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2-3-2016

Mind-Full Love

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Recommended Citation

Vermeer, B. (2016). Mind-Full Love. Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/446

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Mind-Full Love

Abstract

"Developing and maintaining cognitive fitness is a lifelong process that, not unlike physical fitness, requires considerable self-discipline at every age."

Posting about loving and honoring God with our minds from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/mind-full-love/>

Keywords

In All Things, cognition, mental health, exercise, love

Disciplines

Christianity | Psychology

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Mind-Full Love

 inallthings.org/mind-full-love/

Bruce Vermeer

Our society overflows with gyms, exercise equipment offers, and muscle-bound, air-brushed models that beckon us to join in the fitness craze. Although this craze may indeed be overdone at present, maintaining physical fitness is desirable — even important. Additionally, it provides an important avenue through which we Christians can praise and love the One who created these bodies of ours. But did our Lord not also create our minds? Yes. How then can we praise and love God with our minds?

In his recent book *Soul Keeping*¹, John Ortberg provides a model of the soul that was conveyed to him by his mentor and friend Dallas Willard. It consists of four concentric circles. Starting in the smallest (center) circle and moving outward, Willard placed the will, mind, body, and soul. In this model, the will maintains a central yet limited role of rendering yes/no intentional responses. The mind consists of thoughts (that is, all things conscious) and feelings. The body, he added, provides the means through which behaviors of all kinds are produced. Finally, the soul maintains the capacity to integrate all of the other parts into a single, whole life. In other words, it serves as an operating system for all of life. The resulting integration of these constitutes life as we experience it. Ortberg asserts that harmony among the will, mind, and body results in a healthy soul. Unfortunately, humankind's fallen, sinful state leads to the disintegration of the soul — particularly when we fail to live in accordance with the will of God.

This model holds significant implications for us as we consider how we can praise and love God with our minds. It challenges us to recognize that fitness of the mind — let us call it *cognitive fitness* — necessitates a willful decision to direct our thoughts, feelings, *and* activities (behaviors) towards God. Indeed, Scripture exhorts us to praise and serve God in this way. It represents a spiritual act of worship — a means through which we demonstrate our love to Him. This model likewise challenges us to recognize that cognitive fitness does not exist in a vacuum. Thoughts and feelings are generated, in no small part, as a result of physical activity — that is, through the sequential firing of neurons in the brain. At another level, the individual's soul provides meaning and context for thoughts, feelings, and activities — either in a healthy, integrated manner or in an unhealthy, *disintegrated* way. Just as one's heart, lungs, and appendages are involved in and require physical exercise, so does one's mind need exercise. Therefore, it is important for us to maintain cognitive fitness.

Developing and maintaining cognitive fitness is a lifelong process that, not unlike physical fitness, requires considerable self-discipline at every age. Optimal cognitive fitness for the Christian begins and ends with God's Word. Philippians 4:8 states, "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things" (NIV). This is a key foundational principle through which we are called to engage in every activity of the mind. That is, all of our thoughts should be filtered through the framework of this principle in order to maintain our focus on God. With this in place and functioning optimally, we discover the freedom to fill our minds with all manner of God-honoring thoughts and feelings.

Maintaining this focus, however, is only the beginning. Just as regular exercise is necessary to maintain physical fitness, so regular exercise of the mind is necessary to maintain cognitive fitness. What might such exercise be? It can be anything that engages the mind — anything that facilitates the development of knowledge and wisdom. This small test might be helpful: During any given mental activity, evaluate the extent to which it is "stretching" your mind. At times, this might even include a physical feeling in your brain

— perhaps a “rush” of exhilaration or a wave of exhaustion. Additionally, challenge yourself to engage in a mentally-stimulating activity every day for a *minimum* of 30 minutes (more would be better). Select topics of interest to you whenever possible, as this will provide added incentive. Finally, determine *today* — irrespective of your current age — that you will maintain this exercise regimen for as long as the Lord allows you to remain mentally active. As with physical exercise, there is an increasing “use-it-or-lose-it” risk with cognitive fitness as we age. This is particularly evident after the age of 50. Therefore, it becomes increasingly important to remain mentally engaged with every passing year.

In nearly 25 years of practice as a geriatric neuropsychologist, I have noticed that the people who remain healthiest, cognitively and physically, are those who maintain vital involvement throughout their lifetime. Such involvement, by its very nature, requires considerable cognitive fitness. These are the individuals who never stop learning. Their interest in God, family, and culture (to name but a few) remains strong. In their twilight years they recognize that they still have something to offer to others and to the world, and they are not afraid to provide it — even if it now takes them longer to do so or involves extra effort. In short, they maintain a clear recognition of, and desire to, love and honor God with their minds.

Now, did you know that God blesses those who maintain cognitive fitness throughout their lifetime? Neuroscientists have determined that individuals who have been — and remain — mentally and physically active appear to have a reduced risk of developing Alzheimer’s disease (perhaps as much as 46% lower). Likewise, they seem better able to compensate for other types of age-associated brain deterioration — such as those caused by strokes. Neuroscientists call this the “cognitive reserve hypothesis.” I like to think of it as God’s gracious provision for those who engage in mind-full love!

Footnotes

1. Ortberg, John. *Soul Keeping: Caring for the Most Important Part of You*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan (2014). ↩