



## Self discipline and mental health

*Mark Tyrrell*

*"Do it if it feels good!"*

*"Don't do anything you don't want to do!"*

*"I know I should exercise/work/practise,  
but when it comes to it I just don't feel like it!"*

*"Yeah, the money would be good,  
but I'm not getting up at that time!"*

Self discipline is not a new idea. There is an old story about a man who went to a tattooist because he had always wanted a tattoo of a lion on his back.

The tattooist started to sketch the tail into the man's torso: 'Ouch! What are you doing?' asked the man. 'I'm doing the lion's tail' replied the tattooist. 'Well then, for goodness sake let's have a lion without a tail!' said the man, wincing in pain.

Next the artist set about on the lion's whiskers. 'Ouch!' cried the man, 'What's that?' 'The whiskers!' said the tattooist, getting increasingly irritated. 'Well, let's have a lion without whiskers!' moaned his customer.

The tattooist then set about doing the lion's back. 'No, that hurts too!' shouted the man. At this, the tattooist finally lost patience with the man's lack of self discipline. Throwing down his tools and the man out of his shop, he shouted, 'How can you expect to get what you want without a little discomfort?'

### **Self discipline gets you what you want**

One meaning of this story may be to show how handicapped you are if you base your decisions purely on your comfort level. If we don't develop the capacity for self discipline we deprive ourselves of not only greater likelihood of success, but also larger and lasting satisfactions.

Knowing we can discipline ourselves over and above what feels comfortable increases self confidence. We need to be stretched as much as we need comfort and rest.

*"Don't have a wishbone where your backbone should be!"*

### **Depression and self discipline**

Over recent decades rates of depression have sky-rocketed but during World War II, depression and suicide rates dwindled almost to zero.

Winston Churchill could only offer the British people 'blood, sweat and tears' but victory was the greater goal for the whole nation, and so the discomfort it brought could be borne. There was no concept of not working because you didn't feel like it, and rationing imposed discipline even upon eating patterns.

## **TV discipline**

TV shows such as 'Brat Camp', 'Career Boot Camp' and 'Faking It' have demonstrated the incredible changes in ability and self esteem that can come about from short periods of imposed 'self' discipline. On these shows, personal preferences are set aside in pursuit of a longer term goal. They demonstrate that exercising the 'muscle' of self discipline hurts at first but pays dividends once it's in shape.

## **Long term benefits over short term preferences**

We know that the quickest way to raise serotonin levels in a depressed individual (a neurotransmitter involved in mood elevation, emotion control and the ability to feel satisfied) is to get them moving - the quicker and longer they move, the more serotonin they produce.

However, exercise is the last thing a depressed person feels like doing. This is where the capacity to put aside short term preferences for long term benefits comes into its own. (Someone who is deeply depressed may need to recover from the depression a little through relaxation and proper rest before they begin to gain energy through exercise.)

## **Increase your capacity**

Like any capacity the more we use self discipline, the stronger it gets. Imagine your own life for a few moments if what you did was dictated entirely by whether you felt like doing it or not! What exactly would you do? And more importantly what wouldn't you do?

The more we do things we don't want to do, the more we are able to do: "It is the exercised muscle that lifts the weight!"

We are bombarded by commercials tempting us with beautiful products without indication of the effort, dedication, self discipline and time - "I want it and I want it now!" - required to purchase such products. (Neither do the commercials, quite naturally, show us taking the product for granted after only a few weeks and ceasing to be satisfied by it.)

Getting something is usually short term satisfaction compared to the inner rewards of the effort applied in acquiring it.

We are told not to 'overdo it!' but how do we know what 'over doing it' is if we have never used self discipline to push ourselves? The best candidate for psychotherapy is someone who is willing to work with the therapist, to try new things and be active in their own recovery. Otherwise, like the man who wanted a tattoo they will not end up with what they want.

Rant over, I'm off to make that phone call I have been putting off. Honest.

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