

Students are returning to their schools and colleges this month. Most of them will take a course in a topic like physical education or health education.

Training in programs like these has given us helpful information about such things as how long and how intensely we should exercise, how high our blood pressure ought to be, how many calories, fats grams and carbohydrates various foods contain as well as how best to prevent heart attacks, stroke, injuries, pregnancy and many diseases.

When it comes to our mental health, we do not know much at all about how to take care of ourselves. Many of us have never visited a psychiatrist, counselor, psychologist or social worker. Health insurance programs routinely restrict or deny payments for mental health services. Moreover, millions of Americans do not have health insurance.

Neglecting our mental health produces highly predictable results. One recent example involves a husband who is navigating the unfolding chapters of a marital separation.

His situation has deteriorated to the point that a legal order of protection was issued to assure his wife's safety. She reported to police that he had attempted to choke her.

What is ironic is that he is a man who is generally very well prepared for whatever might befall him in life; there is not much that he couldn't deal with effectively.

Now, he visits a therapist several times a week; he has been calling family members repeatedly for help. Ordered to stay away from his wife, who lives in the family home, he appears desperate, frantic and painfully unprepared to cope with this situation.

This man's reactions and behavior are nearly identical to those of another outwardly calm and collected husband who went through a divorce a number of years ago.

By contrast, the wives of both men had been visiting counselors for some time before their marriages deteriorated to the divorce state.

Despite the fact that both cases involved their husbands' dating publicly, moving to an apartment, and coming and going at will at the marital residence, both wives handled these trying situations with grace and dignity, while also caring for the couples' children.

Each wife gained sufficient courage to stand up for herself effectively, to file for a legal separation and to call the police when her husband became violent. Each protected her children as much as possible, making their welfare her highest priority.

Intense emotional turmoil involving such extremes of behavior as episodes of rage and revenge can lead to such undesirable consequences as alcohol and drug abuse, overeating, overspending, sexual promiscuity, alienation from one's children, even incarceration.

A woman I knew socially, the mother of three teenaged children, coped with her divorce by drinking heavily, using the children as leverage against their father, and by actively plotting revenge. She exhausted her friendships by focusing on “ruining” her husband.

Five years later, her health and physical appearance had deteriorated so much that I did not recognize her when we met; she called out to me and had to remind me who she was.

Her traumatized children rarely visited or called her. She had remarried quickly; her new husband was an alcoholic and she had become one. She did not have a job.

We do not wait until the baby has been born before visiting an obstetrician, we do not wait until our children have a serious disease before getting them vaccinated, and we do not wait until our teeth are wiggling out of our gums before visiting a dentist.

We generally wait until a crisis has occurred before getting mental health help. The possibility that these crises could have been prevented receives little attention. The words “mental” “health” and “promotion” are rarely combined in the same sentence.

Training in mental health skills and strategies can help to reduce psychological damage.

The out-of-control individuals involved in these relationships could have extricated themselves from unworkable situations with far less drama and upheaval if they had previously obtained even brief emotional education and training in several key areas:

- Anger management skills
- Reality checking skills
- Stress management skills
- Training in letting go
- Parenting skills
- Communication skills

Communications training early in these relationships might have helped to prevent their deterioration. It could also help in maintaining relationships with children, parents, other relatives and friends. At a minimum, it would help in negotiating conflict resolutions.

As a community service, over the coming months, our company will be offering 90 minute, low cost training programs to adults in a number of these and other skills areas.

Please visit our website at www.emo-ed.com for information about upcoming events.