



Mental Fitness and why you need to build it

- By Dr Gareth Furber
- Psychologist [*BPsych (Hons), PhD (Clin. Psych)*]
- eMental Health Project Officer
- Health, Counselling and Disability Services
- www.flinders.edu.au/mentalfitness
- www.flinders.edu.au/hcd

**What constitutes a satisfying
and/or rewarding life and how
do you achieve it?**

I can't answer that question specifically for each of you.....

I can provide some **guidance** based on the idea that we are connected by our common humanity and that there are consistencies between the fields of psychology, medicine, philosophy and theology in terms of what constitutes a good life.

That **guidance** may help you in answering the question for yourself.

That sounds great but I have no idea where to start or how to get there...

Don't worry. I'll be covering the basics in this presentation. At the end of this presentation I will give you some simple clear starting points for where you might start your journey of building a rewarding and satisfying life.

I can barely cope with the demands of everyday life, let alone worry about building the best life possible...

The ideas, concepts and starting points I discuss in this presentation can be used to help you refine and simplify your academic life, freeing up time and resources to manage the other aspects of your life.

I feel like I am doing pretty well in that area – I am happy with my life as it stands...

Compare the strategies you are using in your own life with the ones outlined in this presentation.



The guidance I provide takes the form of my **Mental Fitness Model**.

It is a model for building/expanding your mental and psychological capacity and draws primarily from my ongoing reading of the psychological literature.

As you strengthen your mind you get better at:

- Taking advantage of the opportunities that present to you.
- Coping with the inevitable challenges of life.

This is both a recipe for handling everyday stressors, but also a recipe for helping you build a rewarding and satisfying life.

Disclaimer:

Your mental and psychological capacity generally improves with age, education and experience.

I'm simply inviting you to take a more active role in its development.



Fast forward to the end...

- Know what **mental fitness** is
- Know **why** you should build it
- Know **how** to build it
- Have a **5-step program** to get you started that is focused on the student journey

Mental Fitness Definition

Mental fitness is the ability to meet the psychological demands of life.

It isn't just one domain but includes knowledge, skills and performance across a range of domains such as meaning and purpose, emotional intelligence, self-awareness, cognitive ability, social skills, self-care and habit formation.

These are domains that are linked to wellbeing, life satisfaction, quality of life.

It is analogous to physical fitness.

As a set of skills it is closely related to resilience, mental toughness, mental health, mental wellbeing, good psychological health.



Physical Fitness

Train body

Exercise, feed, rest

Use

Growth

Repair/ adapt

How

Aerobic

Strength

Balance

Flexibility



Mental Fitness

Train mind/brain

Exercise, feed, rest

Use

Growth

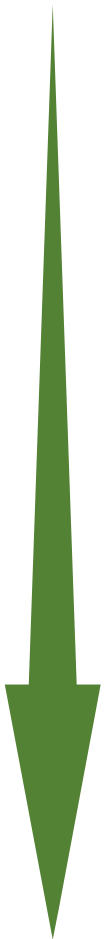
Repair/ adapt

How

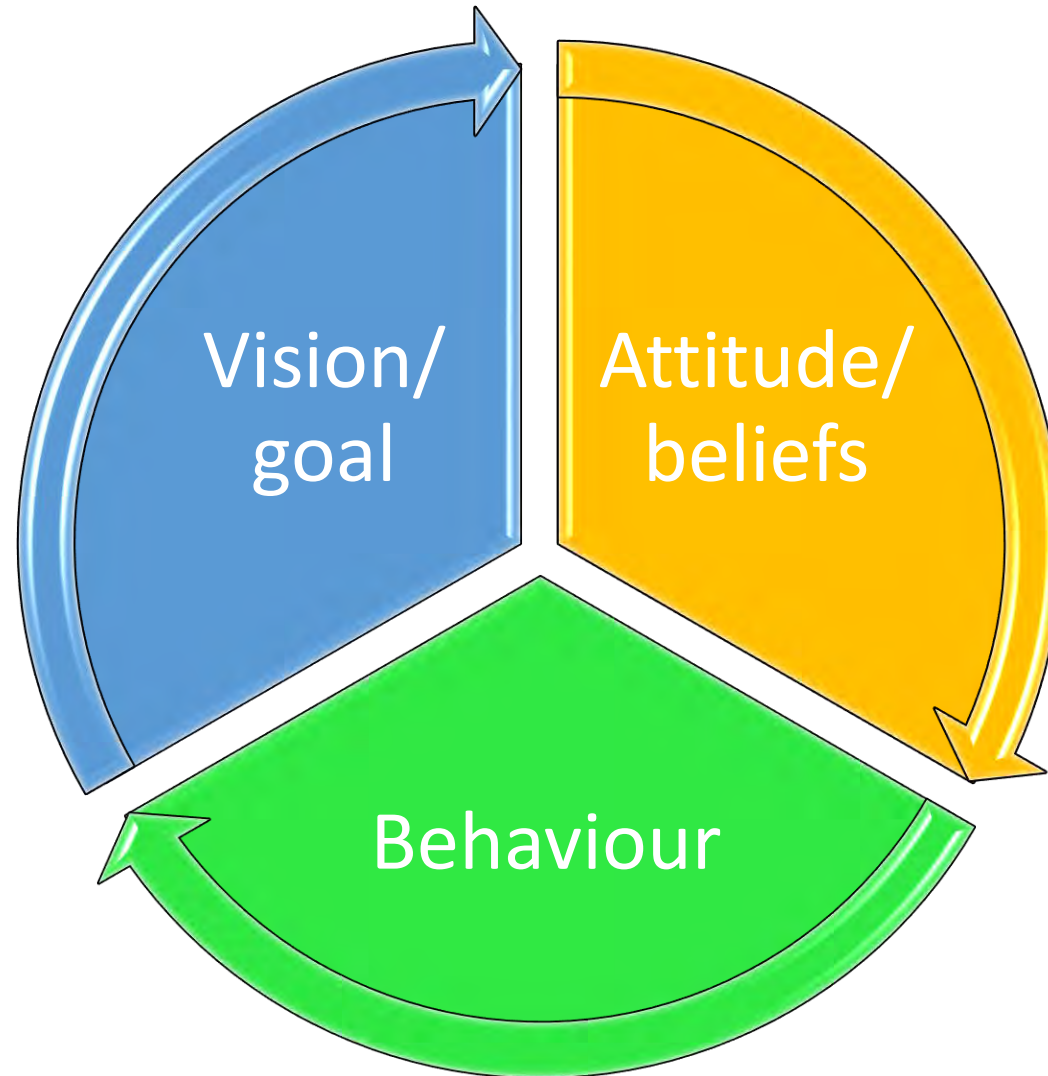
Emotions, thinking, self-awareness, meaning/purpose, relationships, body, finances, safety, environment, study/work skills, habits, helping

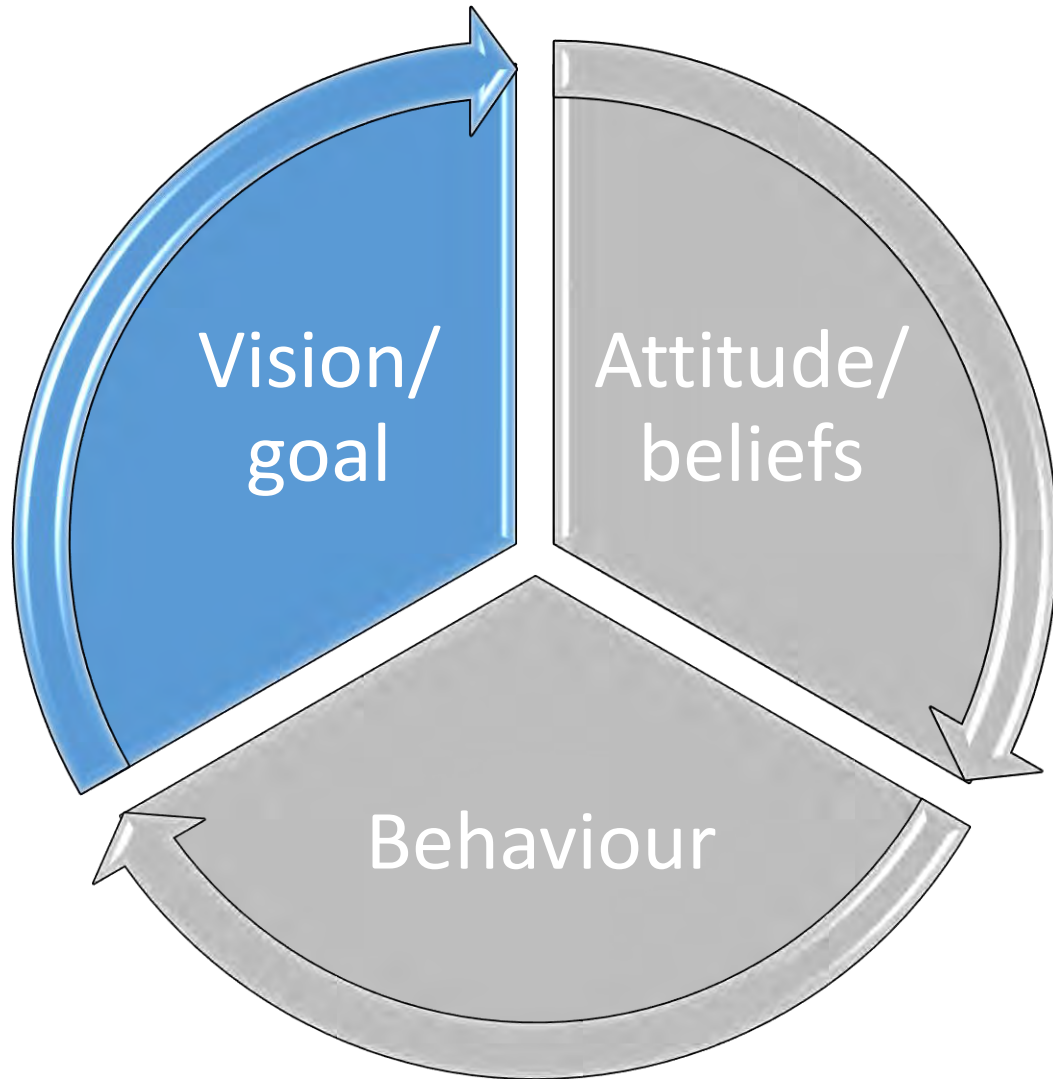
Why would you want to build it?

- You want to do well at your degree and to do this you need to be operating at your best mentally
- You are finding that the psychological demands of everyday life are outstripping your psychological resources
- You've struggled with mental ill health in the past or suspect that you might in the future and want to guard against that
- You currently struggle with mental ill health and want to do everything you can to recover fully
- You plan on building a career in a high performance area and know you'll need every advantage you can get
- You want to be a role model in your career
- You have a vision of yourself in the future and need to improve to get there (values-based living)
- Because you want to live a satisfying and rewarding life.

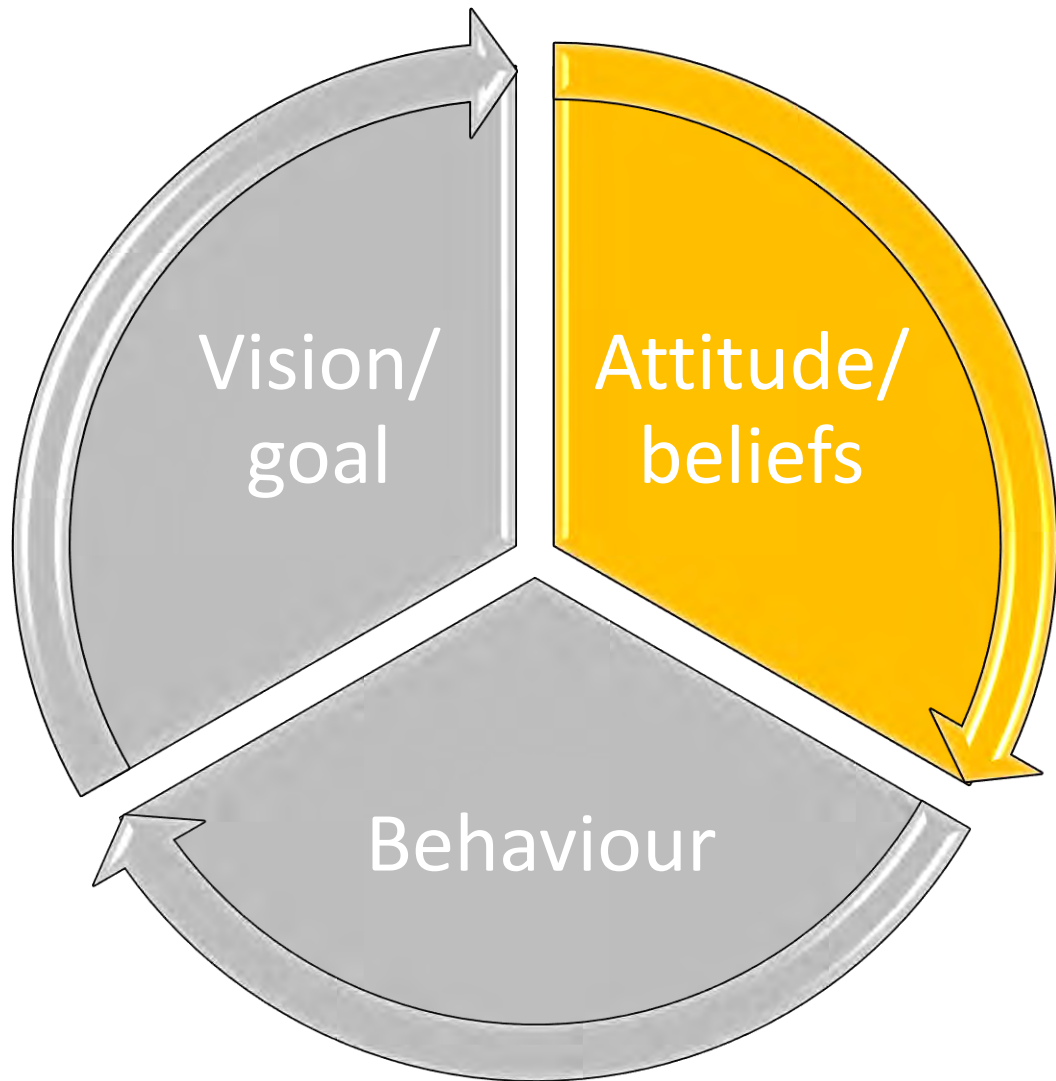


What goes into building it?

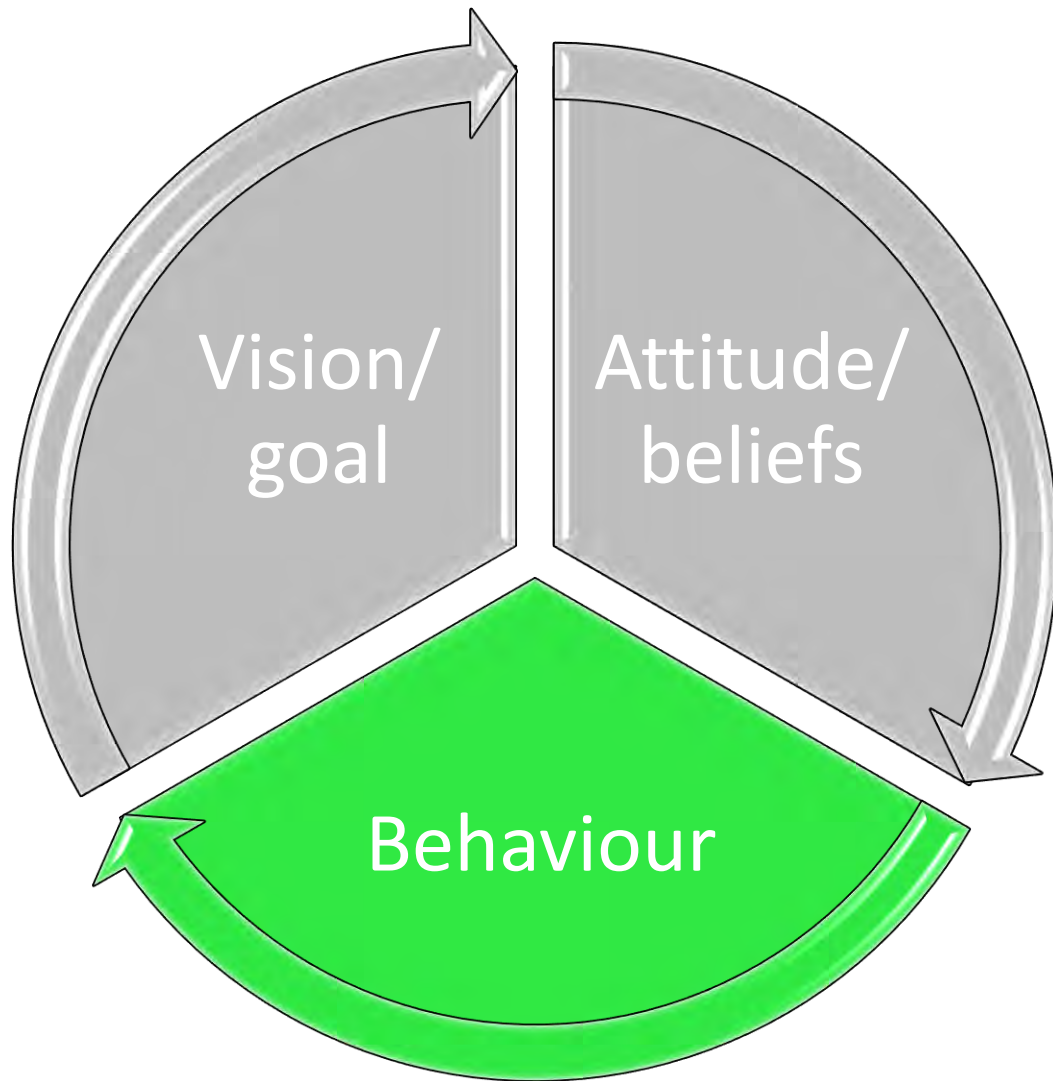




- Know what it is you are working towards/ trying to change
- Discrete tangible goals
- Vision of who you want to be as a person
- Vision of what you want to achieve
- Some desired mental representation of your future self



- You are a 'work in progress'
- Perfection is impossible but growth/ improvement is normal/desirable/ achievable
- Willingness to fail/ self-compassion
- Openness/interest in evidence-based knowledge about mental health and wellbeing

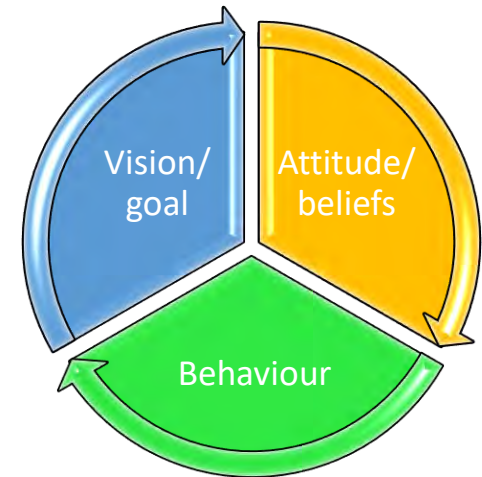


Self experimenter

- Set micro goals
- Acquire evidence-based knowledge
- Translate this knowledge into new skills
- Form new habits
- Evaluate whether those habits lead to the changes you want

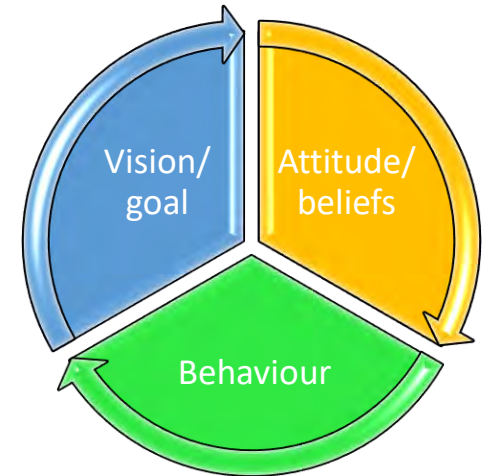
Mental Fitness in action - Example 1 – coping with adversity

- Determine that you are anxious a lot of the time and it is getting in the way of your studies
- You learn that there are online programs you can access to treat anxiety - <https://mindspot.org.au/>
- You access the program which teaches you skills to manage anxiety
- You become proficient in those skills
- You implement them in your own life and assess whether your anxiety is improving
- Your anxiety does improve, and you continue to use those skills on a daily basis



Mental Fitness in action - Example 2 – desire for growth

- You want to free up time to devote to your studies
- You determine your time spent on email and social media is eating into your available time
- You read about some productivity hacks involving ‘inbox zero’
- You learn the specifics of how to implement ‘inbox zero’
- You assess whether implementing it has freed up time and/or mental space to devote to your studies
- You find it has not had much of an effect
- You continue your search for productivity hacks



Skill Domains

- **M**astering emotions
- **T**hinking effectively
- **S**elf-awareness and understanding
- **M**eaning and purpose
- **B**uilding positive relationships
- **C**aring for your body
- **F**inancial control
- **P**ersonal safety
- **S**haping your environment
- **C**ognitive enhancement
- **A**dvanced study skills
- **W**ork skills
- **H**abit formation
- **H**elping others
- **P**lay and Fun

Mental Fitness Workout: 5-Step Plan - Student Edition

- Priority skills and habits for tertiary students
- Aspirational – get as close as you can
- Bite off as much as you think you can reasonably do as a first step, and build from there
- Same applies as above
 - Goal/vision
 - Attitude/beliefs
 - Behaviour



Mental Fitness Workout: 5-Step Plan – FISC Student Edition (V1.2)

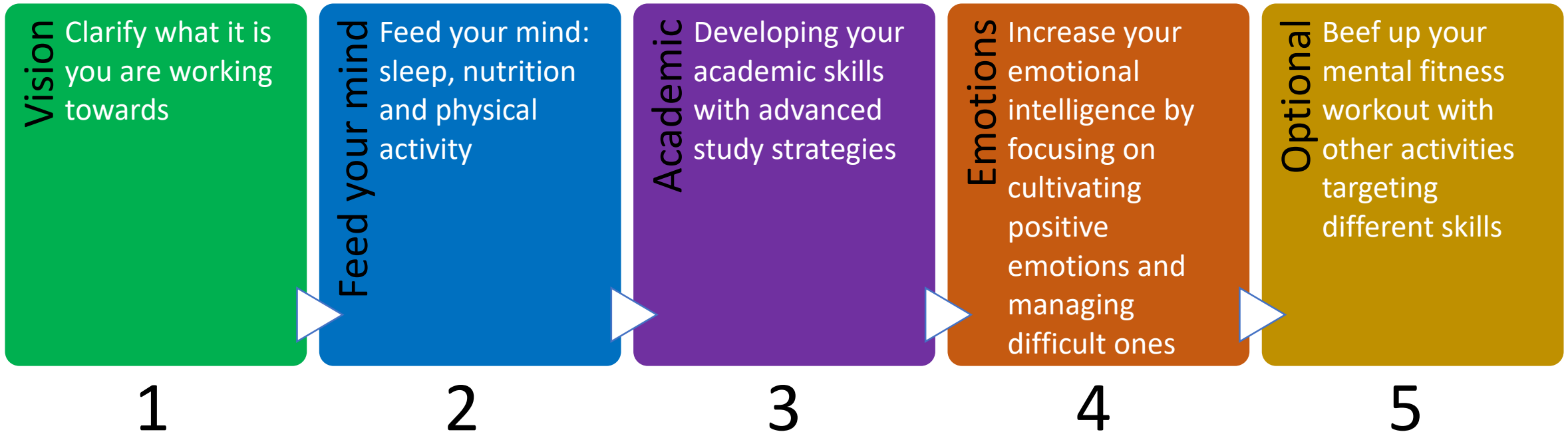
1. Goals/vision

Spend some time thinking about what you are hoping to get out your time here in Australia.

What do you want to achieve in the next couple of months, in the next year, in the next couple of years?

What kind of person do you want to be?

Who are the people that you admire and want to be like? Why?



1. Vision

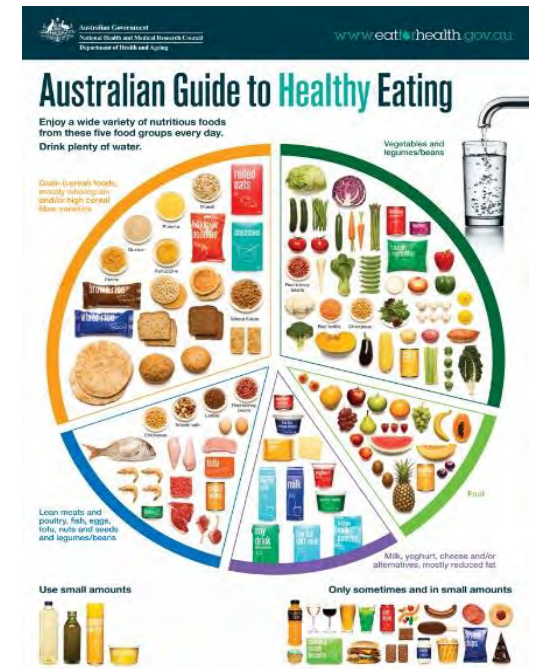


- Have goals or a vision that you are working towards
- Goals
 - Short, medium or long-term
 - Outcome vs performance goals/objectives
 - Focused practical goals and audacious ‘big picture’ goals
- Values
 - The type of person you want to be
 - The way you want to behave
- Role models
 - Who are the people that you admire? Why?

2. Feed your mind



- Sleep
 - 7-9 hours
 - Regular schedule
 - Timed to match your natural rhythms
 - Sleep hygiene (reducing light and arousal levels)
- Nutrition
 - Australian Dietary guidelines - <https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/>
 - Mediterranean Diet for depression
- Physical activity
 - 150-300 minutes moderate physical activity per week
 - Break up sedentary behaviour (break up every 30-45 minutes)
 - Muscle strengthening twice a week
- Drugs and Alcohol
 - minimise



3. Develop your academic skills



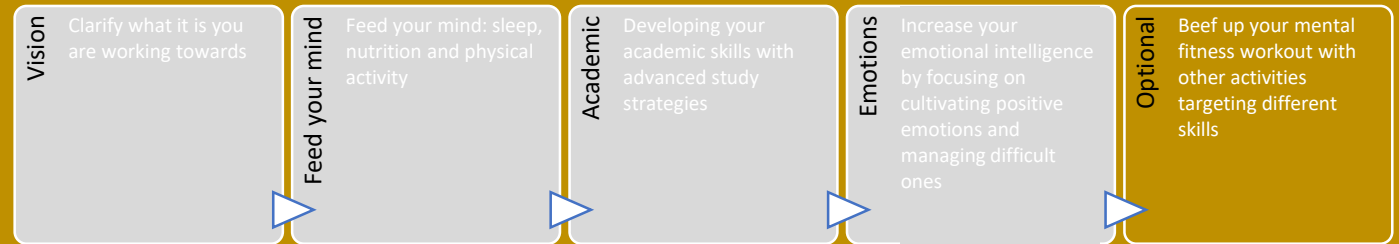
- Self-reflect
 - *How do I study?*
 - *Why do I study this way*
 - *Does it work?*
- Map out what needs to be done – scheduling
- Evidence-based study strategies
- Study environment
 - A space you want to be in
 - A space that nudges you towards study, away from distractions
- Social
 - Study groups/ study buddies

4. Emotions



- Learn how to elicit positive emotions/feelings
 - <https://ggia.berkeley.edu/>
- Become an amateur psychologist and learn the CBT model to better manage stress and difficult emotions/feelings
 - <https://mindspot.org.au/>
 - <https://thiswayup.org.au/>

5. Optional



- Self-awareness and understanding – **meditation**
- Building positive relationships – **social skills**
- Thinking effectively – **mindsets and cognitive biases**
- Cognitive enhancement – **activities to enhance cognitive abilities**
- Personal safety – **coping planning**
- Shaping your environment – **decluttering**
- Meaning and purpose – **self-authoring**
- Financial control – **financial literacy**
- Work skills – **transferable skills**
- Helping others - **volunteering**

www.flinders.edu.au/mentalfitness



- TIME TO TRAIN -

**INTRODUCTION
TO MENTAL
FITNESS**



Flinders
UNIVERSITY
Health, Counselling and Disability

What would you work on?

If you were to leave today's lecture and start working on your mental fitness, which aspect would you focus on?

Would it be one of the areas I have outlined or would it be a different area?

?

Gareth.Furber@flinders.edu.au