May the Fourth Be With Your Mental Health

While May is Mental Health Awareness Month, there are more than a few of us who also like to celebrate May 4th for its official designation as Star Wars Day. After all, aren’t most of us looking for a way to randomly drop “may the force be with you” into our conversations?

Mark Leavell, Star Wars aficionado and Great Circle’s western region director of home and community-based services suggests each of us use May 4 to check in on our own force – for our well-being as well as for those we care for.

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This Installment is part of Great Circle’s ongoing Family Strength series to help brighten all futures.

Leavell says it’s critical to be aware of “Dark Side” challenges, such as conflict, social isolation or disconnection which can contribute to addictive behavior. “We’re social beings, and that sense of connection to others is crucial,” he says. “In order to feel stronger, we all need to know someone cares about us.”

How can you stay one with the Force?

1. **Take care of your own mental and physical health first.** “It’s much like when you’re on a plane and the flight attendant reminds us to put on our own oxygen mask before trying to assist others,” Leavell says. “When you’re thinking clearly and feeling strong, you can interact more positively and set a better example for your loved ones.”

2. **Use humor to defend against the “Dark Side.”** Have fun and let a little levity into your daily life whenever possible. “It’s healthy for kids to see their parents being silly and enjoying life,” says Leavell. “It helps them learn to laugh at themselves and offers a model for how to cope with stress. Plus, it’s a great way to build a strong parent-child bond.” For grown-ups, humor balances with the all-too-often serious side of adulthood, and can ensure we don’t follow a negative path.

3. **“Be mindful of your thoughts, Anakin. They’ll betray you.”** Obi-Wan’s sage advice is an important reminder for each of us to pay attention to how stress affects both our physical health and our psychological response. “The mind is a powerful thing,” Leavell says. “If you’re dealing with a lot of anxiety or pressure, the world can seem very cold. You might clench your teeth, or experience neck or back pain or aching joints. You might eat too much or not enough. You may feel so depressed you can’t get out of bed.” He suggests the BREAD plan: 
   - **Breathe deeply** to reduce the “fight or flight” response caused by stress;
   - **Relax your mind**;
   - **Exercise** for at least 20 minutes every day;
   - **bolster your Attitude** through positive people and activities;
   - **maintain a healthy Diet**.

4. **Seek help to reach the “Light Side.”** Poor Darth Vader made the mistake of thinking he could control everything and everyone around him,” says Leavell. “He also isolated himself physically and emotionally from others.” But just as Yoda helped Luke discover the power of the Force within him, parents and families can discover their stronger selves by seeking help from trained professionals. “Great Circle offers individualized tools and therapies to help people who “feel isolated or stuck in a ‘circular’ mode of thinking, which can only increase anxiety and other symptoms,” Leavell says. “Great Circle’s clinicians are available to help families handle pressures in healthy ways.”

“Remember, the mind is part of the body, so there are deep parallels between mental health and physical health,” Leavell explains. “Behavioral therapy is a lot like physical therapy – it can be painful at times, but it also helps you get stronger, and ensures that the Force will be with you…always.”

Great Circle provides a unique spectrum of behavioral health services for children, adults and families facing personal challenges or difficult circumstances. For more information about Great Circle’s parenting programs that help strengthen children and families, visit greatcircle.org.