A big problem is many people have no idea how to strengthen their own mental well-being, let alone teach it to others. Fortunately, it is very easy to learn.

Caring. Listening. Supporting. Encouraging. Respecting. Befriending. Trusting. Accepting. Start by simply keeping these words written down and incorporate one of the concepts into your day on a daily basis. Practice with strangers, colleagues and family. Repetition is imperative, just like when building your biceps. Working on these core traits of a healthy emotional state will help prevent depression, anxiety, poor relationship choices and many emotional inflictions we as a society struggle with. Prevention of physical health has been preached for decades, but it's time prevention of mental illness becomes the norm.

*Psychiatrist Michael Yasinski M.D. on the importance of improving one's mental health.*