



We tend to equate a powerful mind with being mentally fit, but this is really a misunderstanding of mental fitness. In fact, our minds will tend to limit us at every turn and drain our power away. We need to “get out of our minds” to see situations more clearly. Mental fitness is not concerned with the mind, per se, but rather with awareness. Someone who is mentally fit is aware.

We all have a certain degree of awareness, but how can we become aware of mental processes currently unknown to us? We begin by understanding the mind’s tendencies. Once we make this initial crack in our mind’s armour, we’ll begin developing mental skills that will destroy its limiting hold on us.

Our minds do have useful intelligence, an essential asset that we utilize during the preparation process of risk assessment. Before we can utilize this intelligence, however, we need to understand the destructive traits – the illness – our minds have that limits our awareness.

Our minds have specific limiting tendencies such as being comfort-seeking, thinking in all-or-nothing ways, and tricking us into bypassing stress. We need to notice when our minds distract attention due to these tendencies and learn to redirect attention. In short, we need to develop an appropriate relationship with the mind so we can use its intelligence and diminish the limiting tendencies that hold us back.

In 2006 I was putting up a first ascent on Whitesides Mountain in North Carolina. I had climbed half a pitch the previous year before the cliff was closed for falcon nesting. Now the cliff was open again and I was waiting in the Whitesides parking lot for my partner to show up. He was late and it was looking like he wouldn’t arrive. I began to feel that familiar mixture of disappointment and relief. I felt disappointed that I wouldn’t be able to climb; I felt relief that I wouldn’t have to deal with the stress associated with putting up a first ascent. Another friend, Bill Sabine from Atlanta, was hanging out in the parking lot planning to go hiking. We talked while I waited for my partner, and inside my head, the mental chatter began. “Without a partner I have an excuse to go home. Wait, maybe Bill could be my partner. No, he hasn’t expressed any interest in climbing today. Anyway, I’m getting too old for this nerve-wracking first-ascent business...” Then Bill piped up and said, “I’d love to

Photo Scott Perkins

Mental Fitness Illness

Story by Arno Ilgner