KEEPING A SOUND MIND

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NEW YORK

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1935
The point of view which underlies the content of this book is that mental health is dependent in large part upon the formation of certain mental habits and the elimination of certain others. It is believed that it is just about as easy to form the beneficial habits as it is to fall victim to the detrimental habits if the person involved can be given a clear conception of their relative significance. Furthermore, it is believed that the practice of those habits which bring mental health is just as enjoyable, or more so, than the practice of the pernicious mental habits which lead to mental disease. It is ignorance that does the damage.

Through infancy and childhood the formation of these habits is dependent upon the guidance of parents and teachers but in later years the individual is thrown upon his own resources and discretion, and his mental development must be directed primarily by himself. How is he to know which of the things he has learned are not for his best interests or how is he to initiate others which might be beneficial to him?

This book therefore is addressed to the college student primarily and puts in understandable form the basic principles involved in the preservation of one’s own mental health. It is offered as a basal textbook for courses in mental hygiene. Because of the absence of technical language it is hoped that it may also be used in freshman hygiene courses covering mental as well as physical aspects of health.
KEEPING A SOUND MIND

CHAPTER I

HOW TO EVALUATE YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

Marian had graduated from college at the head of her class. Her record in high school had been unusual. She was cheerful, industrious in her academic work, an excellent tennis player, a star in dramatic performances, she was chosen president of her class, and was much sought in all social affairs. In college she was even more conspicuously successful. For three years she edited the college paper, was head of the student council, was again selected president of the class, and finished her academic career with great promise of success in the hard, cold world.

However, opportunity did not seem to beckon her when she left college. She drifted aimlessly for a time and eventually took an inferior position with a woman who seemed to delight in humiliating her. She left this position, took another even more inferior, began to break in health, returned to her home, grew despondent, and attempted suicide. Her family, thoroughly frightened by this change in her, put her in a sanitarium where she remained for six months. Shortly after her discharge she made a second attempt at suicide and then developed a serious condition which necessitated her second commitment, this time to an institution for mental disorders.

This girl's break was wholly unnecessary and was due to ignorance of and consequent failure to apply some
simple principles of mental health which would have made such an outcome practically impossible. Her mental break was just as unnecessary and foolish as the total decay of excellent teeth because of failure to care for them, the development of digestive disorders due to improper diet, the destruction of physical health due to failure to take adequate exercise, or the contraction of an infectious disease because of failure to obey the simple laws of sanitation.

It is not necessary to become a physician in order to learn the essential rules of healthful living. We need the physician to help us when we have failed to comply with the rules of health. He is necessary to help us regain our health, but the more significant result of the study of physical diseases is the formulation of prophylactic measures which will enable us to evade ill-health. It takes the chemist, the pharmacologist, the physiologist, the histologist, and the clinical work of the practicing physician to dig out of the facts of physical disease the rules for physical health. As these become more thoroughly understood, they can be more and more clearly formulated and can be expressed in simpler and simpler terms so that the layman can understand and apply them.

The principles of mental health can be clearly stated. The same principle holds in connection with mental health. It takes the work of the laboratory psychologist to formulate the principles of mental life and the clinical work of the psychiatrist, who deals with cases of mental disease, to show how the failure to apply the principles of mental health results in mental disease. But the real value of the work of these two professional groups lies in the eventual formulation of the laws of mental health in such terms that they can be applied by any person who
possesses a modicum of intelligence whether he is trained in psychology or not.

How much knowledge of mental life should one possess in order to maintain his mental health? The more one knows the better, but it cannot be expected that every person should acquire enough information to make him an expert before he can remain mentally balanced. On the other hand, the statement of rules of health with no explanation of why they are effective results in a dry pronouncement of mere platitudes. One needs to know enough of the principles of mental adjustment to understand why to apply the rules and how one rule is related to the others. The general outlines are logical, and simple enough for any person to grasp without burending himself with the details which the professional should possess.

Knowledge eliminates fear of mental diseases. Adequate knowledge involves an understanding of the dangers to be avoided as well as of the positive aspects of adjustment. The important thing is to get a wholesome balance. It would be folly to stress the dangers unduly. Such a procedure breeds unwholesome fear. At one time a white cross was erected on the highways throughout the state of Ohio wherever a person had been killed in an auto accident. These ghastly crosses were supposed to instill the drivers with such fear that they would drive carefully. But fear did not make for careful driving. The fear thus aroused made for less assurance in driving and resulted in increased accidents. The crosses were removed.

The object of showing dangers is not to instill fear but to increase knowledge. If we know where others have made mistakes, we can guide ourselves more wisely because of such knowledge. Fear results from a knowledge of danger without clear understanding as to the nature of the
danger. Knowledge of the significance of the danger eliminates the fear. If a person finds that he is afraid of a mental break he should not avoid the subject of mental hygiene. He should study it until he knows enough to maintain his mental health without fear.

Importance of mental hygiene. The average man or woman invests a third or a fourth of his life span—a vast store of energy and considerable money—in the improvement of his mind. He spends years sitting in class rooms receiving instruction from teachers. He gleans from books the knowledge accumulated by his forefathers through the ages. He consumes endless hours practicing skilled acts of one sort or another. His mind becomes his greatest treasure, far outweighing in importance all the other benefits of life. Why should he not give a little time to learning how to take care of this treasure?

The world is full of examples of men who have developed great minds only to lose them because of sheer ignorance of some simple fundamental principles of mental health that would have made such a fate almost impossible. The average man knows less about taking care of his mental integrity than he does about safeguarding his money. The time to learn the laws of mental balance is in the prime of life before any damage has resulted from ignorance. Every person should, in his teens, stop long enough to take account of stock, to develop a consistent program of mental health and efficiency which will safeguard him in later life and enable him to live a life of happiness, of personal and social accomplishment, and increased ethical merit.

Can mental health be measured? The evaluation of mental health must be on a basis of relativity because there is no definite scale of measurement which can be
applied. We have all degrees, from the complete lack of health which may be witnessed in extreme mental disease to the opposite extreme of ideal mental balance. If we had a calibrated scale extending from one extreme to the other, self-evaluation might be relatively easy; but no such scale exists. We can only compare ourselves with those who are unbalanced or with the ideal of perfection. Which is the better plan?

In our self-analysis we might fix our attention on the possible kinds of ill-health and, as a result, we should emerge from our study either with a feeling of exaltation that we are in fairly good condition or with a hidden fear that we might succumb to some of the disorders we have discovered. On the other hand, we might compare ourselves with the ideal and thus provide ourselves with a powerful incentive to improve or with a feeling of discouragement because we seem to be so far from the ideal.

It is obvious that two of these attitudes should be avoided. We should not permit ourselves to fear dire possibilities nor should we be discouraged because the ideal seems so far from our reach. We should be able to survey our position with equanimity and use our knowledge in an intelligent program of improvement. We can do this if we recognize that our mental condition is never static. Our position on the scale of mental balance is sure to change with the passage of time whether we attempt to change it or not. Knowledge will enable us to move in the direction of mental health, whereas ignorance might carry us in the direction of deterioration. Knowledge should not bring fear. It should banish fear; and should breed the hope and energy needed to effect an improvement.
True insight usually does naturally give rise to a program of improvement. If self-analysis ends in a feeling of self-pity or in arrogant pride the possibility of such improvement will be checked. The first step toward mental health is to get rid of any such emotional reactions. True insight must be cool, calm, rational, and balanced.

How to make a personal survey. If you will answer the following questions sincerely and carefully, you will obtain a relative evaluation of your mental health.

1. Are you happy? If you are unhappy you may be sure that there is something wrong in your mental life. The unhappy are always wrong. Happiness is a symptom, a sign that things are going well with you. Unhappiness is a sign that things are not well. The degree of happiness which you experience is as accurate an indicator of mental balance as the temperature of your body is of your physical health.

If happiness is such an important sign should you not then strive always and only to be happy? Not directly. You should attempt to attain such perfect adjustment that happiness will become a habit but if you permit basic maladjustments to be present and attempt to attain happiness in spite of such maladjustment you are merely working at cross purposes. If, when unhappy, you merely try artificial means for convincing yourself that you are happy, you are paving the way for ever increasing bitterness and for mental illness.

Do not ignore unhappiness when it comes. It is an extremely significant index of maladjustment. But do not try to attain happiness as an end in itself or use artificial devices to convince yourself against evidence that you are happy. Unhappiness should be a goad to
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prod you on and on in your search for the basic cause of your discomfort and, when you have found the cause, to continue to prod you until you gain courage to right the conditions which caused the trouble.

May not this be demanding an impossible achievement for you? Are not some conditions beyond your control? How can a person control such inevitable and unavoidable calamities as disease, illness, the death of one’s loved ones, loss of property through fire and storm, and the like? To be sure, a person cannot avoid being unhappy under such circumstances, but the person with virile mentality immediately sets about adjusting himself to the events of life, no matter how calamitous they are. It is to be expected that a person will be unhappy if death takes his best friend, but it would not be normal for him to spend the next fifty years wholly absorbed in self-pity because of this loss.

The essential task of life is to adjust to anything and everything that comes, and happiness or unhappiness is merely an index of the degree of success or failure one is having in making such adjustments.

2. *Have you breadth of vision?* One of the prime tasks of youth is to get acquainted with life as it is. Youth should have a wholesome appetite for new experiences, a curiosity as to the significance of each new experience as it comes, a fairness in the evaluation of each new viewpoint which is presented, and a willingness to relate each experience to what has gone before. Breadth of vision does not come from flitting from one experience to another in a superficial manner, nor does it come from avoiding certain aspects of life; on the contrary, it comes from a true evaluation of each situation and a relating of it to all others which have preceded it.
Suppose life has hurt you. Is that any reason for hiding from it and living in a world of fancy? Suppose it has failed to measure up to your expectations and your ideals have been shattered. It is better to admit that it is not up to your expectations than to deceive yourself into believing that it is different from what it is.

Narrow vision is unwholesome. If it is the result of limited experience the normal way to correct it is to widen your contacts with life. If it is the result of biased vision and prejudice you must change your emotional bias to tolerance and honesty.

You must, because of local and temporary circumstances, align yourself with certain organizations, beliefs, and factions, but it is a sign of mental imbalance when you can see no virtue in the connections and positions of others. You may be an American, but other political boundaries may have just as much value for an ongoing world. You may have a religious preference, but there is value in other religions than yours. You may have joined a particular fraternal organization, but that is no excuse for snobbery. Even a self-righteous person may have a more shrunken soul than one who has succumbed to some of life's temptations. Narrowness, no matter how cleverly cloaked under the guise of virtue, is a sign of weakness, cowardice, or lack of experience. If you find yourself to be narrow, try to view it as the result of a lack of experience and do not let weakness or cowardice prevent you from remedying the deficiency.

3. Can you do things easily and smoothly? Adjustment to life involves more than seeing things broadly; it rests upon reacting to experiences wholesomely. A large part of your life as a child was taken up with learning motor performances. This should continue through
life. You have not completed your motor adjustments when you have learned to eat, to walk, to talk, to write, and to play a few games. Your bodily activities become a more and more intimate part of you as you grow older until they express your personality better than anything you may think or feel inwardly.

Speech, for example, displays your mental balance and integrity in unmistakable fashion. If you stammer in the presence of others you thereby display your lack of poise and self-control. If your voice rises in pitch with the slightest excitement you thereby loudly proclaim your emotional tension. Fluency of speech, an adequate choice of words, and a clearness of expression are the best indicators of clear and unified thinking. Here is a form of motor expression which lends itself to improvement as long as life lasts.

At the other extreme nothing so clearly shows when you are breaking mentally as your speech. Blocking, hesitation, repetition of ideas, dwelling on some hobby, incoherence in expression, or vulgarities betoken varying degrees of disintegration.

Excitement provides the best test of motor coördination. Even a poor driver may guide a car successfully on a straight open paving. The crucial test of our driving skill comes when we encounter some foolhardy driver or get mixed up in traffic. Spilling soup at a formal dinner, knocking over furniture, or treading on others’ feet are all betayers of inward panic, excuse them as we may. The body of the well-trained man never gets in his way. It gets him out of tight places automatically.

4. Do you enjoy solving problems? Is a difficulty a challenge which brings out the best in you? Or, are you the kind of person who cringes unless fate presents good
fortune to you on a silver platter? Fears, as we shall show later, are behind most mental disorders. They may make one retire from a problem situation or may impel him to attempt to solve it in feverish haste. In either case he is likely to make a poor solution and, of course, each failure to solve a problem satisfactorily makes the next one more difficult of solution.

The one thing about life which is absolutely sure is that it is ever changing. This changing nature of events makes continuous readjustment essential. You scarcely have time to get your breath after one conflict before the next one is upon you. Life is a game with a continual challenge which you must meet if you are to keep alive. Stagnation and death come when you cease to rise to the challenge. Increased confidence and vigor result from accepting it.

Success in a game is measured more by the attitude of the contestants than by any reckoning of victories or defeats. If you play valiantly you have succeeded. If you play unwillingly, with fear of the outcome, or hatred for your contestants, you have lost the real value of the game. Your attitude toward the problems of life is a real measure of your mental health.

5. *Have you a manifest objective in life?* If your past life has been unsuccessful you may be afraid to look ahead because you fear a repetition of past failure. If you have been successful you may be so intrigued with your success that you prefer to gloat over it rather than to look to what the future may hold for you. Either attitude is unwholesome and may lead to serious disintegration. It is unwholesome to dwell too much on the past. You may learn from the past lessons which will guide you in the future, but these lessons have value only as you put them to use.
One great barrier against the forward outlook is our disappointment that things do not always turn out as we expect them to do. We plan ahead with high hopes only to find disillusionment and disappointment. This should mean only that we have miscalculated. The value of the forward look does not depend upon achieving what we set out to attain but in the fact that it incited us to do something. The man who is doing something is thereby enriched mentally. The man who does nothing stagnates and dies. It is the forward look which keeps him going.

If you spend more than a small amount of time going over your past you need to revise your mental program. We shall find that looking back leads to a very pernicious form of mental disruption.

6. What factors in life motivate you? In childhood the motives which actuated you were simple and obvious. As you grew older and life became more complex your motives became correspondingly complicated and very often, perhaps, were of a nature that you could not understand.

The difficulty of comprehending our motives lies in the fact that we are taught to evaluate them. Some, such as patriotism, loyalty, industry, and the like are regarded as noble and we try to interpret all our actions as the result of these drives. Others, such as selfishness, pride, passion, and hate, are considered ignoble, and we do not wish to admit that they play any part in our lives.

If, in spite of ourselves, some of the ignoble impulses play a part in our behavior, we tend to delude ourselves into thinking they are inoperative or we distort our thinking so as to overemphasize the noble impulses. Such distorted thinking plays some part in most of our be-
behavior, but if it takes too great a grip upon us it is a sign of unwholesomeness and should be avoided.

It may not be so serious if we do some things from unconscious motives but, if we permit our reasoning processes to become violently distorted in an attempt to excuse such behavior, the resulting irrationality becomes a habit and spreads to all phases of our lives. We shall, in later chapters, show the significance of such distorted thinking and present more specific means for correcting it. We merely mention it here to show its significance as an index of mental unsoundness. The man of sound mentality does relatively few things for reasons which he does not understand. Insight into motivation is one of the best indices of mental soundness.

These motives become crystallized into attitudes or principles, into systems which some call a philosophy of life, and these attitudes become the guiding principles which direct us in all our behavior. There is nothing in life which it is more important for you to understand and to control than the development and influence of your fundamental attitudes.

7. Do you get along with people? Do you like people? Do they like you? Are they at ease when you are in their company and do they enjoy your actions and conversation? Are you at ease when with other people? Do you feel that people are kindly disposed toward you and would help you in a crisis, or do you think people would, as a rule, hurt you if they had the opportunity? Do you like advice or do you shun it? The answers to these and many other similar questions will indicate to you the degree to which you have adjusted yourself socially.

In the last analysis, the psychopathic patient who becomes so seriously deranged that he must be confined
in an institution is merely one who has not learned to get along with others. Queer ideas or unusual forms of conduct do not, in themselves, constitute grounds for segregation; it is only when behavior becomes extremely annoying to others that segregation becomes necessary. Sanity can be measured only in terms of social tolerance.

Consequently, if you cannot get along with others, do not blame them, for that is what all abnormal people do. If they are out of harmony with the whole world they consider the world out of tune and think that their music is perfect.

The growth from egocentricity to socialization is, again, one of development. It was normal for you as a child to be relatively egocentric, but normal life should have enabled you to integrate with society. For this reason, do not think that any minor social maladjustment is an index of a pending psychosis; it may merely indicate the necessity for more social education. Each social blunder should teach you to behave in a more wholesome fashion next time just as each fall of the child should enable him to learn to walk more steadily.

Finally, when you are socially matured you will enjoy the society of other people. If adjusting to other people is still a task which provokes considerable worry on your part you have yet a long way to go before you can consider yourself socially mature.

The causes of maladjustment. If you are unhappy, narrow in your outlook on life, awkward in your execution of acts, afraid of meeting problems, lacking in any objective in life, if you are unmotivated, or if you cannot get along with people, what can you do about it?

There are two sensible things to do. The first is to gain