

Building Your Mental Fitness as a Soldier

As a member of the **National Guard** you strive to be physically fit – you exercise, you try to eat healthy foods, you talk to fellow Guard buddies and physicians about health. But what about your behavioral health? **Mental Fitness** is a vital component of our overall wellness, but too often we separate mental fitness from body fitness. They are tied together.

Through the influences of psychology, religion and a changing healthcare orientation, we are gradually catching on and learning about this essential element of our health and well-being. We go to gyms, walk, run, try to eat healthy foods, and swim for body fitness. In so doing, we build up our **physical strength, resiliency, and flexibility**. Imagine being able to build our mental strength, resiliency, flexibility and creativity!

While there are hundreds of tips to pass on, we've chosen ten for you to consider. These can help you get into good personal shape and better meet the challenges of everyday work and family life as part of the National Guard.

1. **Reach out and help someone.** It turns out that people literally feel better when they help someone else or do a “good” act. By selflessly giving a helping hand or a word of praise, we not only improve someone else’s life, but our own endorphins (**the good anti-stress hormones!!**) get pumped up, providing an internal sense of well-being.
2. **Take time to take stock of who you are.** Many of us spend a lot of time distracting ourselves from looking within and thinking about what we want in our lives, who we want to be with, and how to make this happen. We drift and then can feel helpless. It’s important to “take stock” of who we are and whether we are living up to our own expectations and potential. It is part of becoming happier.
3. **Do daily mental ‘reps.’** Similar to doing reps lifting weights, consider doing 5 mental reps a day reminding yourself of what you have accomplished and what is going well that day. **This will help your self-esteem, one of the building blocks of mental fitness.**
4. **Do weekly mental ‘reps.’** Reach out to a friend, a co-worker or a family member and let them know you value them. If possible, be specific about something they have done or who they are to you. Try 12 ‘reps’ a week and you will soon create a **fan club** of people around you who value your presence because you contribute to their well-being. **Build compassion and appreciation!**
5. **Practice optimism.** People who are optimistic are happier and actually succeed more in life. Optimism can be learned, but it takes practice. People who are

pessimistic spend more mental time thinking about negative outcomes that have happened or might happen. Try to catch yourself if you do this and think about a positive event or something good that has happened in your life recently. Keep practicing and you might actually become a more optimistic person. For further information, read Dr. Martin Seligman's bestseller, **Learned Optimism**.

6. **Practice assertiveness.** Being assertive allows us to tell others our feelings, needs and points of view without having to attack, criticize, or give up. Communicating in an assertive way most of the time, as opposed to an aggressive or passive style, improves mental fitness as we don't harbor negative feelings toward others and then run the risk of hurting ourselves or expressing feelings which hurt others.
7. **Do something different.** Just as we stretch our muscles and become more fit physically, we also have to **stretch ourselves emotionally** to become fit mentally. Try pushing yourself to do something that causes you a little anxiety. This increases your mental 'muscles.' You could talk to a friend, family member or partner about something you have been worried about saying. Or, you could talk to your commanding officer about a challenge you would like to take on at work. **Pushing your comfort zone just a little can reap big rewards.** This is a vital aspect of mental resiliency.
8. **Take time to do something mentally healthy every day.** This can be reading a good book, doing crossword puzzles, practicing a favorite hobby, meditating, praying or taking a class. Using different parts of our brains stretches our thinking, our attitudes and provides greater flexibility, strength and creativity in our daily lives.
9. **Unlearn helplessness.** Rather than give up or give in when faced with challenges or failures, find a way to learn a new skill or way of coping. No one learns to walk without falling, or drive a car without bumping the curb a few times. The question to yourself is not, "How can I be so stupid?" but, rather, ask yourself, "What can I learn from my mistake so that I can do it differently next time?"
10. **Ask for help.** We don't have to go it alone. Reach out and ask for a helping hand, whether it's a personal, work or family challenge. Counselors at the **Guard Your Buddy program** are available 24/7 to coach you or a family member through a difficult time. It's a confidential and free benefit. Just call anytime at 855 HELP GYB (855-435-7492) or consider an Instant Chat for some tips.

Getting 'mentally fit' is a great goal for any soldier. It is just as important as your physical well-being.

@Copyright, Sobel & Raciti Associates, Inc., 2011