On Mental Discipline
by Moses Ben Maimon

Moses Ben Maimon, who was also known as Maimonides, was a Jewish philosopher and physician who lived in Islamic Spain and Egypt in the 12th century. Maimonides tried to reconcile philosophy and religion with scientific studies. He wrote Rules of Health, a health regimen for Saladin's son, Sultan al-Malik al-Afdal, in about 1198. As you read this passage, think about the medical, religious, and philosophical ideas Maimonides expresses.

Section 3

It is well known to our master—may God grant him a long life—that emotions of the soul affect the body and produce great, significant and wide-ranging changes in the state of health. Physicians therefore advise that the emotions of the soul be watched, regularly examined, and kept well balanced. The physician should see to it that the sick and healthy alike be of cheerful disposition; emotions that cause upset and disorders should be smoothed out. This is essential for the cure of every patient, and especially for the care of mental cases like hypochondria, depressed and melancholy persons. Likewise, in the case of a patient who is afflicted by hallucinations or nervous anxiety in matters that should not cause distress, or by lack of cheerfulness in matters that usually cause joy, the physician should apply no treatment before he removes the irritating condition.

The physician should not consider the treatment of upset emotions a medical skill. It is rather a problem of practical philosophy and religious ethics. Philosophers who have written books on many branches of science have also dealt in numerous works with the training of character, with spiritual education, and with the matters of acquiring virtues. They show the ways by which to remove character-faults so that the disposition to wrong action may disappear.

We find emotional affections of great intensity only in persons who have no notion of philosophical principles, of religious ethics, and of ethical teachings in general. Such persons are unbalanced, timid and unenergetic. Distress and misfortune aggravate their trouble so that they scream and cry and strike their cheeks and chest; some persons are so completely unnerved by misfortune that they die suddenly or after a short time as a result of it. And, likewise, if persons of this kind meet with good luck, they become overexcited. Those lacking psychological balance exaggerate the importance of the lucky circumstance to such an extent that they die in excess of joy. . .

Those, however, who are trained in philosophy and in religious and general ethics gain strength thereby. Their souls are only slightly exposed to extraneous influences. The more mental training man has, the less affected he will be by luck or misfortune. He will not get excited over a very fortunate event and will not exaggerate its value. Likewise, if one meets disaster, he will not be disturbed and aggrieved, but will bear it valiantly. This discourse does not intend to demonstrate the truth of this thesis. Much has already been written on it at various times and among civilized nations that cultivate the sciences. Your servant only desired to set forth a few simple remarks on mental discipline and on the usefulness of ethical literature and the teachings of the wise. They teach how to strengthen the soul that it may regard the truth as true and the false as false. Then the emotions will calm down, and the nervous anxiety disappear; the disposition will be cheerful, regardless of the situation in which a person may find himself.


Research Option

Using Research in Writing Sultan al-Malik al-Afdal, the patient for whom Maimonides wrote Rules of Health, suffered from depression. Use print and on-line resources to find out what causes depression, what its symptoms are, and how it is treated today. Then write a brief summary based on your findings.