

Interview with Vicki Berkus, MD, PhD
Author of Ten commitments to Mental Fitness

Reader Views welcomes Vicki Berkus MD, PhD, and author of “Ten Commitments to Mental Fitness.” Dr. Berkus is being interviewed by Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views.

Juanita: Thanks for joining us today Dr. Berkus. We are very interested in hearing more about your new book “Ten Commitments to Mental Fitness.” Would you start by tell us what is mental fitness, and then what your book is about?

Dr. Berkus: The book is a “how-to” manual for anyone who wants to be more “mentally fit” meaning aware of your feelings, needs, desires, priorities and abilities. This awareness is crucial to making changes.

When someone comes into my office complaining about another person in their life-my first question is always-“What do you need in this relationship?” Nine out of ten responses are “I don’t know”. Well if the person with the complaint doesn’t know what they need, how can the other person in the relationship have a clue? We interact with so many people during a day- we need to check in with ourselves and see how we are doing emotionally before we start interacting with others in a healthy way. It is the unhealthy behaviors such as raging, blaming, using drugs, not holding ourselves accountable that lead to consequences in our lives.

I think all of us at times are not proud of our behaviors but may not know how to change them. This book helps the reader identify what needs to be changed and how to do it. It is so painful to watch someone you care about behave in a way that is self destructive-the feeling of helplessness is not pleasant and this book can help you model healthy behaviors for the people you care about.

Juanita: What inspired you to write your book?

Dr. Berkus: I was inspired by a colleague who was so enthusiastic about his 10 Commitments to being physically fit, that it was catching! I am always amazed when patients respond to a suggestion with- “that sounds so simple, I wish I knew that ___ years ago!” It truly re-enforces my belief that the patient is the book. Each patient is unique in their needs and it was their awareness that is usually keeping them from making better choices in their lives. This awareness may be around relationships, spirituality, family of origin issues, their own needs (I could go on-but my patients told me to “keep it short”. So I did-and the 10 Commitments to Mental Fitness was my way of providing an owner’s manual for establishing a sense of well being. This is my first book, but I have written chapters and articles on obesity, weight loss, eating disorders and mental health issues. I

have had several of my patients thank me for writing the book and were able to use the exercises with positive results . They then go on to tell me of someone else they know that “should read it”.

Juanita: I understand that you’ve been in the field of psychotherapy for many years. What has been your professional background thus far?

Dr. Berkus: My Ph.D is in Biochemistry which is a nice introduction to how the brain works. I then went to medical school and completed a psychiatry residency. I am Board Certified in Psychiatry and Neurology. I received additional training through the International Association of Eating Disorders Professionals (IAEDP) to become a CEDS (certified eating disorder specialist). I headed and in-patient program for patients with bulimia, anorexia and compulsive overeating for several years and now see patients with all types of mental health problems in a private practice setting in Tucson, Arizona.

Juanita: How did you transform your professional insights into guidelines for mental fitness?

Dr. Berkus: I based the chapters on the issues that bring most patients into my office for help. I have watched people’s behaviors cause a lot of pain and sadness when they just needed some help to change some of the beliefs that kept them acting in unhealthy ways. After watching people and hearing their stories, it wasn’t hard to identify major themes in what people do when mentally unfit.

Juanita: What happens when a person doesn’t address their mental fitness/wellness? What are some of the warning signs that they are in trouble?

Dr. Berkus: Several aspects of their lives are affected including their jobs, family relationships, abilities to go and do things, feel good about themselves. I frequently hear that “everything is such an effort” or they struggle to do things that were previously enjoyable. They may be short-tempered, withdrawn, turning to unhealthy behaviors such as drugs, shopping, overeating, sleeping too much.

Juanita: How does someone transform seeing themselves as a victim of their circumstances, to the proactive mindset required to take responsibility for their feelings?

Dr. Berkus: By first realizing what they can and can’t control. If they focus on their behavior rather than someone else’s behavior-it can really be freeing! I start by asking someone to make a pro and con list of their current “trapped situation,” then make small goals to change what they can.

Juanita: What changes will readers experience by following the Ten Commitments outlined in your book?

Dr. Berkus: They will hopefully start to increase their self awareness and look at their behavior with a non-critical eye but one that will be willing to be open to changing their behaviors and thoughts. It will put them in a position of power and self-fulfillment rather than feeling hopeless and stuck in their present behaviors. People will respond to them differently if they feel good about themselves.

Juanita: How is your book set up in relation to chapters, exercises, excerpts/examples, etc?

Dr. Berkus: Each chapter deals with a different Commitment (to self, to spirituality, to relationships, etc). There are examples and simple exercises to help people get honest with their “stuff” and make the changes needed to feel better.

Juanita: Would you give us an example of one of the Commitments, and then show us how the format actually works?

Dr. Berkus: The first Commitment is to Know I Count-which refers to putting yourself first in your list of priorities. We get so busy and involved in our daily routines and commitments that we don't usually take the time to first check in with ourselves. This chapter challenges the reader to practice this by asking 4 questions-a tool given to me as a medical student. I really didn't understand the importance of it until much later. The questions are aimed at getting in touch with one's feelings. How do I feel about today's activities? This question helps the reader find out if they are scared, fearful, angry –is it a doctor's visit or a test in a hard class? We all have feelings about what our day has in store but if we took the time to recognize them and “take action” (do I need to ask a friend to come with me to the doctor, do I need to get support from a fellow student). We can make choices about dealing with our feelings and making them manageable as opposed to stuffing them or letting them get overwhelming. If we take five minutes each morning to check in with our feelings-it sends a message to our sub-conscious that “ I count, my feeling count and my needs count!” So many people wait for validation from external sources which is a set-up for disaster.

Juanita: Dr. Berkus, an integral aspect to the Ten Commitments is behavior – taking responsibility for it, understanding it, changing it, etc. Would you elaborate?

Dr. Berkus: It is so easy to blame others and hang onto anger, fear and sadness. Our feelings are our responsibility-not someone else's. There may be “old tapes” that we hang onto because our parents did it that way or we feel it is too hard to change. So we continue to act out in ways that hurt others and our own well being. Change is hard because it means leaving the predictable (not that it feels good) but we have a level of comfort in predictability. It takes help and motivation to go outside our comfort level-that is what the book is all about.

Juanita: In Ten Commitments, you also ask readers to examine their relationships/roles with others. Would you tell us more on this powerful self-discovery process, and how it applies to mental fitness?

Dr. Berkus: We tend to go to people who tell us what we want to hear – “it's OK to drink” or “you don't need to lose weight” or “it's OK to verbally abuse your wife and kids”. If we have poor boundaries - always giving to others or not knowing how to say no - we will attract people who are “takers”. These unhealthy relationships take a lot of energy to maintain. If someone doesn't have your best interest at heart-do they need to be in your life? Would you be thrilled to hear from them or drop what you are doing to see that person - if the answer is no - why are they part of your life?

A basic part of any relationship is to give clear, consistent messages and develop healthy boundaries.

Juanita: Dr. Berkus, your book is written in a casual, humorous style that is highly relatable to readers. Would you comment on the profound effect of this approach?

Dr. Berkus: I don't know how profound it is but being "human" involves humor. We do things that make us roll our eyes or belly laugh. That is why America's Funniest Home Videos is so attractive-we are funny and if we can use our own level of humanness to put some laughter into our pain, it can make the pain bearable.

Juanita: Who should read your book, and do you recommend that it be used in conjunction with therapy sessions?

Dr. Berkus: I would love to say everyone, but I doubt that a 2 year old would get much out of it. This type of book is for anyone who wants to improve their awareness and behavior - get the most out of every day and like what they see when they end their day feeling good about their choices rather than facing consequences that can get overwhelming.

Juanita: How can readers find out more about you and your endeavors?

Dr. Berkus: My web site is DrBerkus.com and they can order the book through Amazon.com.

Juanita: Dr. Berkus, we thank you for taking the time to talk with us today. We encourage everyone to take a look at their mental fitness, and check out your new book. Do you have any last thought for your readers today?

Dr. Berkus: Yes- each of you is special and deserves to feel good about yourselves, your uniqueness and your choices. I hope that my book allows each of you to make some changes which will bring a sense of well being into your lives that wasn't there before you opened the book.