

Implementing a Mental Wellness Fast: An Intervention Strategy for
Regulating the Negative Inner Dialogue
by

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The mental wellness fast was created to assist individuals who desire faith-based intervention while in therapy. The term “mental wellness fast” has been coined by this author and it is very similar to the variety of anonymous programs [i.e., alcoholic’s anonymous, debtor’s anonymous, and narcotic’s anonymous] that promotes relying on a source greater than mankind to facilitate change. This developing technique could be utilized as a milestone approach to regulate a state of mind that is stuck in cynical thinking, and will allow the client to be more aware of his/her own inner pessimistic thoughts and responses. Fasting has been a religious practice for centuries and it is seen as a covenant that an individual makes with God to venture into a realm of intense spiritual awakening for a designated period of time. From a Christian standpoint, the Bible does not give explicit rules on fasting. However, many dictionaries define fasting as abstaining from eating food, and traditionally people would give up certain foods from their diet to rely solely on God to receive inner strength by practicing meditation and devotion. Bergant (2003) suggests that, “Today we may have to discover new ways of appreciating fasting” (p. 31). She presumes that in contemporary society many people fast to lose weight and may not be driven by spiritual reasoning. In brief, fasting is commonly practiced perhaps to receive self-healing and/or family-healing, demonstrate perseverance via petitions for change, give God praise, show repentance, develop a

better relationship with God, thank God for giving unmerited favor in life situations, and perhaps many other beliefs. The mental wellness fast does not necessarily require giving up food totally; however, the individual is recommended to have a balanced diet that is free of alcohol, unhealthy food, caffeine, and illegal substances. A mental wellness fast requires a commitment by the client to change how he/she thinks in regards to his/her stressful and/or conflict inducing situations, and he/she should consistently refer to his/her goals and prayer that were personally written for his/her mental wellness fast. This fast assists clients to remain aware of self-defeating remarks they say to themselves and/or perhaps ponder on a daily basis. It is perhaps best recommended for clients who seek help for their cynical inner and/or perhaps outer dialogue responses, and who are committed to change.

In the field of counseling, Carl Rogers proclaimed that being in mental distress does not necessarily mean that a person is diseased and many people who are mentally distressed can be helped without the assistance of prescribed drugs (Kirschenbaum, 2004). Therefore, this intervention can be beneficial for individuals who are seeking a technique that will assist them while encountering mental distress. Also, this technique is rooted in cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) and has a person-centered aspect. “CBT premise is that people’s thoughts about events lead to emotions, and CBT works by changing detrimental thoughts” (Turis & Cochran, 2006). Its person-centered aspect reveals when a client expresses that he/she is determined to change and/or perhaps no longer desires current behavior and wants to learn new ways to make positive change. For many clients, desiring to take steps to change is a pivotal point in addressing personal conflicts. The individual has acknowledged the conflict within him/herself and is ready

to make decisions on how to change (Alschuler & Alschuler, 1984). Social research has already proven that behavioral and cognitive barriers develop from various complex situations and relationships, which compromise social, cultural, and personal values. As counselors, we know that during the course of life's journey problematic issues degenerate mental wellness and foster individual human discord. Many of us could testify that whatever an individual experiences in his/her environment is internalized, and over time becomes a part of his/her thought processes, especially when similar situations trigger the same frustrations. Most importantly, it is a common practice in our therapeutic work to tackle the results of the human condition in relation to our clients' conflicted experiences.

Kaufman and Raphael (1984) discussed concepts of the inner dialogue by exploring how the self relates to the self. They attest that the most demanding aspect of life is to maintain a satisfying or perhaps a balanced-self after experiencing unexpected negative interruptions during the course of life and/or perhaps living in negative circumstances. These unexpected negative situations impact one's self-esteem, self-worth, self-respect, and self-competence. "What can be most disconcerting, however, is the discovery that our competence is not only undermined by external pressures but by internal forces as well" (Kaufman and Raphael, 1984, p. 239). Kaufman and Raphael (1984) state that, "Not only do our clients need to recognize these disabling patterns [of inner dialogues], but they must also have new self-affirming dialogues to replace them.....relinquishing unsatisfying, undermining dialogues and replacing them with self-affirming ones is an active daily process" (pp. 240-248).

In an effort to address human discord, and change the inner dialogue, Kaufman and Raphael (1984) suggest that therapists should help the client identify self-defeating dialogues that are stated to themselves on a daily basis, as well as identify which situations trigger those dialogues, and create new positive statements that can be recited to the self, which will have a positive influence for the inner dialogue. This is done to regulate behavior and enhance self-realization, which can then nourish mental wellness. They further suggest, “We can appropriately share selected experiences from our own lives which parallel those of our clients and even share how we learned to cope more effectively with them” (Kaufman & Raphael, 1984, p. 247). Although, they have suggested sharing experiences professionally with clients who have poor inner dialogues, an alternative innovative technique would be to guide the client to become more in-line with his/her belief system and how it relates to his/her inner dialogue.

From a more contemporary perspective, Tursi and Cochran (2006) state that clients are requesting techniques that would assist them with having a favorable mental attitude. Therefore, the aim of this intervention strategy is to promote positive inner dialogue dynamics by helping clients become aware of how their thinking impacts their reactions to various situations, while providing spiritual guidance. The mental wellness fast will allow a client to become proactive in regulating his/her own negative inner dialogue and addressing negative situations and/or perhaps circumstances via faith-based practices. Before recommending this technique to a client, the counselor must be aware that the client desires a faith-based intervention, which can become known during counseling sessions. It is also important that this technique is not imposed upon the

client, especially when counselors work in college settings. In public academic settings, the student must give some indication that this type of technique is desired and it is a match with his/her practiced belief system. The following is a well-founded case example of a college student who desired and who was appropriate for practicing a mental wellness fast.

Case Example One

Lily is a 43 year-old mother of two daughters. She is originally from the Caribbean, and she is currently an above average college student. One day she came to meet with a counselor because she was distraught over the mental abuse she was encountering with her paramour with whom she resided. Lilly immediately informed the counselor that she was ready for change. Lily has taken a lot of abuse over the years. She decided to give a history of herself, so her issues could be understood. Lily's issues were complex and devastating. She has encountered child sexual abuse by relatives that resulted in two abortions, had domestic violent relationships, and has been mentally abused by her current paramour as well as was forced [by him] to have two abortions for him.

After listening to her issues, discussing aspects of her belief system, and exploring how she wanted to implement change, it was suggested that she initially try a 30 day mental wellness fast. She was very excited about starting the fast and stated that she was initially afraid of counseling and wanted counseling that applied to her faith-- she needed a form of spiritual guidance. As we completed the mental wellness fast form, more issues surfaced. Lily smoked marijuana joints (one per day). She stated that it was a part of her culture, rather than an addiction, and her boyfriend kept it in the home. Since she has endured so much, it was recommended that with the mental wellness fast, she should focus on eliminating her intake of the marijuana as well as reduce her consumption of coffee and cigarette smoking.

She discussed her consumption amounts of smoking and caffeine and agreed to reduce them by a half. She also agreed to stay away from junk food and eat more healthy food, such as poultry, vegetables, fruit, and plenty of water (she already enjoyed eating healthy). The counselor also used music therapy, as a tool to keep Lily focused. Lily was given a gospel cd by Kirk Franklin entitled "Hero." She was recommended to listen to the music on a daily basis. Lily was also encouraged to use her Gideon's New Testament Bible, which has topics in the table of contents section that guide readers who need guidance on specific issues. Lily was given a mental wellness sheet to complete, and after it was completed, she was recommended to read it throughout the day.

In the following, Lily completed the preliminary steps for the mental wellness fast by completing a mental wellness fast sheet that was originally created by the counselor.

Lily's Completed Fasting Form

Mental Wellness Fast

Starting Date: 5/1/06 Starting Time: 8:00 a.m.

Ending Date: 5/30/06 Ending Time: 6:00 p.m.

Restoring Mental Wellness through Prayerful Intercession-

As you venture into your personalized mental wellness fast, “be renewed in the spirit of your mind.” (Ephesians, chap. 4 vs. 23). “The spirit also helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the spirit makes intercession for us” (Romans, chap. 8 vs. 31). “For those who live according to the flesh, set their minds on things of the flesh, but those who live according to the spirit, the things of the spirit.” (Romans, chapter 8 vs. 5). Be peaceful and know that “if God is for us, than who could be against us” (Romans, chap. 8 vs. 31).

My Cause and reasoning for fasting:

“To clarify and strengthen my whole being. To help make me have a stronger understanding of life, and become a more caring-loving human being. To be able to help my children and their children to be caring, loving, people. To be successful in every endeavor that is good or great in the Lord. To live my life according to the creator of this world.”

Who will I ask to fast with me (it is ok to venture into a fast without others):

At this time, I will not ask anyone to fast with me.

What will I eliminate from my diet and lifestyle?

Eliminating junk food and fast-food, soda, reducing smoking[e.g., 3 cigarettes per day], and being more aware of my negative thinking and negative reactions

What will I eat or drink only (only)?

I commit to eating a balanced diet, drinking water, juice, and only 1 cup of coffee per day

What is my fasting prayer to God? (I will remember this prayer during my fast and I will repeat it to myself to stay conscious of my fast).

“Lord, creator of this universe, please give me the strength to do right, to have a better understanding of the life you have chosen for me and I believe that if you are for me then no one could be against me.”

As you can see, the recommendation for Lily to use the mental wellness technique was given in the initial counseling session, and of course the counselor would need more follow-up sessions with Lily to strengthen rapport. At the same time, Lily went to the counselor when she was at a pivotal point for change. Lily was very frustrated and needed immediate intervention—she needed a buffer for her emotions, and some method for regulating her reaction to what was happening in her life. The good news is that the counselor was able to provide her with a technique that she could practice, that made her feel good and have a feeling of addressing her immediate issues. Most importantly, the technique was something she desired and it complemented her faith. The concept of faith and/or perhaps having some type of belief system is a strong component to addressing problematic aspects of the human condition, and it can become a buffer when confronted with frustration. With this in mind, the following discusses the premise of how this technique was conceptualized.

Philosophical Concept of the Mental Wellness Fast Technique

This creative technique has been built upon a monotheistic paradigm that conceptually surrounds the philosophical reality of God, who is the Creator of life. Thus, a belief system of God, reinforces the truth that God is omnipotent, God has unlimited authority; God is omniscient, God has infinite knowledge; God is transcendent, God is immanent as well as surpasses the physical dimensions of existence as we know it;

therefore, the spirit of God is everywhere, which places human beings in the presence of God at all times. Additionally, God is a social and personal creator; a God who personally created mankind and who desires a personal relationship with his creation. In the realm of this theological truth, by those who live by it, the experience of life compel men and women to seek God's guidance and desire God's presence on a daily basis. However, life's journey includes freewill and these individuals are confronted with the causes and results of freewill, and are also in the presence of those who may not have accepted *God's culture*, which has been defined for this intervention strategy as God's ordinances and commandments. Furthermore, these realities cause individuals to have imbalances in life's journey, and at times, become disconnected from *God's culture*, because of sin and/or perhaps experiences that were founded upon falsehoods. Therefore, in the realm of freewill, sin and falsehoods are perpetuated and co-exist in this experience that we term life.

As a result of social experiences, an invisible continuum develops throughout life's journey for individuals who strive for a peaceful life. Individuals who apply God's culture to his/her lifestyle usually desire to have whatever he/she may perceive as a satisfying relationship with God, which could be nurtured via having a personal relationship with God, having inner peace, fellowship with other believers, and being able to perform God's work that has been individually pre-determined for them by God. So, for many, there is an inner [personal] tussle to strive to apply God's culture to a conflicted-self, as well as co-exist in a gratifying society, which has many social aspects that function against *God's culture*. Situations that arise from this lack of harmony can be identified in problematic family systems that may derive from unresolved generational

behaviors, financial hardships, conflicting intimate relationships, illness, and other social ills as well as life challenges that breed disappointment, confusion, anger, and/or perhaps rage. Thus, from a theological aspect, Fotiou (2000) expounded on how negative inner dialogues could hinder being progressive in today's society. He attests that an individual's level of well being could be recognized by how he/she perceives and responds to situations or perhaps how he/she views the world.

It is unfortunate that frequent poor situational reactions can ruin daily progress for people who believe they have been commissioned to perform God's work, which reinforces their purpose in life. Individual inner dialogues are reflective of the internal spirit. Thus, in the realm of spirituality, this inner dialogue can be nurtured with fasting and prayerful intercession. Fasting fosters a commitment to change and serves as submission to God. This submission demonstrates acknowledgment of God's presence, and is a request to allow God's omnipotence to heal negative inner dialogues, while existing in freewill. Overall, there are a significant number of individuals who are striving for purpose and who may strive to achieve a better outlook on life and have responses that are derivative of prior hurtful experiences. Thus, many of these individuals have mentally bound these poor experiences into cynical thinking. Furthermore, these individuals have pessimistic responses, which expose inner dialogues, and poor inner dialogues are being recycled. Unfortunately, this habitual behavior is self-defeating. To illustrate, the following is another case example of a student who resides in stressful circumstances and whose issues are compounded.

Case Example Two

Rose is an above average college student, who is 27 years-old. Her family is from Guyana, South America. She has no children and resides with her parents and

younger brother. Initially, Rose has been attending counseling to discuss issues with coping with a father who is an alcoholic. Rose was referred to Al-non; however, she only attended one session. She defined her mother as passive and who is a hard-worker, and her father stays home and drinks a lot. Rose has a lot of financial responsibilities, which sometimes angers her because she desires to have a personal life [having her own apartment] and cannot because of family responsibilities. After meeting with Rose, over a duration of 15 months, Rose obtained a better paying job and purchased a home [along with her mother as a co-signer] and reported that everything in the home seems as though it has gotten better. Her father no longer drinks because his doctor informed him that if he does, he will die. She stated that he helps around the home; however, he is not affectionate with her in comparison to how her [paternal] uncle is with his children. Also, her father has expressed that she is smart [to other family members]; however, he does not express that to her nor does he talk to her about different issues. Although Rose has taken great strides in school, work, and home, she continued to ponder fears of failure in different aspects of her life. Rose is a Christian and attends church on a regular basis. She was informed about the mental wellness fast and she was very excited about practicing the fast for 30 days. In the “my cause and reasoning for fasting” section of the mental wellness form, Rose was instructed to outline her fears and desires, which are the following.

- *I will not be good enough at something I want to do.*
- *I will not have healthy, fulfilling relationships.*
- *I worry that I will not make successful career choices.*
- *I have a fear of not being independent, a fear of traveling alone to far places, being a single woman forever.*
- *I can not address problems with family members face to face.*
- *I want a better relationship with my father.*

Rose’s fasting prayer to God

Dear Lord, I am praying for you to increase my faith for my life’s journey that I know have been pre-destined for me by you. I know that you have created me to be good at things that you have for me that are of your will, and I know I have grown up and have witnessed unhealthy relationships. I know with your guidance, I will have healthy relationships for myself and for my lineage. Lord, please continue to guide me to fulfill a career choice you have for me. Lord, restore my confidence for when I travel to see the world that you have created, and protect me with all of my endeavors. Lord, please continue to work with my family. I am grateful for what you have done so far, and I pray for your continued intervention.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Implementation

Both students in the case examples consented to share their information, and the names are fictitious. In the first case example, Lily stated that although she was only able to perform the mental wellness fast for 14 days, she felt strengthened, it allowed her to allocate personal time with God, and helped her be more focused with what she needed to do to become more progressive. For Lily, the mental wellness fast helped her address negative situations and circumstances. After her 14 day fast, she stated that she could no longer reside with her paramour and although he now washes dishes [the ones he uses only], she is making provisions to move. It is significant to note that before implementing the mental wellness fast, Lily desired to stay with her paramour until she completed college because he was not physically abusive. In the second case example, the mental wellness fast assisted Rose while being distressed about having failures in different aspects of her life. Although, she was a academic high-achiever, conflicts in her family caused mental strain regarding personal confidence. Rose was instructed to write out her fears, re-write her fears as a prayer for positive change, and to follow the guidelines of the independently created mental wellness fast. Rose was able to complete the fast for seven days and stated that she found herself eating a lot of unhealthy foods because of her work and school schedules. At this time, she does not feel disciplined enough to practice a healthy diet for the mental wellness fast, but states she will revisit it in the future. For Rose, the mental wellness fast helped her outline personal issues she wanted to address, and it raised her level of awareness of how she perceived aspects of her life, and her prayer helped her to personalize her relationship with God.

This technique could be used to improve the reality, and/or perhaps perception, of negative circumstances and negative inner dialogues. For both of these students, it was

hard to conduct the fast for 30 days; so, it may be recommended for the client to try the fast for a shorter period of time. The mental wellness fast could be modified to 7, 14, 21, or 30 days or more [or less]. Before implementing this technique, the counselor must ask the client what is his/her perception of fasting, to ensure that the client maintains a balanced diet, and not try to abstain from food for a long period of time, especially if they have medical conditions, e.g., diabetes. It may be beneficial for a client to sign a form that outlines the specifics of the fast and their voluntary agreement to engage in the activity. Clients who are appropriate to practice this strategy view the following as values: (a) Have a positive attitude, (b) Desire to positively interact with others, (c) Desire to have individual empowerment, (d) Are determined to change, (e) Desire mental well-being, (f) Desire some form of spirituality in their life, (g) Have a belief in God, who is their source of strength and life, and (h) Aspire or are striving to apply *God's culture* to their lifestyle. Of course this mental wellness fast comes with limitations. Some of these limitations depend upon 1) whether the client has a belief system that is grounded in spirituality and/or perhaps religion, 2) the match between the client's belief system and the counselor's belief system or perhaps the counselor's knowledge of different religions, religious denominations, or spirituality, and 3) the counselor's ability to use spiritual and/or religious terms to empower and guide the client. Carl Rogers noted how patients would resist therapeutic intervention if it went against their personal will for change (Kirschenbaum, 2004). Therefore, it is very important that clients desire this strategy and the implementation of the technique matches the client's religious belief system. Equally important, I have used this developing technique with students who communicate low self-esteem; students who are in conflicted family systems; individuals

whose mothers were non-nurturing parents; students who have identity crises; and with students who were treated inhumane as children.

Brief Bio: Holland, Rochelle A., is an assistant professor at Borough of Manhattan Community College, which is one of 19 colleges that is part of the City University of New York. She has 10 years of counseling ethnically diverse individuals and has an affinity with researching social issues. She enjoys using eclectic counseling strategies for brief therapy intervention with college students. Last, in regards to creating this technique, there is an old saying: “an idle mind is the devil’s playground.”

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