

HCDS PRESENTS..

INTRODUCTION TO MENTAL FITNESS



A guide to building
your psychological
capacity

Dr Gareth Furber

AN INTRODUCTION TO MENTAL FITNESS

Hi, I'm Dr Gareth Furber, the eMental Health Project Officer.

I am a psychologist by trade, complete with the formal registration and everything!

I like psychology because it is the science of human behaviour.

Having an understanding of psychology has helped me in my own life – to better understand myself and others, how to cope with difficult situations, and what to focus on in order to achieve greater wellbeing and life satisfaction.

In my role I want to share what I have learned (and what I am learning) with students to help them do better at their studies, build wellbeing and find meaning and satisfaction in their life.

One of the ways I am doing this is through my **Introduction to Mental Fitness Course**.



The **Introduction to Mental Fitness Course** is an ongoing series of lessons, published on the Student Health and Wellbeing Blog (<https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2019/03/22/mental-fitness-intro/>) where I explore how to train your mind.

You can use this knowledge to:

- Better deal with the stresses of being a student
- Get better at your studies
- Improve your emotional and mental health
- Increase your overall wellbeing
- Find greater meaning and satisfaction in your life

During 2019 I released a series of lessons (18 in total) as blog posts. You can access them at the link above.

During 2020, I am writing a workbook on Mental Fitness and Self-Improvement. I'm releasing the chapters as I go (at the link above also) and will eventually collate them together in a book that students can use in a self-directed way or hopefully as part of some online workshops that I will run (fingers crossed in Semester 2).

In many ways I consider myself a student of this stuff as much as you. Whilst some of what I have drawn on in writing the lessons and chapters is stuff I already know, a lot of it is stuff that I am learning along the way, as I explore this topic myself. Instead of keeping it to myself though, I will be sharing it with you in the hope that it is helpful.

HOW TO JOIN/FOLLOW THE COURSE

Subscribe to the Health, Counselling and Disability Newsletter and included in that you'll get reminders of when new mental fitness lessons/ chapters have been posted -

<https://confirmsubscription.com/h/r/4A53DD0AB75F8610> OR just visit

<https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2019/03/22/mental-fitness-intro/> and see what new content I've posted.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS HANDOUT

The purpose of this handout is to give you an introduction to the topic of Mental Fitness, with enough information to get started making changes in your life.

Depending on your familiarity with the ideas, you may be able to use this handout alone as a mini Mental Fitness course.

Otherwise consider it a 'taster' for what is covered in the lessons from 2019 and what I'll cover in the workbook in 2020.

Let's get started.....

WHY DID I GET INTERESTED IN MENTAL FITNESS?

If you'll excuse me a short diversion, I want to explain how it is that I came to be developing a mental fitness course in the first place. Inherent in the story are examples of some of the core principles that underlie mental fitness as a concept.

The story begins with me doing my PhD in Psychology here at Flinders.

My PhD was in the area of psychological recovery after a heart attack. I used a randomised controlled trial to test whether a written workbook that dealt with the physical and psychological implications of a heart attack could help individuals improve their psychological wellbeing after the event. I was already at that stage of my career interested in the power of the written word in helping people tackle the challenges of life.

The results of my trial weren't quite what I wanted. On the positive side, most people in my trial made a strong psychological recovery after their heart attack. Disappointingly, my workbook didn't accelerate or enhance that in any measurable way. I was disappointed but not too much. That is how science works – you hypothesise something, test it, and see if your hypothesis holds up. Any result is a good result as you learn something from it.

Anyway, so I submitted my PhD and immediately had to start thinking about 'what next?'. I was broke and needed money so moved pretty much straight away into finding a job. I was very fortunate that an organisation I had done a placement with during my clinical training had a role for a psychological researcher. I took that role. The area was Youth Mental Health (YMH). I would remain in that area for over 10 years.

I remember my time in YMH fondly. I got to work on some great projects and with some very smart people. Some of my colleagues from YMH remain friends to this day. In the first few years of my work in YMH I felt strongly connected to work, and strongly connected to my profession, psychology.

However, there were some challenges during that period as well. About half-way through that 10-year period, my life got more complex. Personal health issues disrupted my life in a big way. I got stuck in a cycle of health problems --> not engaged with work --> questions about what I was doing with my life --> stress --> health problems. I started to make poor decisions about my health and wellbeing and stopped looking after myself. By 2015/2016, I was pretty flat, feeling disconnected from psychology and not being an active positive force in my own life. I was in a rut.

In 2017, I was shaken out of this rut in what turned out to be the best way possible. My contract in my existing job came to an end and I was essentially forced to choose a new direction for my career. Fate served me up a couple of options. The first was to continue in a related area to where I had been working. The second was to come to Flinders and head in a very different direction – mental health promotion.

I chose Flinders and am incredibly happy I did. In this role I get to return (in a way at least) to the same challenge that inspired my PhD.

Could I help people make significant life improvements through the written word?



In trying to answer this question, I got to start a blog (<https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/>), develop self-help resources (<https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/05/13/counsellinghandouts/>), give presentations and explore how to convince people that taking care of themselves is central to building a life worth living.

I got to reconnect to my field of psychology by heading back into the literature to understand how one shapes their life to maximise their mental health. I got to revisit what we know in psychology about how people make significant changes in their life.

Coming into this role was simultaneously personally transformative. I started looking after myself better. I made better choices about my health. I realised that what I was writing about to help others was just as (if not more) relevant to me as anyone else. I embraced the possibility of self-improvement.

Reflecting back on my transition into this role, I realised a few things:

- We're all 'works in progress' meaning we have room for self-improvement. This isn't about admitting you aren't good enough. It is about embracing the possibility of being a better version of yourself.
- That even though the conditions that give rise to psychological wellbeing aren't necessarily complex to wrap your head around, implementing them in your life can be. This is especially the case if you are already struggling in some way.
- Psychological wellbeing is built like physical wellbeing (physical fitness) is – good choices and healthy habits over time. You don't necessarily have to make big changes to your life, but you do need to make investments of time and effort into making 'smart' changes in your life. When people want to get physically fit, they add physically healthy habits to their lifestyle – exercise, rest, good nutrition. It turns out when people want to get mentally fit (i.e. happy, productive), they need to add mentally healthy habits to their lifestyle.
- University is a great time to learn this stuff as you are already embedded in an environment of learning and building a better version of yourself. You also have full access to an incredible knowledge base of books, articles, lecturers, and other students.
- Having a sense of belonging professionally is very powerful. When I felt disconnected from my chosen field of psychology, I lost a sense of professional identity. It is important to make specific efforts to be engaged with your topics/field.
- That having a purpose or job that is bigger than you (e.g. a commitment to helping others, the environment, animals, whatever) can provide meaning and wellbeing in the face of the challenges of daily life.
- If I learned lessons from my own experiences and combined that with what I knew about the science of wellbeing, I could perhaps provide other people with a map/guide for building productivity, wellbeing and purpose in their lives.

And so, the mental fitness stuff I talk about, and the course I wrote and workbook I am working on embody these realisations and combine them with what I learn as I head back into the psychological literature and what I learn about the experiences of modern university students.

Working here at Flinders, I've learned that students are actively pursuing learning, productivity, wellbeing and meaning at the same time. They want to upskill, do good work, enjoy their time as students and know they are making a difference (or at least feel that what they are learning will help them make a difference in the world).

For some this is a challenge. They might be juggling extensive commitments (e.g. study and work) or they might be dealing with chronic health or mental health problems alongside their studies. International students are dealing with standard student challenges, plus all the challenges of relocation and adjusting to a different culture.

Knowing this, my goal is to give students a map/guide to help them achieve their learning, productivity, wellbeing and meaning goals at the same time. The kind of map/guide that perhaps I would like to have given myself back in 2015/2016. Mental Fitness is that map/guide.

So that is what you'll find in this handout. A map/guide to building productivity, wellbeing and meaning. I'm constantly working on this guide and you'll see that take shape on the blog - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2019/03/22/mental-fitness-intro/> and you might see me around the university talking on the topic. I look forward to connecting with you.



WHAT IS MENTAL FITNESS?

Mental fitness is the ability to meet and thrive amongst the psychological demands of life. It isn't just one domain but includes knowledge and performance across a range of domains such as emotional intelligence, self-awareness, self-regulation, cognitive ability, social skills, self-care and habit formation. Think of mental fitness as a set of mental capabilities that you can develop over time.

As indicated, it has strong parallels to physical fitness.

For example, when you want to get physically fit, you subject your body (e.g. muscles, joints, cardiovascular system) to controlled levels of stress that help those body systems grow and get stronger. This could be walking, running, cycling, swimming, sports, weight-training etc. You then repeat these activities over time so the benefits are sustained. Combined with appropriate rest and good nutrition, this ongoing activity builds and sustains physical fitness.

As your physical fitness increases, your ability to meet the physical demands of life get better. For example, it is easier to lift things, to get up stairs, to get around. It is easier to play sports or engage in recreational activities that involve fitness (e.g. bushwalking). It is easier to pursue those activities that are important to you that require physical fitness.

But our life isn't just physically demanding, it is also psychologically demanding.

Think about your average day from the moment you wake up to the moment you fall asleep. You have to deal with people, manage your time, keep your emotions in check, deal with setbacks, learn or memorise new stuff, concentrate and focus for extended periods of time, resist the urges to overeat or slack off, and cope with the enormous amount of information coming in via social media, email, telephone, news. Your mind/brain is constantly being called on to manage stuff. To deal with these demands and rise above them so you can focus on what is most important to you requires mental fitness.

Interestingly, the brain operates a bit like a muscle. If you strengthen it by subjecting it to controlled stressors (e.g. learning new stuff, behaving in a new way) it can then perform better when managing the everyday psychological demands. For example, if you read regularly, you strengthen your ability to take other perspectives, think flexibly, understand different people and cultures, which can come in very handy in everyday life.

So mental fitness is built by regularly requiring yourself to think and behave in different ways, across different areas of your life, so your mind can remain strong, flexible and capable in dealing with the psychological challenges of life.

CAN WE MEASURE MENTAL FITNESS?

Yes and No.

One of the areas of expertise of psychologists is the measurement of psychological constructs like intelligence, personality, emotions, mood, beliefs, attitudes, memory, attention, concentration. We love it and do it all the time.

In theory therefore, it would be possible to develop a way of assessing mental fitness, in the same way that a personal trainer might measure different aspects of fitness (flexibility, strength, endurance etc) to give you an overall physical fitness score.

In practice however, this isn't quite as easy:

- There is no universally decided definition of what it means to be 'mentally fit'.
- There are so many psychological constructs that we could measure that the assessment would be unmanageably large.
- Many measures require the involvement of a psychologist to administer or interpret, but I want people to be able to build mental fitness on their own if they want.

Instead, I build into the process of building mental fitness multiple points for self-reflection and self-reporting of how someone thinks they are functioning in different areas of life and whether the things they are trying to get better are working. This subjective approach has some weaknesses but is more reflective of what happens in clinical practice, where individuals are invited to self-assess the different areas of their life and identify where they'd like to make improvements.

This helps keep individuals focused on making improvements relative to where they are at, versus some kind of 'ideal' that might not be relevant or appropriate for them.

This doesn't rule out a future in which we can measure mental fitness more precisely, but for the time being, the metrics of interest are those created by the individual themselves.

WHY WOULD YOU WANT TO BUILD MENTAL FITNESS?

People build physical fitness for different reasons.

Similarly, there are different motivators for people to build mental fitness.

When considering investing time and effort in building your mental capabilities, which of these (if any) would be a motivator for you?

There are parts of your life that are very important to you, but you don't feel you are living up to your own expectations in how you are doing in those areas.	<input type="checkbox"/>
You are finding that the psychological demands of everyday life are outstripping your psychological resources and you are feeling stressed and burnt out.	<input type="checkbox"/>
You've struggled with mental ill health in the past or suspect that you might in the future (e.g. family history) and want to guard against that.	<input type="checkbox"/>
You currently struggle with mental ill health and want to do everything you can to recover fully.	<input type="checkbox"/>
You have one or more chronic health conditions that place additional stress on you.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some aspect of your life requires a high level of performance and you are aware that you'll need to increase your mental capacity to perform at your desired level.	<input type="checkbox"/>
You want to be (or are already) a role model in your career or home life and that means being more deliberate and disciplined in the choices you make, the way you act.	<input type="checkbox"/>
You have a vision of yourself in the future or specific goals you want to achieve and you know you'll need to improve to get there.	<input type="checkbox"/>
You don't feel like your psychological needs are being met (more on this one later)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Because you want to live a satisfying and rewarding life.	<input type="checkbox"/>

In reality, for most of us it is probably a combination of these things. What else might motivate you to work on your mental fitness?

Higher order goals

I suspect that for some people, the pursuit of mental fitness will help them achieve higher order goals. What is a higher order goal?

For me, a higher order goal is one that relates to the meaning of our lives and who we are as a person. For example, I studied psychology in order to get a degree (lower order goal) but in the process discovered that I could use that knowledge to help people with their own mental health (a higher order goal).

I didn't really start to clarify my higher order goals until later in life, but found that as I did, I was able to more clearly identify what I needed to be doing with my life in order to achieve those goals.

When thinking about higher order goals, I tend to focus on:

Psychological needs – getting our own needs met and also being able to help meet the needs of others. Getting our psychological needs met is just as important as getting our physical needs met. In fact, I would argue that having got our basic needs met (food, water, shelter, safety, clothing, clean air), much of what we do in our everyday lives is about getting our psychological needs met. You can read a bit more about psychological needs here - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/11/26/psychological-needs/>

Values – the description of who we want to be as a person and how we want to behave. Identifying our values is about laying claim to the person we want to be. Read more about values here - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2017/08/30/values-who-do-you-want-to-be-in-life/>

Personal mission – the purpose of our lives. What we want our own life to stand for. You might not yet have a personal mission. That is fine. Personal missions develop at different times for different people.

Pursuing mental fitness can help achieve these higher order goals.



DO YOU NEED TO BUILD MENTAL FITNESS?

There are objective and subjective ways to measure a person's mental fitness. Objective methods include things like measuring mental illness symptoms or assessing cognitive functions like attention or memory. Such methods can be time consuming and typically only focus on a particular area of mental fitness.

Subjective methods include asking people how they think they are doing in a specific area. They aren't always the most accurate method but are often quicker and easier to do.

To determine whether building mental fitness might be a worthwhile thing for you to think about, consider your answer to this question:

In general, would you say that your mental health is:

Excellent

Very Good

Good

Fair

Poor

(circle the most accurate description)

If you answered '*Excellent*' or '*Very Good*' then there is a good chance you are already doing some things in your life that build or maintain mental fitness. You might find some new ideas in this handout, or simply confirm stuff that you are already doing.

If you answered '*Good*' or '*Fair*', then you might find some value in investing some time and effort in building one or more areas of mental fitness. See if there is anything in this document that helps, or perhaps tune in to our mental fitness course on the blog – <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2019/03/22/mental-fitness-intro/>

If you answered '*Poor*', then you might find value in both building mental fitness, but also seeking assistance from the Health, Counselling and Disability Service – www.flinders.edu.au/hcd. Whatever the reasons might be for your answer, seeking help is an important first step to addressing those issues. In my experience, most problems have a solution of some kind.



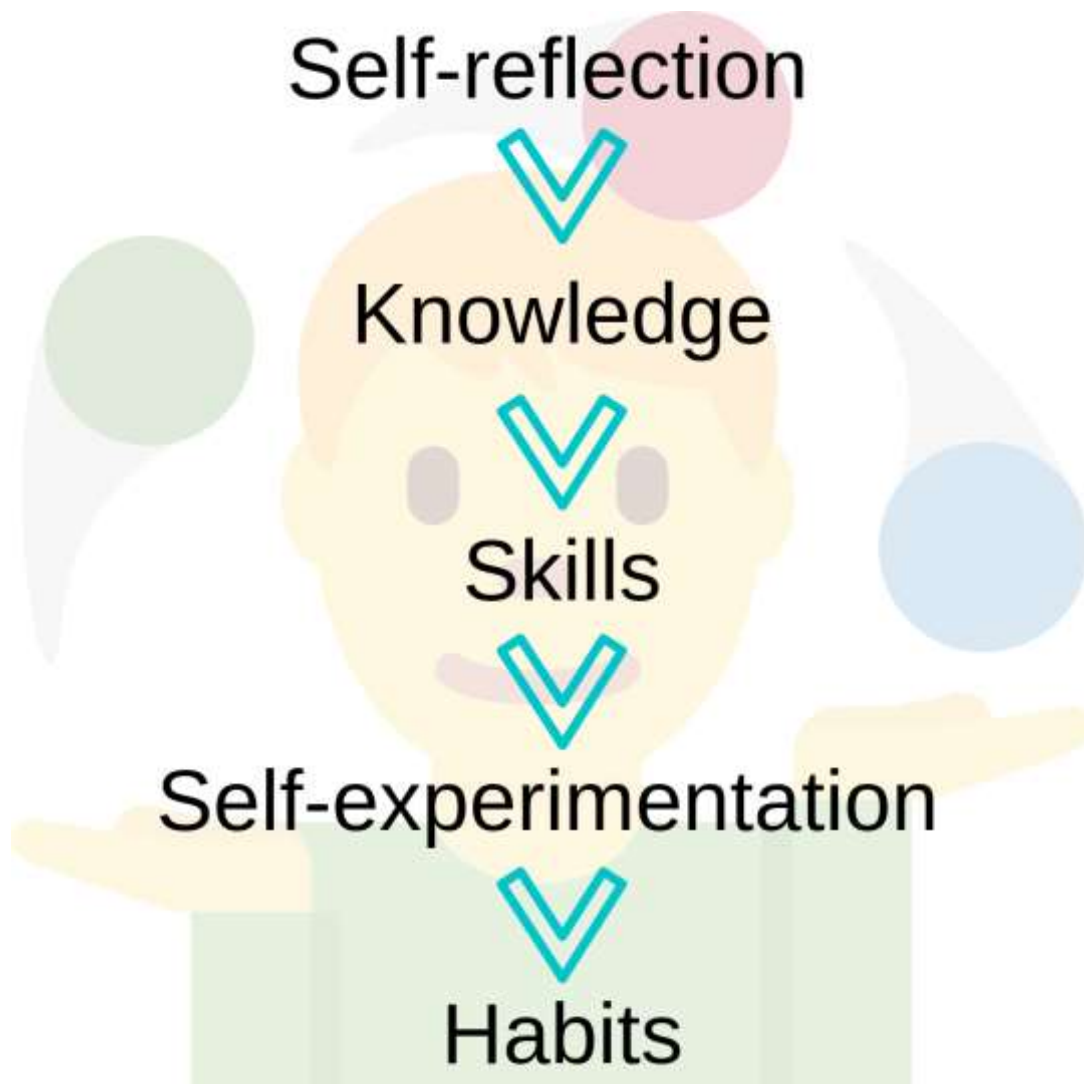
HOW DO YOU BUILD MENTAL FITNESS?

The core of building mental fitness is establishing mentally healthy habits, that is, things we do every day, week, month or year that contribute in an ongoing way to stretching and expanding our mind.

Establishing mentally healthy habits is a process, that can be summarised in a few steps.

Helpful in the process of starting to build mental fitness is cultivating a positive attitude towards personal self-growth:

- Belief that growth and personal change is possible
- Belief that **you** specifically can make improvements to your life
- Willingness to learn and try new things
- Willingness to fail and use trial and error to discover useful additions to your life
- Willingness to challenge existing ways of doing things



Self-reflection

Self-reflection involves identifying those areas of your life in which you want to make improvements or skillsets that you would like to develop further.

There are a few different exercises you can do to assist in this process. One involves looking at the extent to which your psychological needs are being met. One involves reflecting on which areas of your life are not going as well as you'd like. One involves thinking about skillsets you'd like to develop further.



Psychological needs

Many of our attempts at self-improvement reflect a conscious or unconscious attempt to get our psychological needs met. Even across individuals, cultures, gender and age, there is reasonable consistency in what constitutes our core psychological needs. Understanding these needs may help you identify areas for self-improvement (ps. It might also help you help others as well). The needs below are expressed as desires or wishes (e.g. I want to....., I need to....., I would like to.....). It isn't expected that all of these needs will resonate with you. Mark the ones that do. In subsequent exercises, we'll explore ways to get started on meeting these needs.

Competence

- I want to be good at.....[insert skill here]
- I want to get better at.....
- I want to learn how.....

Autonomy

- I want to be able to make choices about.....
- I want to be given responsibility to.....
- I want to have control over.....

Positive emotion and vitality

- I want to feel good
- I want to feel healthy
- I want to be energised

Engagement

- I want to be immersed in.....
- I want to feel passionate about.....
- I want to be engaged with.....

Relationships/ belonging/ relatedness

- I want to be loved
- I want to feel like I belong
- I want to be appreciated by others
- I want to love
- I want to help others
- I want to feel part of a group or community
- I want to feel more connected to others

Meaning/ purpose/ identity

- I want to know what to do with my life
- I want a reason to wake up in the morning
- I want to make a contribution to the world
- I want to leave a positive legacy

Achievement

- I want to achieve my goals
- I want to be recognised for my contributions

Creativity

- I want to make a unique contribution to the world
- I want to create.....

Safety and predictability

- I want to feel safe
- I want to feel in control of.....
- I want security and order
- I want financial security

Self-esteem

- I want to feel valued and appreciated
- I want to feel like I am a worthy person

Aesthetics

- I want to be in the presence of beautiful things

Areas of your life

Even the most average life consists of multiple different aspects. Take a moment to reflect on the different areas of your life. Are there areas in which you'd like to make improvements?

- 1. Family relations.** What sort of brother/sister, son/daughter, uncle/auntie do you want to be? What personal qualities would you like to bring to those relationships? What sort of relationships would you like to build? How would you interact with others if you were the ideal you in these relationships?
- 2. Marriage/ couples/ intimate relations.** What sort of partner would you like to be in an intimate relationship? What personal qualities would you like to develop? What sort of relationship would you like to build? How would you interact with your partner if you were the 'ideal you' in this relationship?
- 3. Parenting.** What sort of parent would you like to be? What sort of qualities would you like to have? What sort of relationships would you like to build with your children? How would you behave if you were the 'ideal you'.
- 4. Friendships/ social life.** What sort of qualities would you like to bring to your friendships? If you could be the best friend possible, how would you behave towards your friends? What sort of friendships would you like to build?
- 5. Career/ employment.** What do you value in your work? What would make it more meaningful? What kind of worker would you like to be? If you were living up to your own ideal standards, what personal qualities would you like to bring to your work? What sort of work relations would you like to build?
- 6. Education/ personal growth and development.** What do you value about learning, education, training, or personal growth? What new skills would you like to learn? What knowledge would you like to gain? What further education appeals to you? What sort of student would you like to be? What personal qualities would you like to apply?
- 7. Recreation/fun/leisure.** What sorts of hobbies, sports, or leisure activities do you enjoy? How do you relax and unwind? How do you have fun? What sorts of activities would you like to do?
- 8. Spirituality.** Whatever spirituality means to you is fine. It may be as simple as communing with nature, or as formal as participation in an organised religious group. What is important to you in this area of life?
- 9. Citizenship/ environment/ community life.** How would you like to contribute to your community or environment, e.g. through volunteering, or recycling, or supporting a group/ charity/ political party? What sort of environments would you like to create at home, and at work? What environments would you like to spend more time in?
- 10. Health/physical well-being.** What are your values related to maintaining your physical well-being? How do you want to look after your health, with regard to sleep, diet, exercise, smoking, alcohol, etc? Why is this important?

Taken from https://www.actmindfully.com.au/upimages/VALUED_Living_Questionnaire_-_adapted.pdf

Skillsets to develop

I've spent a lot of time thinking about the types of skills that someone needs to develop in order to build mental fitness. There are quite a few.

The reality is likely to be that you will be good at some of these, alright at others, and not so great at a couple.

In the self-reflection stage the goal is to think about how you are doing across these different skill areas and highlight those in which you could get better. The table below can help. Put a tick next to any skill area where you think you have significant room to improve.

	I could improve in this area
Mastering emotions Do I commonly get derailed by feelings of anxiety, sadness, or anger? How good am I at managing these feelings? Am I willing to experience a range of different emotions? Do I know how to bring more positive emotions into my life?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Thinking effectively Am I able to think critically and flexibly about different issues? Do I have mindsets that helps me deal with setbacks and failure? Am I aware of common errors in thinking? Do I have irrational beliefs?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Self-awareness and understanding Am I aware of my strengths and weaknesses? Do I know the situations and contexts in which I thrive, and which I struggle? Do I have a coherent sense of who I am across different settings?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Meaning and purpose Do I know what I am working towards? Do I know the kind of person that I want to be?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Building positive relationships Do I feel like I have supportive people in my life? Do I feel like I am a positive influence in other people's lives? Do I feel like I belong?	<input type="checkbox"/>

	I could improve in this area
<p>Caring for your body</p> <p>Do I make conscious choices in relation to looking after my physical health? Am I healthy? Do I know what constitutes 'healthy' when it comes to sleep, diet and physical activity?</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Financial Control</p> <p>Do I feel in control of my financial situation? Do I know how to manage money so that I can survive in the present moment but also save and invest for the future?</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Personal safety</p> <p>Do I feel safe in my own home or work? Do I feel safe from myself?</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Shaping your environment</p> <p>Do I modify my environment in order to improve my own wellbeing and productivity? Do I surround myself with people that motivate and interest me?</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Cognitive enhancement</p> <p>Am I aware of (and use) strategies to improve my concentration, attention and productivity?</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Advanced study skills</p> <p>Do I know and use evidence-based techniques for learning?</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Work skills</p> <p>Am I aware of the different skills required for the workforce and which ones I am good at, and which ones I need to work on?</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Habit formation</p> <p>Am I good at building new habits? Am I good at manifesting my intentions to change into actions?</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Helping others</p> <p>Can I identify where in my life I am doing things in order to improve the quality of life of others?</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Having fun</p> <p>Am I able to relax and unwind? Do I know how to have fun?</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Expressing self creatively</p> <p>Do I have outlets to express myself? Am I able to bring something new and interesting into the world?</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Summary of self-reflection

Having completed the exercises above, have you identified areas in which you'd like to improve? If so, outline a couple of them below.

Try to phrase your self-reflections as goals – e.g.

- *I'd like to get more physical activity to increase my fitness*
- *I'd like to spend more time reading as a form of relaxation*
- *I'd like to do more professional development on the topic of to improve my job prospects*

If you haven't identified any areas or goals, it might mean that you are comfortable with how things are at the moment, or already have in place some self-improvement or self-care activities. It is not essential that you identify areas where you want to improve.

Building mental fitness is a choice you make about wanting to make improvements, not a compulsory activity.



Knowledge

Having identified some areas in which you could improve, your next step is to build knowledge in that area. For example, if you've identified that you don't know much about what constitutes a healthy diet, then you are going to have to learn.

This is where the internet is your friend (and also your enemy)

You can type virtually any question into Google/ Bing/ Ecosia and find someone who has attempted to answer it.

- How do I make friends?
- How do I be a better parent?
- How can I get better at my studies?
- What is a good diet?
- How do I have fun?

Your main challenge in the knowledge accumulation step is working out what is good information and what is crappy information.

Here is a rough guide.

Good information is typically gained from:

- People who have qualifications or obvious expertise in the area in which you are trying to learn something. For example, seeing a dietician to learn about diet or seeing a psychologist to learn about anxiety.
- The peer reviewed literature – i.e. research papers (<https://scholar.google.com.au/>).
- Information websites run by government organisations (e.g. <https://headtohealth.gov.au/>).
- Friends or family members who have themselves sought out experts to answer similar questions in their own lives.
- Information sites or services developed by universities (e.g. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/>)

Not so great (or potentially compromised) information is typically obtained from:

- Websites where you can't really work out who is providing the information.
- Organisations who are trying to sell you something, without being clear on what it is they are providing and not providing evidence that it works.
- Random blogs or social media where no references for where the information came from is provided.

Here at Flinders, if you are wanting to learn more about any of the skillsets described on the previous pages, you are welcome to contact me – gareth.furber@flinders.edu.au and I will try to point you in the right direction.

Skills

Ok, so you've identified some skill areas in which you could make some improvements and built some relevant knowledge. Now is the time to translate that knowledge into actual skills.

For example, you may have identified that anxiety (constant worry) is something you struggle with and done some research and found some free online programs for treating anxiety (e.g. <https://mindspot.org.au/>).

Now your job is to engage with that program and learn the skills that the program teaches.

Skills are typically built through:

- Observation of others engaging in the skills
- Coaching by an expert
- Deliberate practice and repetition of a skill, including getting feedback on how well you are performing it

Skill development is probably the most difficult part of the process of building mental fitness, as learning new skills (especially if they are a bit complex) takes time and effort and perhaps money if you are getting coaching. This is the time when most people abandon their efforts because it feels like the most laborious part of the process.

This is a problem though, because you might have found that if you got really good at the relevant skills, they would have made a significant improvement to your life.

Let me illustrate with an example.

You decide one day that you are spending too much time on email and it is eating into your study time. You look into some productivity hacks and learn about the 'inbox zero' method which is a set of mental and behavioural guidelines for handling incoming emails. You decide that this method sounds good and you set out to learn it. After about a week, you ask yourself whether it is helping with the original email problem when you discover that you are, in fact, spending more time on email. You decide it is a failure and abandon the method.

Now did it not work because the method is bad, or did it not work because you didn't implement it fully? Often the technique or method or skill doesn't seem to work because we didn't get good enough at the technique to ever really give it a good test.

So the key to the 'skills' part of the mental fitness building process is to get good enough at the relevant skill(s) to then accurately evaluate whether they are going to be helpful in making the improvements you want.



Self-experimentation

Self-experimentation is just a fancy term for evaluating whether the learning of a new skill (or set of skills) is actually helping you make the improvements you want.

Continuing the example from earlier – if you learnt some techniques for managing anxiety from <https://mindspot.org.au/> the self-experimentation phase would include you using those skills for an extended period of time and making the decision as to whether using those techniques was actually helping you reduce your anxiety levels.

The process of self-experimentation can get fairly complex and include developing some outcome measures for yourself - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/04/09/fine-art-self-experimentation/>

Or it might just include you:

- Stating your intention which is combination of your goal from the self-reflection phase and the skill identified that might help you achieve that goal (e.g. *'I want to get fitter and think walking 20 minutes a day might help'*).
- Setting aside a designated period of time that you will engage in the new skill (e.g. *'I'll go for a 20 minute walk every day for 2 weeks'*). This is called the testing period.
- At the end of testing period, ask yourself whether the new behaviour is helping you achieve your goal (e.g. *'Do I think those regular walks had a positive impact on my fitness?'*).
- Abandoning or refining your goal/skill
- Rinse and repeat

The self-experimentation stage acknowledges that not everything that has been shown 'in research' to be helpful will necessarily be helpful to **you**. You will have to discover for yourself which things work for you and which things do not. Yes, this might seem a bit cumbersome, but if you've followed the previous steps, then we've already narrowed down the potential things that are likely to be helpful.

There are four main outcomes to the self-experimentation stage.

1. Your chosen skill has produced the outcome you want – WIN! – *progress to next stage*
2. Your chosen skill has not produced the outcome you originally wanted but may have produced another positive outcome – Semi WIN! – *progress to next stage*
3. Your chosen skill did not produce any positive outcomes – Doh! – *return to the knowledge phase assuming you still want to achieve the same goal*
4. You really can't tell if it helped or not – Confusion! – *try to further clarify your goal and come up with a more precise indicator of success*



Habits

If you've reached the habit building stage, then it means you've come a long way. You identified an aspect of your life you wanted to change, set a goal, learnt something new and applied it and found it worked.

The final step in building mental fitness is turning that new behaviour into a habit.

Habits are skills implemented on a regular basis that help construct a 'psychologically healthy lifestyle'.

Habits are built by taking your knowledge and skills and building them into the routine of your everyday life.

Basically, you are going to take the skills you've learned and tested in the previous steps and try to make them a consistent and regular part of your life, just like brushing your teeth.

Health psychologists have spent a lot of time trying to understand what helps people build new habits. In the following section you'll find a list of some of the most common strategies they use.

The key is to be mindful and deliberate about putting things in place to ensure a new behaviour/skill can become a habit. If you don't make specific effort to turn a new behaviour into a habit, you will quickly revert to old behaviour.

Mental fitness as a collection of habits....



This stage can be messy, even with the best intentions. By messy I mean it can be hard to get a new behaviour established as a habit. We do well for a couple of weeks and then revert back to old patterns.

There isn't a magical formula for establishing a new habit, although I do like the work of BJ Fogg who talks about Tiny Habits (www.tinyhabits.com). Experiment with the strategies listed over the page. Remember that establishing new habits is itself a skill that can be practised. The more you try establishing new habits, the better you will get at it. This means getting motivated by setbacks, rather than discouraged.

Techniques to help build new habits

Just about any change you make in your life in order to be more productive, happier or healthier requires establishing new habits.

If you want to be happier, it means implementing mentally healthy habits (e.g. meditation). If you want to be physically fit, it requires exercising regularly.

Building new habits can be difficult. Sometimes we get off to a good start, but within a couple of weeks, we've reverted to our old behaviour. The number of times I've started an exercise program but found within a couple of weeks I had stopped are too numerous to count.

One reason we commonly fail to establish new habits is that we don't employ the right strategies in making such changes.

If you are trying to implement new habits in your life, in order to be healthier, the strategies in **this handout** might help you be more successful. These strategies are taken from research conducted by health psychologists on how people initiate and maintain 'health behaviour change' – that is, start and maintain healthy habits.

There are quite a few of them, so don't feel you need to do them all. However, you might find in this list some ideas that you've not come across before that are the difference between you successfully establishing a new habit and reverting back to your previous behaviour.

GOALS AND PLANNING

Set goals. These include 'outcome' goals (how you think your life will be better if you implement the habit – e.g. 'I'll be fitter') and 'process' goals (the specific things you will need to achieve along the way to establishing the habit – e.g. 'I need to walk 30 minutes every day'). Be clear with yourself and others what you are hoping to achieve. You can use the S.M.A.R.T process if that helps you define your goals - <https://www.smartsheet.com/blog/essential-guide-writing-smart-goals>

Discrepancy between current behaviour and your goals. Note down how different your goals are to your current behaviour (e.g. I want to use my standing desk for 5 hours per day, but currently I am only doing it for 2 hours). This alerts you to the extent of the difference you need to make.

Problem solve barriers. Take some time to consider all the various things that might go wrong or hold you back from establishing a new habit. Brainstorm solutions to these problems.

Write an action plan. Describe the habit you are trying to form and how you intend to do it in excruciatingly fine detail. Include your goals and problem-solving ideas from the strategies above.

Make a public commitment. Tell friends or family about the change(s) you are trying to make and that you will keep them updated on how you go. Social media (e.g. Facebook) can be a good place to make such a public commitment. This doesn't work for everyone and some people end up feeling ashamed or embarrassed if they don't succeed, but others find this quite motivational, as the attention gained from others supports them in the process.

Sign a behavioural contract. Find someone to whom you feel answerable (e.g. a health professional or close family member). Write out and sign a contract outlining your commitment to making the desired changes.

Remove barriers. Identify, remove or modify anything that is likely to get in the way of you engaging in the habit (e.g. get a warm raincoat for walks in the winter).

FEEDBACK AND MONITORING

Use monitoring and feedback tools. Use monitoring tools that provide real-time feedback on your progress towards a particular goal. For example, use a fitbit, smartwatch or mobile phone app to track your physical activity, dietary intake and/or sleep. You can use feedback and monitoring tools to track both the habit (are you engaging in it?) and the outcomes (are you getting the desired benefits?).

Feedback from an expert. Organise to get regular feedback from an expert who can help track your progress. This is most often a health professional of some type. For example, you might get a psychologist to track your mood as you engage in some mentally healthy lifestyle changes.

Feedback from a trusted other. Identify someone in your life who you think could and would be willing to help you track your progress. Open yourself up to the idea of getting feedback from them on how you are doing with establishing your habit.

SOCIAL SUPPORT

Ask for help. Engage your friends and family to help you make the change. One simple example is to ask a family member to pick up one of your responsibilities for a while whilst you try to make the change. There are different types of support they could provide:

Emotional support (e.g. a space and listening ear for you to express how you are progressing and feeling)

Tangible support (e.g. financial assistance or help with an aspect of the change you are trying to make)

Informational support (e.g. advice or direction towards relevant resources)

Companionship (e.g. joining with you in making the change)

Find others. Find other people who are trying to make the same changes (e.g. through an online forum). Engage with them to get support. Nowadays, with the internet, there is a community for just about everything.

SHAPING KNOWLEDGE

Educate yourself about the new habit. Learn as much as you can about the habit you are trying to develop. How is the habit performed? How have other people developed this habit? What worked for them? What benefits are common for people establishing this habit? What are the common health, social and environmental consequences of making the change you are wanting to make?

If you are trying to establish a habit that is fairly complex (e.g. learning to play tennis), educate yourself as much as you can about the behaviour. Read books, watch videos, get a coach. Educate yourself about how other people have learned the skill you want to develop. What worked for them?

Educate self about your old behaviour. Try to understand what has stopped you from building this habit earlier. Why were you engaging in your previous unhelpful behaviour. This is particularly useful if you are trying to rid yourself of a bad habit and establish a healthier one (e.g. replacing smoking, with brief episodes of meditation).

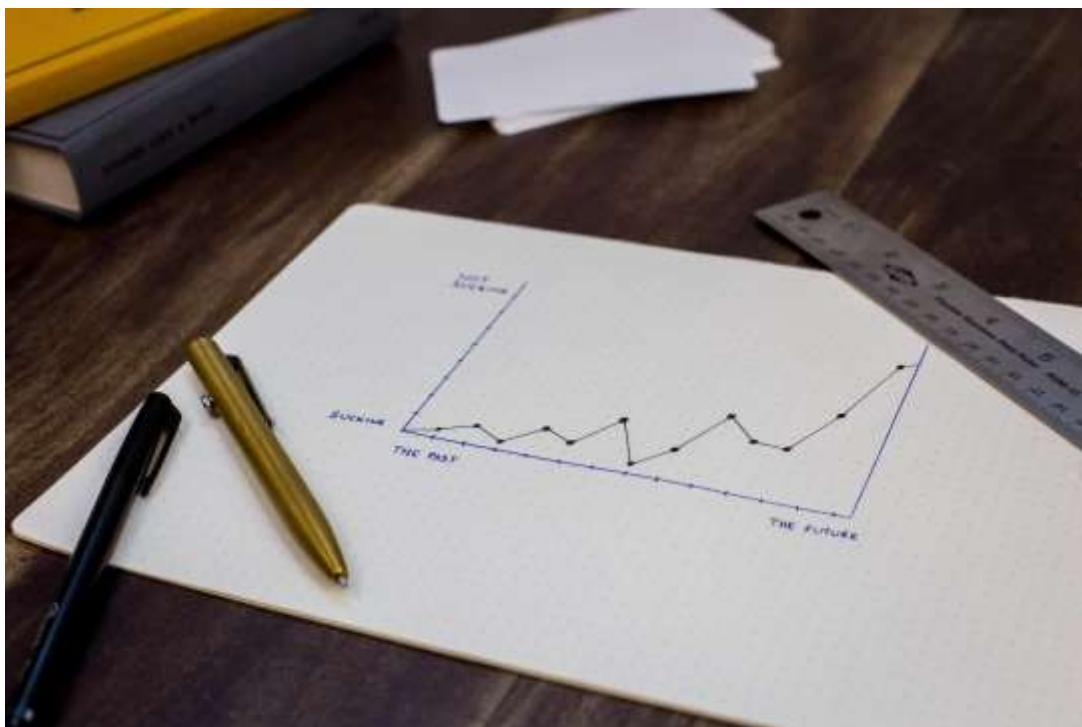
Run behavioural experiments. Set aside a 'test period' in which you are going to engage in the desired habit and observe what happens. What works? What doesn't? What got in the way of you engaging in the habit? What made it easier? Use the information from these test periods to refine your goals and planning.

COMPARISON WITH OTHERS

Find observable samples of the desired habit in others. Look amongst your friends, family, colleagues and peers for others who are engaging in the desired behaviour/habit. Mimic if appropriate. Also, draw on their experience if they are willing to share.

Social comparison. Try to find data on how many other people might also be trying to engage in a similar habit. For example, do some research to find out how many engage in regular exercise. This gives you a sense of how socially widespread the behaviour is.

Information about approval from others. Take specific note of when you get positive feedback from others about your attempts to make a positive lifestyle change.



ASSOCIATIONS

Set up prompts. Set up automatic cues and prompts that remind you to engage in the habit (e.g. set your alarm on your phone to remind you to take a walk at lunchtime).

Connect new behaviour to existing habits. Try to connect your new habit to an existing part of your life that occurs automatically. For example, I listen to educational podcasts whilst driving to work.

Positive associations. Pair the habit you are trying to establish with something that you enjoy (e.g. listening to music whilst walking).

REPETITION AND SUBSTITUTION

Have a practice period. For habits that are complex, acknowledge that the first few weeks/months are a practice period in which you might need to try different things in order for the habit to form.

Use your new habit to knock off another habit. Try replacing an existing bad habit with the new one that you are trying to create. For example, go for a walk when you would normally have a cigarette.

Generalise your habit. Once you have successfully got a habit established in one setting, see if you can translate it to another setting. For example, once you've started meditating regularly at home, try also doing it regularly at work.

Graded tasks. For difficult or challenging habits, build up slowly. For example, commit to a 10 minute walk each day first before building up to 20 or 30 minutes. Get good at each level before progressing to the next.

COMPARISON OF OUTCOMES

Arguments for and against. Research the common arguments for engaging or not engaging in your desired habit.

Personal pros and cons. What are the costs and benefits to you of implementing this new habit? Write them out and stare at the list for a while. Revisit the list and refine it over time Personal pros and cons

Do or don't. Compare what your life will be like if you engage in the habit versus what it will be like if you don't.

Where you are now and where you want to be. Describe clearly the difference between where you are now, and where you want to be in terms of the habit (e.g. I currently do not exercise, but I would like to go for a 30-minute walk, 3 times a week). If the distance between where you are now and where you want to be feels too big, try setting smaller goals.



REWARD AND THREAT

Reward yourself. Reward yourself for your progress towards your habit. This includes rewards for building the habit, as well as maintaining it. Regularly visualise the rewards you will give yourself when you achieve your goals. There are many different types of rewards – money, objects, activities, social connection. Pick rewards that genuinely motivate you.

Punish yourself. Restrict access to pleasant things or actively introduce unpleasant things if you do not progress towards your habit. Punishment is not as effective as rewards, so use sparingly.

Selectively reward or punish different behaviours. If you are trying to replace a bad habit with a new good habit, consider punishing any performance of the old habit whilst rewarding any progress towards the new habit.

REGULATION

Observe your emotions. Take note of how you feel when trying to implement the new habit. These feelings might act as triggers to avoid making the change. Thank the feelings for showing up but inform them you still want to make the change.

Increase positive emotions. Positive emotions help drive us towards new behaviours and habits. Learn how to activate more positive emotions in your life - <https://ggia.berkeley.edu/>

Emotional self-management. Sometimes we are derailed from our efforts to be healthy by unpleasant emotions. Develop new strategies for managing unpleasant emotions such as mindfulness meditation - <https://www.smilingmind.com.au/>

Conserve mental resources. Establishing new habits requires mental energy. Look at other aspects of your life where you might be able to conserve or increase your overall mental energy. For example, getting more sleep.

Get medical support. Consider what pharmacological or medical supports could be put in place to help you achieve your goals. For example, some people want to go to therapy to work on difficult issues but find their distress is too high. Talk with your GP about the possibility of a trial of an anti-anxiety or anti-depressant drug that might reduce the distress levels to a point where you can consider therapy.

Paradoxical instructions. Encourage yourself to engage in an extreme opposite version of the desired habit as a way to discourage old behaviour slipping back in. For example, if you are trying to reduce your soft drink intake, encourage yourself to drink 2L of soft drink in a single day.

ANTECEDENTS

Change your environment. Modify your environment in order to make engaging in the habit easier. For example, leave your walking shoes next to your front door, so you grab them each time you leave the house.

Restructure the social environment. Surround yourself with people who are going to help you achieve your goal.

Avoid old triggers. If there are people or situations that are associated with past undesirable behaviour, consider minimising or avoiding altogether those situations.

Distraction. When trying to extinguish a bad habit (e.g. smoking), try to distract yourself when feeling the urge to engage in the habit.

Alter your body. Use assistive aids to help support the change you are trying to make. For example, using braces on vulnerable areas of the body for exercising.



IDENTITY

Note the positive impact on others. When making positive changes in our own lives, we tend to focus on the benefits to us. But the changes we make can positively impact on others as well. Take the time to note how the changes you are making in your own life might benefit others. You might end up being a role model for other people.

Attach to your values. Associate the habit you are trying to build with the bigger picture of the person you are trying to be. For example, eating healthy is part of looking after yourself so you can be there for your family and friends.

Build into your identity. Start building the habit into how you describe yourself. For example, I am a 'regular meditator'. Start using these descriptors of yourself around other people.

Reframing. Try shifting how you frame your new habit to something that is more motivational. For example, instead of lamenting the fact you are cutting sugar out of your diet, focus instead on the additions you will make instead (e.g. extra fruit and vegetables). You will find that there are ways of framing the change that resonate more with you.

Incompatible beliefs. If you are having trouble abandoning an old unhelpful behaviour, think about how that behaviour is incompatible with other aspects of your life. For example, if you generally consider yourself a health-conscious person, it would be incompatible to still be smoking.

SELF-BELIEF

Identify and analyse past successes. Think back to previous times where you have successfully made changes in your life. What helped? What didn't help? Can you use some of those strategies this time?

Verbal persuasion/ self-talk. Develop more positive ways of talking to yourself. You don't have to go overboard and tell yourself that you are amazing, but you should acknowledge that you are working to make yourself a better person and that with time and effort, you will succeed.

Notice the negative. Notice when you are putting yourself down in relation to the changes you are trying to make (e.g. 'you'll never get this right'). This kind of negative self-talk is very common and can be ignored.

Mental rehearsal. Regularly imagine yourself engaging in the habit as a form of practice. I used this a lot when I was trying to learn how to drive a manual car.

Dismiss excuses. Notice when you are using excuses as to why you didn't or can't establish the habit. Treat such excuses with scepticism. They may simply be a way of avoiding making the change. It is one part of you trying to sabotage the efforts of another part of you.

COVERT LEARNING

Visualise the future. Regularly imagine your future self, who has successfully established the new habit. Think about the positive impacts your future self will be enjoying. Imagine how your future self will feel if you don't establish the habit.

Imaginary rewards and punishments. Imagine awarding or punishing yourself in the future as an incentive in the present moment to have a go at making the change.

Vicarious consequences. Watch what happens to other people when they don't stick to their intended positive lifestyle changes.

SOME STARTING POINTS TO BUILD MENTAL FITNESS

By this stage you are probably feeling a bit overwhelmed at the whole process. Never fear, in this section I give some starting points for things you can do to build mental fitness across a range of skill areas.

Mastering emotions

Humans experience a mix of pleasant and unpleasant emotions/feelings. For the most part this is a good thing. Emotions are motivating and informative. They can help us make decisions.

Sometimes however our emotional lives can feel a little bit out of control. When that happens, it is useful to have specific techniques for managing emotions.

Reflection Questions

- *Do I commonly get derailed by feelings of anxiety, sadness, or anger? How good am I at managing these feelings?*
- *Am I willing to experience a range of different emotions?*
- *Do I know how to bring more positive emotions into my life?*

Suggested Resources/ Tasks

The Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley have been collecting techniques people can use to cultivate positive emotions like awe, compassion, connection, empathy, forgiveness, gratitude, happiness, kindness, mindfulness, optimism and self-compassion. All of the techniques have been tested in scientific studies. Visit - <https://ggia.berkeley.edu/>

In Australia, we are lucky in that we have many online resources for wellbeing and good mental health. A portal to those resources is <https://headtohealth.gov.au/> One type of resource that can be helpful for those dealing with difficult emotions are online CBT programs. CBT is a type of therapy that is well suited to being put online. Online CBT sites include <https://thiswayup.org.au/> and <https://mindspot.org.au/>. They are often free, or very low-cost compared to getting face-to-face therapy.



Thinking effectively

The human mind is a remarkable thing but it is also prone to irrationality and poor logic. Knowing its vulnerabilities can help you make better decisions and think more flexibly.

Reflection Questions

- *Am I able to think critically and flexibly about different issues?*
- *Do I have mindsets that helps me deal with setbacks and failure?*
- *Am I aware of common errors in thinking?*
- *Can I make good decisions?*
- *Do I have irrational beliefs?*

Suggested Resources/ Tasks

Learn more about mindsets (<https://mindsetonline.com/index.html>) and mental models (<https://fs.blog/>).

Discover the cognitive biases that humans are prone to demonstrating (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cognitive_biases). Learn CBT techniques to manage the emotional impact of these biases - <https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/step1.htm>

Read widely to learn new perspectives and keep a learning journal to organise your own thoughts and beliefs.

Self-awareness and understanding

The 'examined life' is one in which you are regularly reflecting on the person you are, and the person you want to be. The better you understand yourself, the better you are at creating contexts and situations that play to your strengths.

Reflection Questions

- *Am I aware of my strengths and weaknesses?*
- *Do I know the situations and contexts in which I thrive, and which I struggle?*
- *Do I have a coherent sense of who I am across different settings?*

Suggested Resources/ Tasks

People can tend to get very self-critical. Balance that out by getting to know your strengths - <http://www.viacharacter.org/www/Character-Strengths-Survey>

As a student you probably don't want to add more writing to your day, but writing can be very therapeutic - <https://positivepsychologyprogram.com/writing-therapy/> and studying your writing can give you insights into who you are - <http://www.secretlifeofpronouns.com/>

The inside of your mind is a fascinating if not sometimes a bit scary place. Get to know it a bit better by taking up mindfulness meditation - <https://www.smilingmind.com.au/>



Meaning and purpose

If you are fresh out of high school, it might be a bit unfair of me to expect you to know what you want to do with your life, but university is a good period in which to start contemplating this question. Having a higher-level sense of meaning and purpose can help buffer us against the challenges of everyday life.

Reflection Questions

- *Do I know what I am working towards?*
- *Do I know the kind of person that I want to be?*
- *Do I know what I want to do with my life?*

Suggested Resources/ Tasks

Self-authoring is a psychological process of really honing in on what you want to do with your life. There is a small cost but this program can guide you through it - <https://www.selfauthoring.com/>

You might not know what you want to do with your life yet, but it is possible to find meaning in your studies - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/06/09/derive-meaning-study/>

Even the simple act of reflecting on photos you take can help you tune into what is most important to you - https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/meaningful_pictures

Building positive relationships

Our relationships (family, friends, colleagues, collaborators) are a critical component of our wellbeing – some say the most important. But good quality relationships take time and effort to build and nurture. And dealing with people is not always easy.

Reflection Questions

- *Do I feel like I have supportive people in my life?*
- *Do I feel like I am a positive influence in other people's lives?*
- *Am I able to build good quality relationships?*
- *Do I feel like I belong?*

Suggested Resources/ Tasks

Contact a friend who you haven't caught up with in a while and schedule a time to catch up.

Consider joining one of the many clubs that operate around the university - <https://fusa.edu.au/clubs/>

Consider starting a study group and achieve two goals at the same time: social interaction and better academic results. Google 'study group' for advice and tips on how to start such a group.



Helping others

Sometimes the best thing we can do to make ourselves happier is to focus on trying to make things better for other people.

Reflection Questions

- *Can I identify where in my life I am doing things in order to improve the quality of life of others?*
- *In what ways would I like to make a contribution to the wellbeing of other people?*

Suggested Resources/ Tasks

Check out the range of volunteer and mentoring programs run by the Horizon Professional Development Awards people - <https://students.flinders.edu.au/student-services/careers/horizon> or look at external volunteering opportunities - <https://www.volunteering-sa-nt.org.au/>

Identify small things you could do to make the lives of those around you (partners, family, friends, colleagues) better.

Personal safety

It is hard to thrive when we are in situations that threaten our personal safety. This might be threats from outside of us (e.g. abusive relationships) or threats from within (suicidal ideation). These situations can be changed though and when they are, new opportunities arise.

Reflection Questions

- *Do I feel safe in my own home or work?*
- *Do I feel safe from myself?*

Suggested Resources/ Tasks

If you are being impacted by sexual assault, domestic or family violence and abuse, check out <https://www.1800respect.org.au/>. They have information and support services.

If you are suicidal, contact Lifeline <https://www.lifeline.org.au/>

If you experience periods of high distress, where you feel unsafe from yourself, consider developing a coping plan - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2017/12/01/my-coping-plan/>

Remember that Flinders has a counselling service - <https://students.flinders.edu.au/student-services/hcd/counselling> and an Out of Hours Crisis Line - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/09/10/new-hours-crisis-support-counselling-line/>

Caring for your body

Your brain is made of the same basic organic material as the rest of your body. This means anything you do that compromises your physical health will also compromise your mental health. Conversely, anything you do to improve your physical health, will also improve your mental health.

Reflection Questions

- *Do I make conscious choices in relation to looking after my physical health?*
- *Am I healthy?*
- *Do I get enough sleep and physical activity?*
- *Do I eat healthily?*
- *How often do I use drugs or alcohol?*

Suggested Resources/ Tasks

Get along to the Flinders Market for good quality, nutritious but cheap food – www.flinders.edu.au/flindersmarket

Familiarise yourself with Australian Dietary Guidelines - <https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/> and do your best to shape your diet around these recommendations. See your Doctor if you think these aren't appropriate for you.

The Australian Sleep Health Foundation have a tonne of resources on getting good sleep - <http://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au/>

See how close you are to meeting the recommended physical activity guidelines ([https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/266671FEE21DF643CA257C760017107F/\\$File/FS-Adults-18-64-Years.pdf](https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/266671FEE21DF643CA257C760017107F/$File/FS-Adults-18-64-Years.pdf)) and if you are below, explore ways you can up your physical activity ([https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/3E1E612D573C2B7CCA257C7500202177/\\$File/Tips&Ideas-Adults-18-64years.PDF](https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/3E1E612D573C2B7CCA257C7500202177/$File/Tips&Ideas-Adults-18-64years.PDF))



Shaping your environment

The places we inhabit (e.g. homes, offices, natural environment) impact on our wellbeing and productivity. A cluttered dark office doesn't inspire hard work. A grey urban environment with no trees and nature doesn't help us relax. You can make positive changes to your existing environment, as well as deliberate decisions about where you spend your downtime. This doesn't just apply to the spaces we inhabit. It also applies to the people we have in our lives. Surround yourself with people that inspire you.

Reflection Questions

- *Am I inspired and energised by the spaces I work and live in?*
- *Do I modify my environment in order to improve my own wellbeing and productivity?*
- *Do I spend enough time in nature?*
- *Do I surround myself with people that motivate and interest me?*

Suggested Resources/ Tasks

Hit up Google with the word 'declutter' and discover a whole new world of people making their living spaces more inspiring.

Take David Suzuki's One Nature Challenge - <https://davidsuzuki.org/take-action/act-locally/one-nature-challenge/> or simply spend more time each day surrounded by plants and animals. This is definitely possible if you study on the Bedford Park campus that has beautiful grounds and mildly aggressive ducks.

Create a study space that actually makes you want to study - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/07/11/create-study-space-makes-want-study/>

Identify which people in your life leave you feeling energised and happy, versus those that leave you feeling flat or lifeless. Spend more time with the former and less time with the latter.

Cognitive enhancement

On Monday morning, I see everyone clamouring to get their morning coffee. What they're doing is using a substance to get a mental lift. Humans have been doing that for ages.

The search for substances or exercises that can safely help us perform above our usual level of functioning is the productivity 'holy grail'. For now though, it's the standards of diet, physical activity and sleep.

Reflection Questions

- *What methods do I use to improve my concentration, attention and productivity?*
- *What lifestyle factors might actually be holding me back from performing at my best?*

Suggested Resources/ Tasks

Read this article on non-pharmacological cognitive enhancement - <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0028390812003310>

Rest easy – your daily coffee is having some positive impacts although maybe not as powerful as you'd hoped - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/09/06/caffeine-cognitive-enhancer/>

Spend some time reviewing the free information over at <https://examine.com/> - they review which nutritional supplements actually work.

Learning and education

Let's face it, the reason you are at Uni is to educate yourself. This might be purely for the love of learning or it might be because you want to get a good job/career.

The desire for competence and ongoing learning is a fundamental human psychological need. Whether or not you end up using everything you learn, a powerful ingredient of psychological wellbeing is the feeling that we are able to and are actively learning new stuff.

Knowing this, it is wise to be able to take full advantage of the learning opportunities available to you. It is wise to try and become the best student you can.

Reflection Questions

- *Do I know how to learn?*
- *Do I know what the best study strategies are?*
- *Do I know and use evidence-based techniques for learning?*
- *Am I engaged in learning outside of my degree?*

Suggested Resources/ Tasks

Read our Evidence Based Study Tips Guide - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2019/06/19/the-study-and-exam-preparation-strategies-that-successful-students-use/>

Familiarise yourself with the services offered by the Student Learning Centre – www.flinders.edu.au/slc

Subscribe to the Learning Scientists blog and find out what cognitive psychologists say about how to learn more effectively - <http://www.learningscientists.org/>

Check out College Info Geek for videos and articles on being a productive student - <https://collegeinfo geek.com/>



Work skills

It is one thing to be a good student. It is another to be able to translate that into being a good employee.

Performing in the workplace is a function of the specific skills of a job, but then a whole bunch of other 'transferable skills' that make you a good person to have on a team.

Work placements and work experience during a degree are a great opportunity to hone those skills. Also, we realise that many students have jobs alongside their degrees.

Reflection Questions

- *Am I aware of the different skills required for the workforce and which ones I am good at, and which ones I need to work on?*
- *Do I think I would make a good employee?*
- *How can I get some work experience?*

Suggested Resources/ Tasks

Check out our 'Preparing Psychologically for Work Placements' document -

<https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/06/27/prepare-mentally-work-placements/> which gives you specific strategies to get the most out of your work placements.

Check out all the professional development programs run by the nice people at Horizon Professional Development Awards - <https://students.flinders.edu.au/student-services/careers/horizon>

Think about your life beyond your degree and have a chat to the Careers Team – www.flinders.edu.au/careers

Financial control

You might not have much money now as a student, but when you move into your career you might have a bit more. At that point, you will want to know how to manage your finances well.

Talking about money can feel a bit shallow but feeling in control of your finances plays a big role in determining your overall wellbeing. And it isn't just about how much money you have, it is actually more about how good you are at living within your means, budgeting, saving, investing and using money wisely.

Reflection Questions

- *Do I feel in control of my financial situation?*
- *How good am I at saving, budgeting, investing and controlling my spending?*
- *Do I know how to manage money so that I can survive in the present moment but also save and invest for the future?*

Suggested Resources/ Tasks

Develop your financial literacy using the Government's surprisingly good MoneySmart website – <https://www.moneysmart.gov.au/>

Talk to the people at FUSA if you are having financial troubles - <https://fusa.edu.au/financial-advocacy/>

Subscribe to this guy - <https://barefootinvestor.com/>

Having fun and unwinding

You might have been thinking, given everything written in this document that I am interested only in hard work and always 'getting better'.

Whilst those are important parts of my philosophy, I am also a firm believer that you need times to unwind, have fun, let loose, and simply enjoy your time on this planet.

I can't tell you how to have fun. But I can recommend that you at least set aside time to do so.

Reflection Questions

- *Do I know how to have fun?*
- *Do I know what relaxes me?*

Suggested Resources/ Tasks

Remind yourself of what people do to have fun - <https://bit.ly/2Z2vZn5>. Add some more of your own.

Learn to distinguish between activities that have only a superficial impact on your wellbeing, versus those that genuinely help you unwind and have fun.

CLOSING REMARKS

There is a lot in this handout, so don't be concerned if it was a little overwhelming.

If the concepts sound interesting to you though, tune in to the Mental Fitness Course – <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2019/03/22/mental-fitness-intro/> where I will be exploring these concepts in more depth, but also a bit more slowly.

The main takeaway message from this handout is that it is possible to build mental fitness and in turn improve your ability to cope with the psychological demands of life.

More than this, it is also possible to build your mental fitness in order to achieve greater wellbeing and productivity.

Building mental fitness is really no more difficult to understand than building physical fitness and once you understand some of the basics, you are on your way.


If you are finding it hard to make changes in your life and this is having negative consequences for you, then please consider contacting the counselling service to make an appointment – www.flinders.edu.au/hcd

Reaching out for help is a really good way to increase your knowledge and skills and taking the time to speak to an expert can be illuminating in helping you develop strategies to cope with the more challenging aspects of your life.

So, until next we run into each other...

Take care

Dr G



The team at Health, Counselling and Disability Services produces handouts on a range of self-help topics. To ensure we are providing good quality and relevant content, please take a moment to provide some feedback on this handout. .

<https://bit.ly/2RAO742>