

9-1-1 *Fitness*

CDE #26374

HOW COMM CENTER STAFF CAN TAKE ON HEALTH & WELL-BEING

BY FONDA DIXON

“Fit for duty,” the concept that has been the nemesis of law enforcement officers for many years, has now reared its ugly head in 9-1-1 comm centers. That’s right, we 9-1-1 dispatchers and other comm center personnel are being assessed for our physical and mental well-being. So I ask, are you fit or not fit for duty? Throughout this article, I’m going to make suggestions on how to attain 9-1-1 fitness in the areas of attitude and mental health, physical health, ergonomics, diet and rest.

ATTITUDE & MENTAL HEALTH

Attitude is just one of the things that affects the fitness of comm center personnel. Have you ever heard the saying, “Your attitude determines your altitude.”? It’s true. Where do you want to be in five years? Will your attitude get you to that altitude? We control our states of mind and our attitudes.

If dispatchers have a negative attitude, stress increases, innovation and motivation decrease and physical health suffers. When thinking about fitness,

consider this: A positive attitude will help you feel better about yourself, your job and your life in general. It will also help you make better choices about diet and exercise, which is a good start toward achieving 9-1-1 fitness.

I recently read an interesting article titled, “Half-Empty or Half-Full,”¹ written by Michael J. Asken, PhD, a state police psychologist. According to Asken, “The fundamental difference between the optimist and pessimist is the way they view the world, the way they perform and the way they respond to difficulties. It has been said that the optimist proclaims we live in the best of all possible worlds, and the pessimist fears it is so.”

Pessimists see a negative situation as permanent and never changing. They feel that things will never get better, and they see the negative situation as “ruining everything” in their lives. They fear the negative situation is their own fault.

Optimists, conversely, see the negative situation as short-lived and feel that things will improve. They believe the

impact of the negative situation on their lives is limited or isolated and that many good things still exist for them. They feel that the negative situation is not their fault and that they have the ability to make changes.

When I was researching this article, I found a poem by William Arthur Ward called “Pessimist vs. Optimist” that compares the two attitudes further. *An excerpt:*

*... The pessimist criticizes
circumstances;
The optimist changes conditions.*

*The pessimist complains about
the apple seeds;
The optimist plants them. ...*

*The pessimist builds barriers;
The optimist removes
roadblocks. ...²*

So what can we learn from these two attitudes? In the face of difficult challenges, it’s important to keep your

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perspective. Don't over generalize your frustration. Recognize the positives and joys that can coexist with stress. Remember, permanence is rare, and things change. Situations can be addressed; they do get better. Be careful not to shoulder the entire burden at work or at home. Learn from mistakes and stressors.

On Worksite Insights, an online resource for mental fitness, I found some insights for improving attitude and, therefore, overall mental health:

- "Exercise mental flexibility—remember to get a grip."
- "Make stress your friend—Be the guitar string that has the perfect amount of tension."
- "Be a healthy, optimistic thinker—wake up and smell the coffee."
- "Change yourself, not others."
- "Stay in the now—Use the past as a guidepost, not a hitching post!"
- "Forgive, forgive, and forgive—Turn your milestones into stepping stones."
- "Lighten up—Life is too serious to be taken seriously."

My own personal favorites are:

- "Accept that some days you're the pigeon and some days you're the statue."
- "It may be that your sole purpose in life is simply to be kind to others."
- "Develop a mental fitness routine. It will take practice, but anything that we want to do well takes time and effort. It's time to get mentally fit."³

PHYSICAL HEALTH

No, I'm not going to give you the lowdown on a physical, but your doctor can. I also won't recommend that you join a gym or buy a treadmill, but all of us could benefit from more exercise to improve our overall physical health.

Our communications jobs, either as telecommunicators or engineers, tend to be sedentary in nature. When we don't exercise our minds and bodies, stress builds up and can lead to migraine headaches, back pain, ulcers, stomach disorders and fatigue.

Studies have shown that stress is also linked to cancer and, possibly, to a weakened immune system, which is responsible for fighting diseases and germs

that invade the body. With a weakened immune system, a person with chronic stress could become ill more frequently. Do any of these problems remind you of yourself or a fellow dispatcher?

Over half of the sick days used annually are due to both mental and physical stress. Stress attacks the weakest part of your body (e.g., your bad back or weak knees). Never-ending stress can lead to a variety of diseases, such as high blood pressure, which can cause heart problems and even heart attacks. When we are not mentally and physically fit, the doctor visits pile up. This, in turn, can lead to spending time and money for visits and medicines. Time you cannot recover, and the loss of money results in a shortage in your bank account, which causes additional stress. These days, approximately 75–90% of all doctor visits are stress related.⁴

Improve our physical health: Most comm centers have policies regarding breaks and lunch times. Take these opportunities to walk outside or around the inside of your center a few times. According to an article from the wellness newsletter, *Top Health*, "Walking can add years to your life and life to your years. Walking conditions your heart and lungs and improves your body's ability to use oxygen. It also helps beat other health problems. Walking is easy on your mind, as it lessens stress and lightens depression. It can burn almost as many calories per miles as jogging and is easier on your joints. Best of all, walking has the lowest dropout rate of any form of exercise."⁵

Here are a few ways to sneak in exercise at work: Instead of taking your breaks in the kitchen and employee lounge, take a brisk walk or do some gentle stretch exercises. Organize a lunchtime walking group. You may be surrounded by people who are ready to walk with you. In a group, members will be able to provide each other with support and hold each other accountable. You may want to invite your supervisor along to brainstorm with the group to see what you can do in your center to increase fitness.

Something you might not think about that's related to staying fit is keeping your work area germ free. Take a few minutes to clean your keyboard and phone before starting work every day. Keep hand sanitizer and a can of disin-

fectant handy to easily accomplish this.

ERGONOMICS

Dispatchers sit at consoles, and 9-1-1 radio engineers and IT personnel sit at desks for long periods of time without realizing it. There are a few things that we should be aware of while sitting, after all, we're there for one-third of our day. Consider this:

- If your center doesn't have headsets, don't cradle the phone between your head and shoulder.
- Make sure your monitor is positioned so you don't have to lean forward to read the screen. When you look at your monitor, your head and neck should be upright and balanced over your shoulders.
- Make sure your keyboard is tilted so that your hands are in a natural position.
- Consider standing during some conversations to change position and increase movement. Take 30-second breaks every 20 to 30 minutes to stretch and move.
- Get away from the stressful environment for a few minutes, and take those much needed breaks. (Call it a work time commercial.)

DIET

Along with keeping exercise and ergonomics in the forefront of our minds, 9-1-1 personnel also have to consider diet. Does your diet say *fitness*?

To jumpstart a healthy lifestyle, eat a healthy meal before going to work. One of the things that I hear quite often from students when I teach stress awareness is, "I don't have time to eat breakfast," or "I don't like to eat breakfast."

My reply, "Would you drive your car without putting gasoline in the tank?" It doesn't matter what time you wake up, if you're on day, swing or night shift, your body needs fuel to start its day. A healthy meal does not include a quick trip to the vending machine for a sugar and caffeine fix.

Also, when you're scheduled to go to work, take a healthy meal with you. Some of my favorite excuses for skipping lunch include: "I have to eat fast food. I don't have time to pack my lunch. We don't have a kitchen in our center." And, best of

all, "I don't have time to eat."

We can't perform at our best if we don't feed our bodies. Your body needs fuel for both your mental and physical fitness. Failing to fuel your body can lead to fatigue, irritability and difficulty concentrating. Eating a well-balanced meal can increase your stamina and make you a more productive, safer worker.

When you're packing your lunch, be careful not to pack things high in sugar and fat. I know you *know* this, but do you *do* it? When you need a snack, instead of eating a candy bar and drinking a soft drink, try a low-sugar, low-fat snack, and drink water. Eating a candy bar and drinking a soft drink will lead to a sugar high and ultimately a crash—a mental and physical energy crash. One regular soft drink is equal to ingesting approximately two-and-a-half cups of sugar at one time, and we all know about the enormous amount of sugar in a candy bar.

A few eating facts:

- Eating vegetables can increase your body's ability to produce serotonin, which is one of the happiness-inducing messengers secreted by the brain.
- Complex carbohydrates, such as cereals, rice, pasta, bread and potatoes, break down slowly and release their sugars over longer periods of time. These sugars are more beneficial than those found in soda and candy bars.
- Eating more frequent, small meals instead of a few large ones helps keep blood sugar stable.

Drink plenty of water. Did you know that the body can go for weeks without food, but a person of average size needs two-and-a-half quarts of water daily to keep functioning? Coffee, tea and soda just won't hydrate you as efficiently as water. Be sure to include at least eight, 8 oz. glasses of water per day in your 9-1-1 fitness plan.

REST

Finally, 9-1-1 personnel must make sure they get enough rest. The average adult requires seven to eight hours of sleep. Although the proper amount of rest dif-



Make the healthy choice. Eat plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables. Consider snacking on carrot or celery sticks instead of candy or chips.

fers from person to person, it's important that you listen to your body to determine what your ideal amount of sleep is. Albert Einstein claimed to have thrived on only two hours of rest per day. That amount may have worked for him, but is it enough sleep for you?

Here are some tips to help you get the rest you need:

- Take a warm bath or shower before you go to bed.
- Read at bedtime.
- Listen to classical or New Age music at bedtime. Doing this has been shown to help people suffering from insomnia fall asleep. The music matches body rhythms and slows the heart rate.
- Avoid stimulants, such as caffeine and nicotine, for several hours before bedtime.
- Don't use alcohol to induce sleep. As its sedative effect wears off, alcohol can trigger wakefulness.
- Don't rely on sleeping pills. They can disrupt your sleep/wake cycle if you depend on them too much.
- Squeeze in fitness. Studies have shown that people who exercise not only sleep almost an hour longer than those who don't, but they also fall asleep in half the time.

How fortunate is the person who is too busy to worry during the day and too sleepy to worry at night? Or for those who work midnight shifts, how fortunate is the person who is too busy to worry all night and too sleepy to worry during the day?

FINAL THOUGHTS

It's time for 9-1-1 telecommunicators and radio and IT engineers to get to work. Remember, taking care of your attitude

and mental health is just as important as taking regular breaks, eating well and exercising.

We've examined five areas for you to consider to improve your 9-1-1 fitness. Although old habits are hard to break, try to keep a positive attitude, stay focused and ease into change. Start by writing down what you want to accomplish, and post that goal in a place you can see every day. Set realistic goals, and set deadlines for meeting those goals. Remember, a yard is hard, but an inch is a cinch. Also share your goals with someone. It's easier to stay on track when you've verbalized your goals. Once you list what you want to accomplish, prioritize your goals and check them off as you complete them.

Who's the most important person during a 9-1-1 emergency call? It's fit-for-duty you. If you're involved in a 9-1-1 situation and are not up on your 9-1-1 fitness, what are the chances that you'll make the right decision in a critical situation? Would you want someone that was not mentally fit answering your call for help? Every good football team has a quarterback who starts the play, and in the world of emergency management services, the quarterback is you. **||PSC||**

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1. **The fundamental difference between the optimist and pessimist is the way they view the world, the way they perform and the way they respond to difficulties.**
 - a. True
 - b. False

2. **Seventy-five to ninety percent of all doctor visits result from individuals who are actually sick.**
 - a. True
 - b. False

3. *Fill in the blanks: Walking is easy on your mind because it (a)_____ and (b)_____.*
 - a)_____
 - b)_____

4. *Fill in the blanks: "Fit for duty" can include your _____ and _____ health.*
 - a)_____
 - b)_____

5. **What exercise has the lowest dropout rate?**
 - a. Biking
 - b. Walking
 - c. Swimming
 - d. None of the above

6. (a)_____ and (b)_____ can increase your mental and physical health.
 - a)_____
 - b)_____

7. **Who is the most important person in this article?**
 - a. Your family
 - b. Your supervisor
 - c. You
 - d. All of the above

8. **Foods high in sugar will increase your productivity.**
 - a. True
 - b. False

9. *Fill in the blanks: One suggestion that you can do at your console is to take (a)_____ - second breaks every (b)_____ minutes to stretch and move.*
 - a)_____
 - b)_____

10. *Fill in the blanks: Most adults require _____ to _____ hours of sleep each night.*
 - a)_____
 - b)_____

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