

The HARDEST PART of Being a MISSIONARY

Sometimes the biggest challenge in missionary work isn't missionary work.

By Wendy Ulrich, PhD

A missionary once told me, “When people said a mission was going to be hard, I assumed that meant I’d be cold or face difficult living conditions or struggle with the language. But for me the hardest part is what goes on in my head—like feeling discouraged or getting frustrated with companions or not liking talking to strangers—just dealing with all the ups and downs, the rejection, the change.”

To prepare for a mission, you can and should read *Preach My Gospel*, study the scriptures, and learn how to cook and do laundry. But you should also get practical experience now with the *emotional, social, and other* skills you’ll need as a missionary. Here’s a list of some of these skills. You can check off one or two of them to start practicing now.

The Skills of Being Humble without Feeling Humiliated

A sister missionary in Alabama, USA, told me, “I guess I thought when they set me apart, somehow I was going to get superpowers. So it was kind of a shock to me to find out when I arrived in my mission that I was still just me. I still had my same weaknesses, fears, and inadequacies. And those really haven’t gone away. I’ve had to learn how to deal with feeling inadequate at doing the Lord’s work.”

Whether you come into the mission with many successes under your belt or few, if you are humble, teachable, and willing to

keep trying and working, the Lord can work with you. But your missionary skills will only improve as you practice, ask questions, get help, and keep trying. If you are convinced that people are just naturally good (or naturally bad) at missionary work, languages, testimony, or relationships, you’ll have a harder time.

A missionary once said to me, “I’ve had to learn that it’s the Lord’s work, not mine. And it’s OK if I feel inadequate at it because I *am* inadequate. I’ll never be adequate to do what only God can do. There’s a lot I can do to improve, but I don’t have to figure it all out by myself. I can count on Him.”



Try doing new and hard things. Then you'll learn not to take feelings of inadequacy too seriously. For example:

- Try things that take you a little out of your comfort zone, like new jobs, extracurricular activities, or unfamiliar classes. Ask questions, get help, analyze mistakes, and keep trying. Take on things you must practice and work at so you learn to trust that you *will* improve with effort.
- Talk back to voices in your head that tell you people are either born with talent, intelligence, or social skills or they aren't. The world's greatest athletes, musicians, scholars—and missionaries—experience many failures and practice many hours on their way to success.



The Skills of Facing Possible (and Actual) Rejection

Rejection and disappointment are daily experiences on a mission. Practice taking risks and facing rejection so you get better at taking them in stride.

- Apply for a job, do job interviews, and work part-time or full-time.
- Try out for a team or a play.
- Ask people on dates or to activities.
- When things don't go well, notice thoughts and actions that help you cope and feel better.
- Learn from setbacks and try again.

The Skills of Managing Motivation

We all have to figure out how to motivate ourselves when we're bored and calm ourselves down when we're overstressed.

- If a situation is boring or not progressing, become curious about what's wrong and how to fix it, make a game out of it, or figure out what you can learn.
- Notice when you're overstressed and learn things you could still do on a mission to calm down (talk to someone, relax, write, sing, walk). Take a step back, break the problem down, involve others, take small steps, pray, and talk back to negative thoughts.

The Skills of Managing Differences

Companions, leaders, members, and investigators will be wonderful but will also try your patience at times.

Practice with siblings and friends to:

- Learn to appreciate others by asking why they do what they do.
- Take responsibility and sincerely apologize when your behavior hurts someone, even if you didn't intend harm.
- Look for a compassionate explanation for another's behavior. Don't hold a grudge.
- Bring up a problem and ask for help solving it rather than blaming or stewing.
- When conflict arises, use a soft voice and show respect for others' feelings.
- Be a roommate with someone who's different from you. Be positive and curious about their preferences.



The Skills of Conversation

Whether you're an introvert (shy) or an extrovert (outgoing), you can learn the skills of good conversation you'll need on a mission and throughout your life.

If you're more of an introvert:

- Set a goal to talk to someone new (especially unfamiliar adults) for five minutes every week.
- Smile, be curious about people, and learn good questions that get others talking.
- Figure out ways to start a conversation and to graciously end a conversation.
- Notice when others are trying to start a conversation so you can be open and responsive.

If you're more of an extrovert:

- Draw out others by asking questions.
- Practice being a good listener.
- Look for signs that your listener is tiring. Give others space.

The Physical Skills of Well-Being

As a mission president, my husband talked to one missionary who was really depressed and struggling. My husband felt impressed to ask him, "So, Elder, what did you have for breakfast?"

"Ice cream."

"What did you have for lunch?"

"French fries."

"What did you have for dinner?"

"French fries and ice cream."

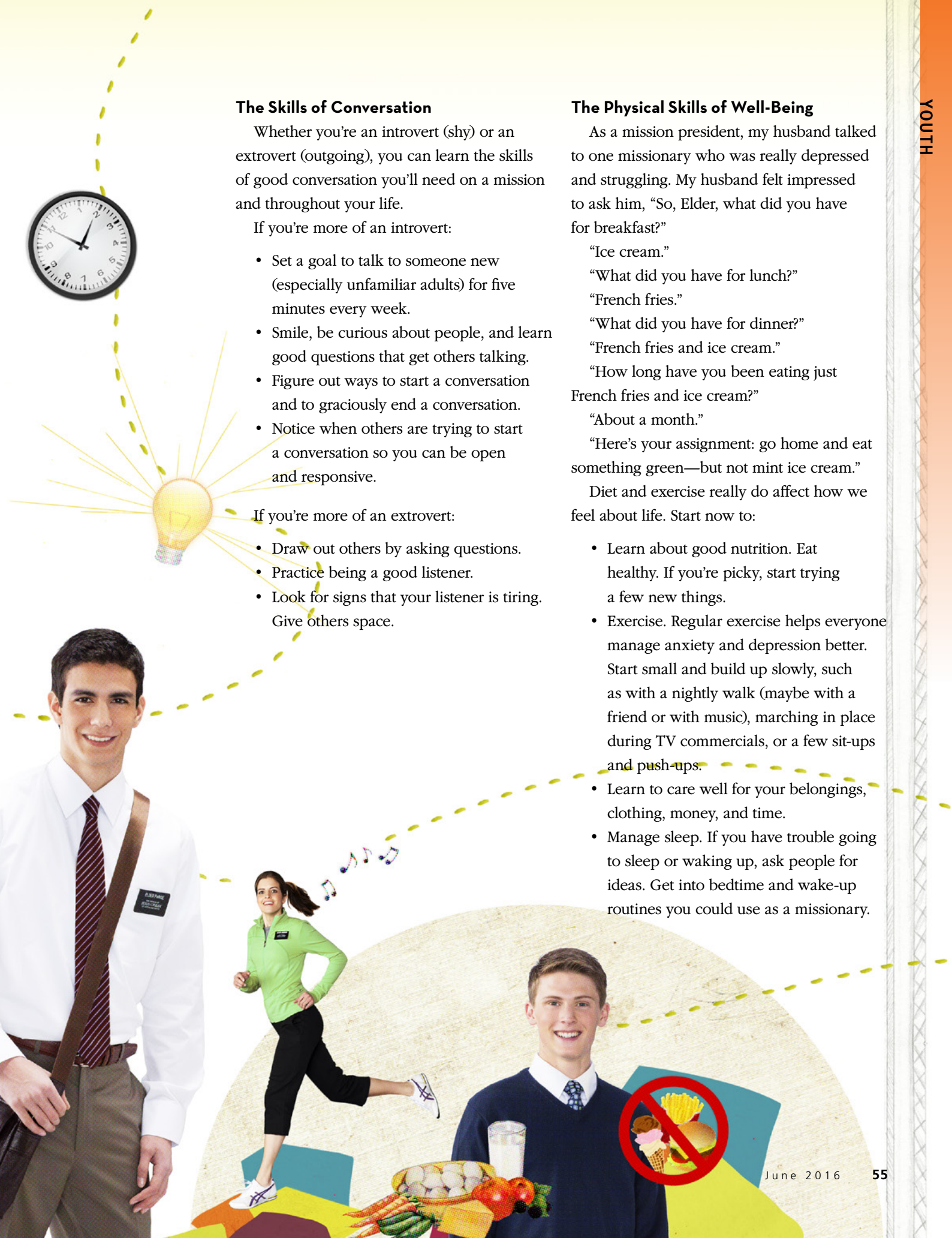
"How long have you been eating just French fries and ice cream?"

"About a month."

"Here's your assignment: go home and eat something green—but not mint ice cream."

Diet and exercise really do affect how we feel about life. Start now to:

- Learn about good nutrition. Eat healthy. If you're picky, start trying a few new things.
- Exercise. Regular exercise helps everyone manage anxiety and depression better. Start small and build up slowly, such as with a nightly walk (maybe with a friend or with music), marching in place during TV commercials, or a few sit-ups and push-ups.
- Learn to care well for your belongings, clothing, money, and time.
- Manage sleep. If you have trouble going to sleep or waking up, ask people for ideas. Get into bedtime and wake-up routines you could use as a missionary.





The Skills of Positivity

- Develop a sense of humor. Laugh at yourself, not at others. Don't take everything so seriously that you stress yourself out.
- Ask former missionaries to tell you something that was hard for them and how they coped with it. Find ideas you can use.
- List scriptures and hymns that uplift you and fill you with faith.
- Talk back to the negative voice in your head with something positive. If that voice is sarcastic, belittling, shaming, angry, cruel, or makes you feel hopeless or helpless, it's not from the Lord. His voice will always be hopeful, encouraging, and compassionate, especially when you're trying.

The Spiritual Skills of Well-Being

- Really pray. Invite Heavenly Father to sit near you, and talk to Him openly about your problems, desires, and gratitude. Try praying out loud, praying with a paper and pencil to record impressions, or praying only to give thanks.
- Study the scriptures. Look for and expect answers to your concerns.
- Be a missionary now. Go out and serve with the full-time missionaries, let the topic of the gospel come up in everyday conversations with your friends, and bear an honest testimony at church. You'll get more excited about missionary work as you do it. ■

The author lives in Utah, USA.

TWO TYPES OF PEOPLE WHO OFTEN STRUGGLE

People who struggle emotionally on a mission often include:

- **Those who got through school without having to work very hard.** People who are smart or talented enough to get by without having to work very hard may see their gifts as a kind of magic. When the magic breaks down (and it always does at some point), they don't know what to do except try to hide their mistakes. Eventually everyone has to learn to be humble, work hard, practice, get help, and overcome obstacles and failures to keep growing and improving.
- **Those who never experienced much success.** Some people see difficulties as confirmation that they're dumb or untalented. But anyone's brain gets smarter and more capable when they focus, analyze what went wrong, try creative solutions, get help, work hard, and practice.

If you're in either group, remind yourself often that no one is born an amazing missionary. Missionary skills develop with practice, lots of hard work, taking risks, overcoming obstacles, trying again after mistakes, learning from others, and complete reliance on the Lord. He loves you and will help you fulfill your personal as well as full-time mission.

PREPARING FOR MISSIONARY LIFE

For more ideas on how to prepare for a mission right now, get the resource booklet Adjusting to Missionary Life at store.lds.org or through your bishop.

