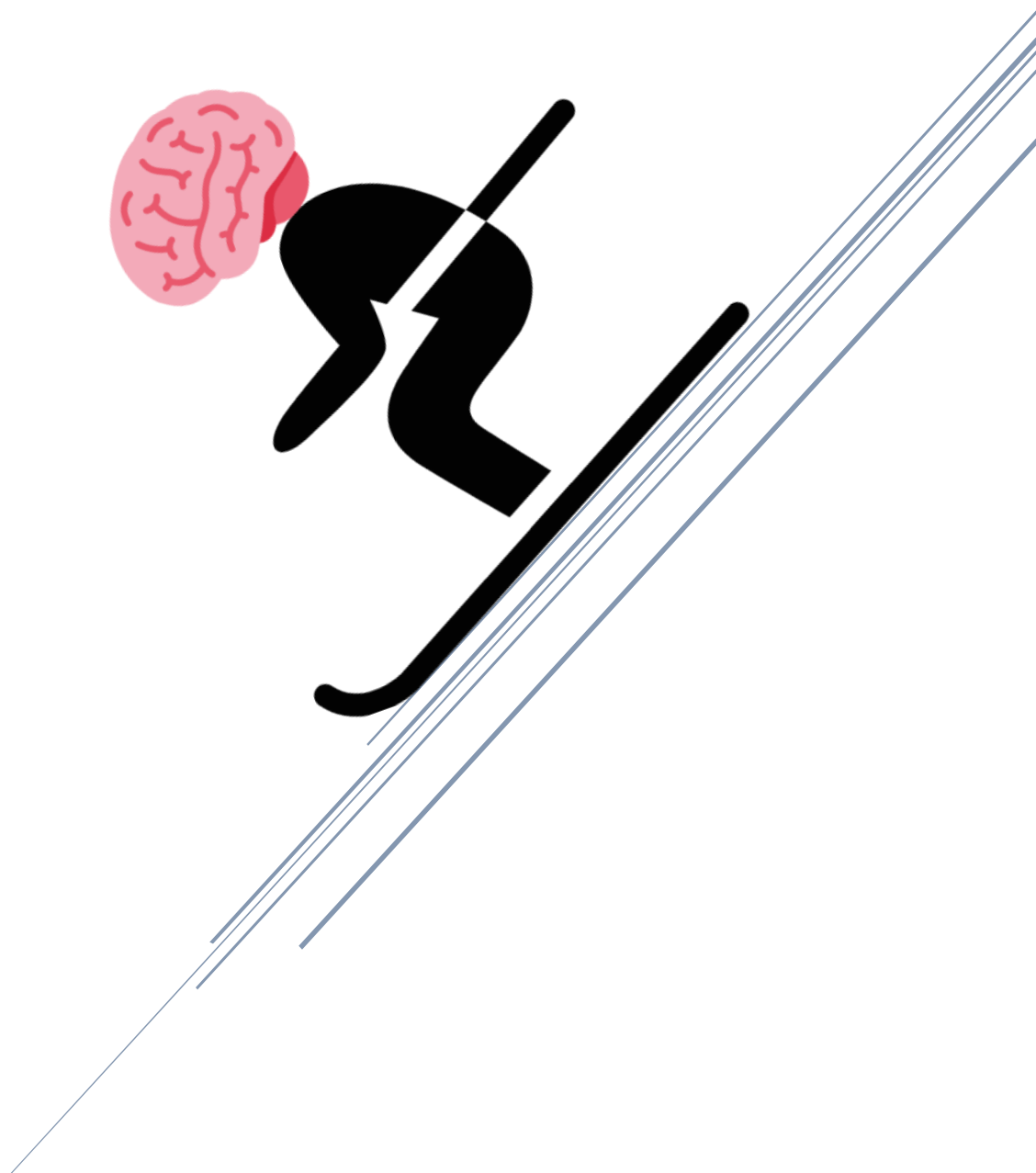


INTRODUCTION TO MENTAL FITNESS

Training the mind





Introduction to Mental Fitness

Welcome

Welcome to this **Introduction to Mental Fitness** handout. My name is Dr Gareth Furber and I am a psychologist, working in Health, Counselling and Disability Services at Flinders (<https://students.flinders.edu.au/support/hcd>).

Back in 2017 I heard the term 'mental fitness' in a podcast and I became very interested in trying to understand what the term meant, whether it was possible to build mental fitness (like we know we can build physical fitness) and whether 'mental fitness' was a good framework for helping students invest in their wellbeing and productivity.

This handout represents my current thoughts on the topic of mental fitness. Mental fitness (in my opinion) is a useful framework for thinking about how to grow, maintain or protect one's mental health and enhance one's subjective experience of life. I think it is also a useful framework for self-improvement, self-development and adaptation to adversity. Early feedback suggests the concept of mental fitness does resonate with some students at least, so I present it here today with the hope that you may get something out of it.

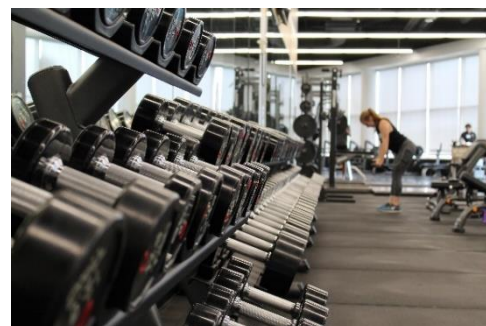
The ideas in this handout I use in my own life. I hope they are useful to you 😊

What is mental fitness?

Let us start by thinking about something most of us understand, physical fitness. The more physically fit we are, the better we can cope with, and thrive in the face of the **physical demands** of life.

Physical fitness is achieved by regular and sustained *training* of the body which in simple terms means regular exercise, rest and good nutrition.

Whilst building physical fitness requires significant exertion and effort, that exertion and effort when done in a specific way leads to increases in fitness. Being physically fit comes with several advantages: greater participation in life, living longer, being happier, being healthier, having more energy and being less susceptible to illness. Physical fitness can also have indirect positive impacts on being connected to others, self-confidence, self-esteem and productivity at work and study.



There are many pathways to improving one's physical fitness including targeted training (e.g. going to the gym), playing sports, engaging in active hobbies (e.g. gardening) and living an adventurous lifestyle. There are also different domains of physical fitness that a person can build: speed, strength, agility, coordination, balance, flexibility, endurance. Most of us need to be taught how to properly increase our physical fitness through personal trainers, instructional videos, courses, coaches etc.

So is mental fitness similar?

Yes, yes it is.

I think of mental fitness as the psychological equivalent of physical fitness.

The more mentally fit we, the better we can cope with, and thrive in the face of the **psychological demands** of life.

Mental fitness is achieved by *training* the mind, which in simple terms involves educating ourselves and experimenting with (and maybe ultimately implementing) different ways of thinking, behaving and feeling. This can take many different forms, as we will explore in this handout.

Similar to physical fitness, whilst building mental fitness requires exertion and effort, doing so has potential benefits: making better decisions/choices, feeling good, coping better with stress, being more productive, feeling more connected to others and achieving a more desirable state of consciousness.

In the same way that most of need to be taught how to improve our physical fitness, strategies for building mental fitness also need to be taught.

Hence why I created this handout 😊



Why should you build mental fitness?

Put simply, building mental fitness is a pathway to improved mental health, which includes ‘feeling’ better, functioning better, being more socially integrated, being able to cope with mental ill health and being more resilient (Figure 1). These all sound good right?



Figure 1- Domains of Mental Health

At a more tangible level, improved mental fitness helps us deal with the challenges of life. Maybe one of the following resonates with you:

- You have a psychologically demanding life (e.g. many things demanding your attention)
- You are subject to forces (e.g. people, situations) that add stress or difficulty to your life
- You have physical or mental illness that you'd like to treat or manage better
- You have some bold and ambitious goals but need improvement to get there
- You want to be able to cope better with stress
- You just want to feel better
- You want to live longer, be happier
- You want to be more successful
- You feel stuck or directionless
- Or you might just be curious!

Most of us would like some aspect of our conscious **experience** to be better. We'd like to be happier, more productive, kinder, more knowledgeable, calmer, more rational, just to name a few. Achieving that requires training of the mind, as it is through our mind that we experience everything in life. In fact, I could probably call it 'consciousness training' and it would mean the same thing.

Anyway, I am getting a bit off track. Like I said before, we build mental fitness so we have better mental health.

How do you build mental fitness?

You train your mind. That is the short answer.

Which raises the question then "*how do you train your mind?*"

That is the question I have been pondering for the last couple of years.

I finally think I have a way of explaining it that is both relatively comprehensive (i.e. captures that there are many ways to train the mind) but also accessible and relatively easy to understand (i.e. hopefully you won't need to spend hours reading this handout).

To explain the different ways that we can train the mind, I am going to use exemplars.

An exemplar is "a person or thing serving as a typical example or appropriate model".

Basically, I'm going to present some of the most common examples of people I see who are engaged in some kind of training of the mind. You can then decide whether any of those exemplars sound like something you'd aspire to be.

A quick note about the concept of training: When we train anything, we exert effort and energy in the short-term, in order to gain capacity/ability/strength in the medium to long-term. Training leads to a depletion of resources and energy in the short-term, but this is countered by medium to long-term gains in resources and energy. If going to gym just made us tired and sore and didn't lead to any future benefits, we wouldn't do it. Similarly with mental fitness, the training in the short-term can be difficult or effortful or frustrating, but it has value by making us smarter, more capable in the long-run.

Mental fitness training exemplars



The Learner

The Learner engages in formal and informal training/education to enhance their knowledge, skill, wisdom, and topic/concept mastery. By doing a university degree, you are already a Learner.

Generally, the Learner is engaging in this education to make progress in some aspect of their life, typically career related. For example, many of us went (or are going) to university to get the skills and knowledge necessary to work in an area of interest to us.

It isn't just formal education settings where you see Learners. You'll also find them reading extensively, in mentorship programs, doing professional development, engaging in online learning or in apprenticeships. Anywhere they can expand their knowledge and skills with the intention to further their work or career goals.

As a society, we orient most people to this model of training the mind through our education system, where all of us go to school and engage in this type of learning for the early part of our lives.

The Meditator

The Meditator is training themselves (through apps, retreats, formal teaching) in one or more models of meditative practice. The goals vary but revolve around gaining an understanding of conscious experience and using that understanding to help develop awareness, presence, focus, concentration, transcendence, emotional and behavioural change, compassion, and kindness.



For Meditators, meditative practice becomes embedded in their daily life, with episodes of formal practice (e.g. sitting meditation) but also informal practice (moments of mindfulness throughout the day). Meditators can have a history of practice stretching back years.

The Therapy Client



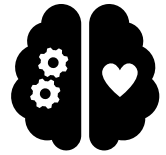
The Therapy Client accesses psychotherapeutic resources (e.g. individual and group therapy/counselling, self-help books and courses, online therapy) in order to treat mental ill health, elicit emotional or behavioural change, find meaning and purpose, make decisions, solve problems, understand themselves better and have better relationships.

The Therapy Client has learned that personal growth and development can be accelerated and amplified through engaging with mental health experts and expert designed resources.

Often the Therapy Client is trying to address and remove adverse psychological experiences (e.g. anxiety, depression) but psychotherapeutic resources can equally be used for growth as well. Some people access therapy to work out what they want to do with their lives.

The Cognitive Stimulator

The Cognitive Stimulator wants to keep their mind active and have fun and enjoyment and engagement along the way. They engage in hobbies, interests, games, brain training, learning a language/ instrument or similarly intellectually stimulating activities. They enjoy and benefit from the feeling of improvement in those things over time.



Cognitive Stimulators are similar to Learners in that they are enhancing their skills and knowledge over time, but are different in that the purpose of the training is for fun and love of learning, rather than something strategic like career enhancement.



The Creative

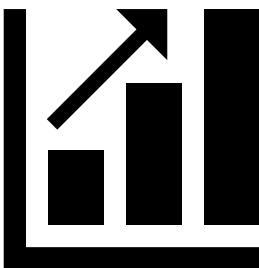
The Creative desires to bring something new into the world and in the process engage in self-expression and connect with a sense of meaning and purpose and contribution. This is typically done through artistic (e.g. art, music, crafts, dance, writing, photography) and entrepreneurial (build something new) endeavours.

The Creative is learning and developing as they go and may make a career or a living from the process, but the fundamental goal is the bringing of something new into the world. To be creative requires taking different perspectives, combining perspectives or attempting to find new solutions to existing problems.

The Mind-body Unifier

The Mind-body Unifier understands the strong connections between body and mind and uses attention and devotion to the physical body to modify their state of mind.

They seek mental health benefits through exercise, yoga, breathwork, nutrition and other activities that promote good physical health. They believe that to feed the body well is to similarly feed the mind.



The Habit Former/ Self-improver

Habit Formers/ Self-improvers are fascinated with the process of change. They pursue self-development as much for the outcomes as they do to understand and take charge of the change process. They tend to be highly disciplined and highly focused on developing routines and practices that allow them to develop a particular skill or knowledge set.

Habit Formers know that if they develop a good change process, they can apply it to achieving any kind of desired outcome. They have a strong interest in learning about and applying knowledge about how humans develop their full potential.

The Self Reflector

The Self-Reflector seeks self-understanding and using that knowledge to make better decisions, change their thinking and behaviour and find meaning and purpose. They regularly reflect on their experiences in order to extract lessons and learnings about who they are (strengths/weaknesses, likes/dislikes), which they then leverage to try and build a better life. They may engage in many of the above activities (therapy, meditation, learning) in the process but the strong theme for them in doing so is arriving at a more accurate and helpful conceptualisation of who they are.



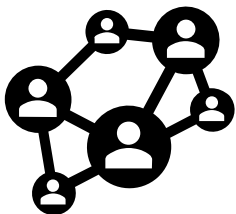
The Spiritual

The Spiritual is seeking connection with a higher power or purpose, to give meaning to their lives and achieve transcendence above the machinations of everyday life. They are seeking connection to spirit, connection to place, connection to life more broadly.

In the process the Spiritual engages in the reading of spiritual texts, formal rituals and routines, and tends to connect with others within a community. All three provide guidance on appropriate behaviour and tools for coping with difficult times.

The Adventurer

The Adventurer seeks personal growth and understanding through trying new things, going new places, meeting new people. They regularly push themselves outside of their comfort zone, with an implicit (and sometimes explicit) understanding that novelty, challenge, controlled risk and the courage to face them are powerful antidotes to fear and anxiety. They also understand that learning and growth are maximised by operating at the edges of their abilities and frequently put themselves in situations where their abilities are tested.



The Networker

The Networker harnesses the benefits of human connection through collaboration and building of relationships.

They see collaboration as a pathway to better projects, but also faster learning and self-development. In the process they build excellent interpersonal skills, which play a central role in mental health and wellbeing. Collaboration with others also provides the groundwork for a sense of belonging.

Although attention to personal relationships are a part of this exemplar, the Networker goes further to develop strong relationships across all aspects of their life: work, personal, hobbies, interests.

Which of these am I?

The truth is, most of us have characteristics/attributes that align with 1 or more of these exemplars.

For example, I could consider myself relatively equal parts Creative/Learner/Cognitive Stimulator.

As you are doing a degree, you are definitely a Learner, but you might have aspects of some of the others as well:

- If playing sport is a part of what keeps you mentally healthy, then you are also a Mind-body Unifier
- If you read self-help books and apply that knowledge then you are a Therapy Client/Self-Reflector
- If you find great mental benefit from collaborating on activities with others, then you are a Networker.

You do these activities because you recognise (consciously or sub-consciously) that there is some psychological value to you of doing so. You recognise that the effort that goes into these leads to rewards of equal or greater value.

The goal in presenting these exemplars was not to encourage you to steadfastly commit to a single one. The goal was to alert you to the different ways people are training their minds and in turn help you articulate the different types of training activities you are already doing, and which ones you might want to consider doing.

This can be particularly useful to identify whether you are dabbling in some of these areas but could benefit from expanding your efforts in those areas. For example, you might read the exemplar of the Creative and realise this is someone you used to be a lot like but aren't so anymore. You can then make a decision whether revitalising that aspect of yourself might be a good investment in your mental health.

Which of these should I be?

I can't tell you specifically which exemplar, or combination of exemplars you should work towards because I don't know the intricacies of your life and who you are.

What I can do is invite you to consider having a mix of these in your life. As a student, you are already a Learner, but what could you combine that with to provide balance and value to your life?

I also invite you to consider your life up till now and which of these exemplars have you been a bit like in the past. Perhaps you were much sportier as a kid and it made you happy, but you've given that away recently. Would you consider revisiting it?

Finally, I can invite you to consider picking one that you haven't considered before and experimenting with whether it brings you benefit. Not ever been much of a hobby person? Why not trying finding such an interest?

I talk about this a bit more below in "How do I get started in training my mind?"

Another way to look at it

You might not find the exemplar approach to thinking about mental fitness useful. Another way that I have talked about it in the past is to refer to different types of **mental fitness workouts**.

In the physical fitness area, the types of workouts you do affect what benefits you obtain. Do a yoga workout and the benefits are likely to be relaxation, flexibility and strength. Do a weights workout and the benefits are likely to be strength, muscle definition and lean mass gain. Go for a run and the benefits will be cardiovascular and endurance related.

The same exists in the mental fitness space. Different activities have different psychological effects.

Mental fitness workout types and their impacts

- Practice Awareness (e.g. meditation) → improved focus, concentration and present moment awareness
- Practice Reflection (e.g. journaling) → self-understanding, mood repair
- Practice Future Orientation (e.g. goal setting) → clarity, purpose, motivation
- Engage with People (e.g. mentoring) → social skills, support network, sense of belonging
- Tackle Problems (e.g. make difficult decisions) → fear reduction, increased confidence
- Engage in Cognitively Stimulating Activities (e.g. games, puzzles) → improved memory, vocab, attention, concentration and other cognitive skills
- Try new things → self-understanding, fear reduction, new knowledge and skills
- Develop a Connection to Place (e.g. time in nature) → sense of belonging, transcendence, calm
- Develop a Connection to Spirit (e.g. spiritual practice) → belonging, transcendence, meaning and purpose, connection
- Engage in Learning (e.g. do a course) → new knowledge and skills, self-confidence, opportunities
- Reflect on your Thinking (e.g. psychotherapy) → self-understanding, emotional and behaviour repair
- Engage in Mind/body activities (e.g. breathing retraining) → calm, sense of control, emotional and behavioural repair, improved physical fitness
- Build Habits → confidence, sense of control, varied outcomes (depending on habits built)



From a workout perspective, the goal is to add different mental fitness workouts to your day/week/month. The types of workouts you add will depend on what it is you are working towards. Looking for emotional guidance? Perhaps therapy is the best training. Looking to hone your social skills? Perhaps mentoring would be a good idea. Build into your life the type of training that is necessary to help you achieve your goals.

What else is needed to build mental fitness?

Building mental fitness isn't just about the training component, in the same way that physical fitness isn't just about exercise. To grow and improve psychologically over time requires other things. Here are just a few to consider:

A destination

Some people just like improvement for improvement's sake (e.g. Habit Formers described previously), but most people engage in physical or mental training because there is something they are working towards – a goal, a destination, an aspiration.



What is it that you are working towards? Do you want to be happier? Think clearer? Be healthier? Smarter? More creative?

What kind of outcome would convince you to take the time and effort to engage in some kind of mental exercise? Because training of the mind is effortful and can be frustrating at times (I don't always find meditation relaxing 😞), it will be useful to have a purpose/goal in mind for why you are doing it.



A way of assessing progress towards that destination

If you have a goal in mind, then you also need to know if you are progressing towards that goal.

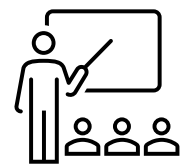
This can be as simple as just checking in every now and then and asking yourself if what you are doing is helping. Or you might use a more formal measurement system. For example, when we train students in the Be Well Plan, they use the Be Well Tracker (<https://www.bewelltracker.com/>) to monitor their mental health as they go, to track their progress.

Basically, it is useful to have some metric of success (or failure) so you know whether to continue or change your mental fitness program. Even just the act of keeping track of which days you engage in a mental fitness training of some sort can help keep you motivated.

Good teachers

Regardless of which type of mental training you decided to experiment with, you'll most likely benefit from having good teachers/guides.

You already know this to be honest. Think about your degree. The topics that are most interesting to study are often those that have the best people teaching them.



The same applies if you take up another type of mental fitness training. For example, meditation is much more interesting with a good teacher. You'll progress much faster at learning yoga if you have a good teacher.

Teachers/guides help us accelerate our capacity in the chosen area of training. A good teacher also inspires and motivates us to continue. Don't be afraid to spend time searching for a good teacher. I've switched meditation teachers a few times along the way on the basis of trying to find those that help me progress in my meditation practice the most.

Sleep and deep rest



Training the mind is effortful and uses mental energy.

If you don't take the time to replenish that energy, your training will simply lead to fatigue or burnout.

Sleep is our primary resting activity, and research continues to show just how many areas of our life benefit from good sleep: memory, learning, mood, energy, cognitive capacity.

Thus getting good sleep should be a focus if you are pushing your mind hard during the day.

Sleep isn't the only type of beneficial rest though.

Relaxing the body and mind through relaxation techniques (e.g. progressive muscle relaxation) or self-hypnosis can provide some of the benefits of sleep, but in a way that can be more easily interspersed throughout the day.

Good nutrition

It is (I think) relatively uncontroversial to say your conscious experience of the world is largely a function of the operation of your brain – that big grey lump in your head.

Your brain is made of the same kind of stuff as the rest of the body has similar resource needs to the rest of the body. A diet that heals and supports the health of the body will also likely heal and support the health of the mind. Just as an aside, there is now a field known as “nutritional psychiatry” which deals with this exact topic - <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/nutritional-psychiatry-your-brain-on-food-201511168626>



I'm not an expert in nutrition, so I am not going to tell you what to eat to have the healthiest mind. I recommend you start with the standard dietary health guidelines (<https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/guidelines>) and then consult with a dietitian if those recommendations don't seem sufficient or appropriate for your needs.



Medication

If you got diagnosed with diabetes and had to take a medication in order to stay well, then you would probably do it. It wouldn't necessarily stop you trying to improve your physical health in other ways (e.g. exercise, diet) but you'd take the medication because it would part of getting yourself healthier.

In some cases, taking a medication for psychological reasons is warranted as well. A common example would be taking an anti-depressant to provide some relief from chronic feelings of sadness and/or anxiety. Taking an anti-depressant doesn't mean you can't engage in other forms of mental training. In fact, you might find the combination of medication and mental fitness training helps you achieve a level of happiness or functioning that you haven't been able to achieve before.

Thus, medication might be a necessary and/or beneficial part of your mental fitness training. Don't be ashamed of that fact. Use what tools you can to help build the mental life you want.

Balance

Most of us have met someone who is addicted to something: food, drugs, alcohol, exercise. Even when the thing they are addicted to is generally considered healthy (e.g. exercise) it is still possible to pursue it in a way that becomes unbalanced.




This is possible also with mental fitness activities. It is possible to engage in too much learning, too much yoga, too much self-reflection.

Now exactly how much is too much is something I can't tell you. You'll have to work out for yourself whether you're doing some kind of mental fitness activity too much. Usually some of the warning signs are constant mental fatigue, a feeling of obsession, the activity is no longer providing any real benefit but you are committed to it anyway, training is using up too much time, training is interfering with other important aspects of life.

Mental fitness training can be challenging whilst you are doing it (think about how hard it is to write an essay from scratch) but when you aren't training, and with appropriate rest, you should feel that engagement in the activity has been worthwhile (think about how cool it is to get a good grade on that essay).

How do I get started training my mind?

Hold up a tick .

Before I get you launching something new in your life, let's take a moment to reflect on the mental training you are already doing.

First, there is your degree. Doing a degree is already a considerable mental investment. You might want to ask yourself if you could engage better with that existing form of mental training. A starting point would be examining your study strategies and whether they are maximised for getting the most out of the learning experience - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2021/02/15/the-study-and-exam-preparation-strategies-that-successful-students-use/>

Second, what other kinds of training might you already be doing? Perhaps you already have a meditation practice. Perhaps you are seeing a counsellor or therapist. Perhaps you have hobbies or play sports. All of these are potentially powerful mental training spaces. Similar to your degree, ask yourself if you are engaging as well with those activities as you could.

And then finally, if you've assessed your existing mental fitness training efforts and have determined there is room for more in your life, then you can start thinking about what next.

In making that decision, review the different exemplars discussed previously.

Do any of them pique your interest?

Do any of them seem like things you could do?

Do any of them seem quite different to what you've done in the past and hence might be a novel choice?

You can also review the different activities I've listed as an Appendix in this handout. Find some starting points of interest.

I'm training but don't seem to be getting any benefit!

There are many reasons why you might feel you are putting in the mental effort (e.g. learning, meditation, hobbies, interests, exercise, trying new things) but not getting much back in terms of mental rewards.

Here are just a few starting points to troubleshoot that scenario.

Not enough rest – you're doing the training, but you aren't allocating enough time for deep rest. Consider focusing on your sleep and increasing the amount, quality or regularity of your sleep.

Too much training – put simply, you are going overboard with the mental fitness focus. Look to create some balance in your life with activities that are just fun and enjoyable, without necessarily being linked to getting better at something.

Not the right training – perhaps you aren't focused on the right areas. For example, you might be doing a lot of meditation, but you really need to see a therapist and sort out some other problems in your life.

Need a better teacher/guide – consider changing teachers/guides and getting a new perspective on the training you are doing. When I started listening to a range of meditation teachers, instead of just the one, I started to get a lot more out of the practice.

Not enough time elapsed – maybe it is just a little too early in the training process to see benefits. Give it a bit more time, especially with activities that are likely to have relatively subtle slow-burn impacts on your mental health. Or maybe you need to up the intensity a little.

Need a better way to track progress – what are you using to track your progress? Perhaps you are focused on one outcome (which isn't changing) but failing to see benefits accruing in other areas. It can be challenging to notice mental improvement over time.



Common traps

- **Unreasonable standards/ perfectionism** – you set unreasonable goals for yourself in terms of improvements to be made and then chastise yourself for not meeting them.
- **Self-criticism and lack of self-acceptance** – your commitment to training ends up as a constant focus on the things you don't perceive yourself to be good at, and you find yourself being highly self-critical.
- **Insufficient rest/ recuperation/ overcommitment** – you don't allocate yourself enough time during the day or week or month to simply rest and be OK with who you are/how things are.
- **Obsession with self-improvement** – you get obsessed with always trying to be better and forget to enjoy yourself.
- **Overfeeding of the negativity bias** – you become overly fascinated with things that aren't working and lose sight of stuff that is going well.
- **Getting stuck** – you can't work out how to improve in a given area and get discouraged.
- **Avoidance (of the bigger problems)** – you focus on fine-grained improvements or areas of your life where you are already doing well and ignore some of the bigger and more pressing issues in your life.
- **Expectation it will be a fix all** – you expect too much from the mental fitness process and lose sight of the incremental improvements you are making.



Put a tick next to any traps you think you might fall into, based on past experiences. These are easy traps to fall into and you will need to be mindful of whether they have become an issue for you. They don't negate the value you can get from building mental fitness, but like any form of training, you'll have to find the right balance for you [*as a brief aside, I tend to fall into the 'avoidance' trap, where I focus on fine-grained improvements but ignore some of the bigger issues in my life :)]*

Where to learn more

This handout isn't intended to be a complete guide to mental fitness. It is really just intended to get you thinking about the topic. If you want to learn more, here is where to go:

I run regular workshops on mental fitness. Join the Oasis Online FLO Topic (<https://flo.flinders.edu.au/course/view.php?id=63157>) or follow the Student Health and Wellbeing Blog (<https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/>) to be notified of when the next workshop is coming up.

There is a fledgling Mental Fitness Community forming here at Flinders. At the moment the community consists of me sending out semi-regular (approx. fortnightly) emails on the topic to keep the discussion of mental fitness alive. But we will look to expand that over time. Learn more at <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2021/04/01/mental-fitness-community/>

I aggregate a lot of past and present writing on the topic at this blog post. It includes a mental fitness workbook I am working on at the moment - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2021/03/01/mental-fitness-intro/>



Appendix – Mental Fitness Training Starting Points

1. **Training Awareness** – most types of mindfulness meditation practice can help you harness and focus your awareness. A good starting point is this focus meditation - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ausxoXBrmWs> . You can also explore the large range of meditation focused apps available – e.g. Smiling Mind, Insight Timer, headspace, Waking Up. Mindfulness meditation is an entry point practice into different types of meditation practices, many of which have an awareness/ attention/ focus/ concentration component to them.
2. **Training Reflection** – Reflect on how your life is now, the history that brought you here, your strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, successes, and failure. Use this to get a better sense of which parts of your life are going well, which parts aren't, and what might explain that. Repeat this regularly as a way of 'taking stock of your life'.

Example: rank and rate the different domains of your life.

Domain of life	Ranking of importance from 1 (most important to me) to 10 (least important to me)	Rating of personal performance in this domain – i.e. how well I am doing in this domain - from 1 (not very good) to 10 (excellent)
Family relations		
Marriage/ couple/ intimate relations		
Parenting		
Friendships/ social life		
Career/ employment		
Uni studies		
Personal growth and development		
Recreation/ fun/ leisure		
Spirituality		
Citizenship/environment/ community life		
Physical health and wellbeing		
Mental health and wellbeing		
	What would be the top 2 domains for you to work on (maybe indicated by high importance but low performance score)	

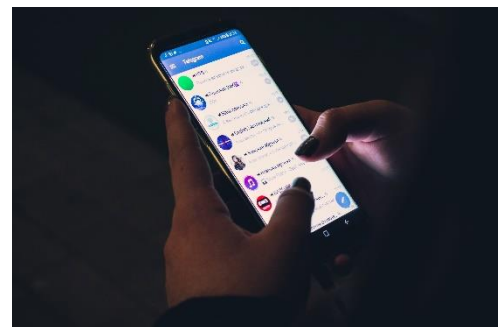
3. **Training future orientation** – fast forward into the future and imagine your ideal life and the best possible version of you. What would you be doing? What would you have achieved? What kind of person would you be? What kind of life would you be leading? Who would be in your life with you? Repeat this process regularly so you always have an updated gameplan as to where you want to go in your life.

Example: Setting goals is a simple way to start the process of imagining what you want your life to be like. Try coming up with a couple of goals for each of the time-frames indicated below.

What would you like to achieve in:	
The next month	
The next 6 months	
The next year	
The next couple of years	
The next 5 years	
The next 10 years	

4. **Engage with people** – build and nurture a network of people who support you to the best version of yourself that you can, and for whom you reciprocate that support. This includes family, friends, colleagues, partners, peers, professional connections and support professionals.

Example: email or text an important person in your life and express your gratefulness for having them in your life. Explain why you are grateful to have them in your life.



5. **Problem-solving** – be deliberate in identifying and solving the main problems in your life – the things standing in the way of you leading your best life, being your best self. This includes tackling the inconveniences of everyday life to bravely confronting the bigger life-defining problems.

Example: Resources and challenges questionnaire (taken from the Be Well Plan - <https://www.bewellplan.com/>)

Below you will find a list of common challenges (things that are not going so well) or resources (things that are going well) for your mental health and wellbeing. Let's determine which of these apply to your life and how important you feel they are to your own life.

1. Mark the challenges with a “-“, the resources with a “+“, and use a “0” for the ones that are neither.
2. Have a go at assigning the importance of each of these concepts ranging from 1 to 10.

Psychological		Challenge (-), resource (+) or neither (0)	Importance
Coping	My ability to cope with difficult situations is a..		
Self-esteem	The way I think about myself and my own self-worth is a...		
Emotions	The amount of positive emotions I feel on a daily basis is a...		
Autonomy	The sense of control over my life that I feel is a ...		
Empathy	My ability to feel what another person is experiencing is a ...		
Negative thoughts	The negative self-talk that I experience on a daily basis is a...		
Competence	The way I feel about my ability to successfully complete tasks is a...		
Achievement	The sense of achievement that I feel is a ...		
Flow	My ability to 'get in the zone' and focus on an activity is a ...		
Meaning and purpose	The sense of meaning and purpose I feel on a daily basis is a ...		
Creativity	My ability to be creative or creatively problem-solve is a ...		
Time management	My ability to prioritise my tasks and manage my time is a ...		

Interpersonal		Challenge (-), resource (+) or neither (0)	Importance
Positive relationships	My sense of positive and supporting relationships in my life is a ...		
Communication skills	My ability to communicate clearly with others is a ...		
Relatedness	The sense that I feel accepted and needed by others in my life is a..		
Feedback	My ability to deal with and accept positive or negative feedback is a..		

Health risk or promotion		Challenge (-), resource (+) or neither (0)	Importance
Nature	I feel that my sense of connection to nature is a ...		
Alcohol	I feel that my relationship to alcohol is a ...		
Smoking	I feel that my relationship to cigarette smoking is a ..		
Drugs	I feel that my relationship to recreational drugs is a ...		
Fitness	I feel that my level of physical fitness is a ...		
Sleep	I feel that the amount of quality of sleep that I get is a ...		
Nutrition	I feel that the quality and amount of food that I eat is a ...		
Physical health	I feel that the quality of my overall physical health is a...		

Other		Challenge (-), resource (+) or neither (0)	Importance
Finances	I feel that my financial situation is a ...		
Work	I feel that my work life is a ...		
Housing	I feel that my living situation is a ...		
Security	My sense of safety on a daily basis is a ...		

Do you have another example of a challenge or resource that we might have missed? If yes, please describe it below and mark whether it is a challenge or a resource in your life and rate its importance:	Challenge (-), resource (+) or neither (0)	Importance

Pick the top 5 challenges – **these are the priority areas that need your attention in terms of problem solving**

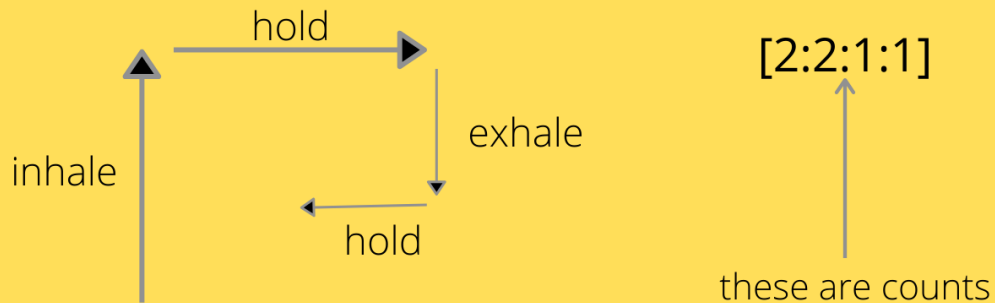
Pick the top 5 resources – **these are what you can draw on to help you solve the top 5 challenges**

Top 5 challenges	Top 5 resources

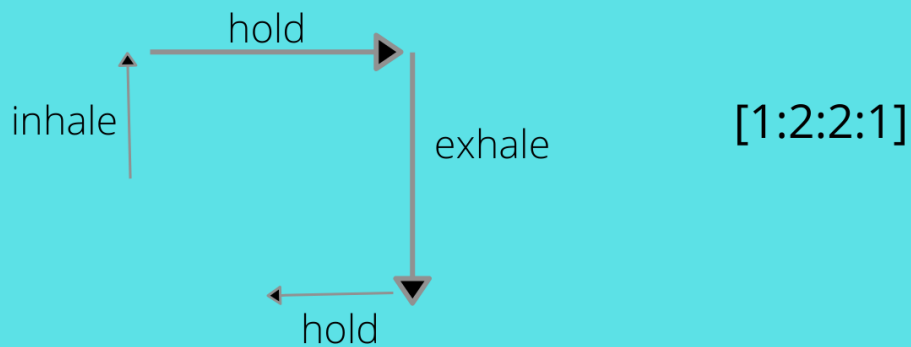
- Engage in Cognitively Stimulating activities.** Pick a game from <https://www.braingymer.com/> and have a play. Seek out similar games and puzzles on your phone and play them on a regular basis. If you don't have a hobby, consider getting one. Experiment to find out what kinds of hobby activities you enjoy.
- Engage in mind/body activities.** Follow and watch this guy on YouTube - <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2D2CMWXMOVWx7giW1n3Llg> - he explores neuroscience-based tools for achieving particular states – relaxation, focus, learning, pain, stress. An example of his work on breathing and mental states is in the next diagram.

How to use breathing to change your state

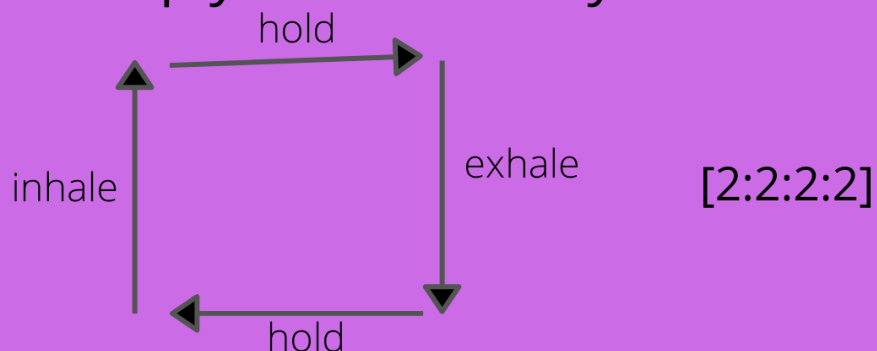
to make yourself more alert



to calm yourself down



to keep yourself steady



A mental fitness training session may simply involve breathwork to modify your mental state.

8. **Try new things** – be prepared to get out of your comfort zone and experiment with new ways of thinking and behaving, trying new things, having new experiences and meeting new people. A good way to start would be to join a club on campus - <https://fusa.edu.au/clubs/>
9. **Develop a connection to place** – what is the most relaxing spot you know? Where is it? Can you bring it to mind? What is it about that spot that is so relaxing? How about other places? Where you do feel most energised? Where do you feel most connected? What would it take to get to those spots more often?

Write about the places most important to you:

10. **Develop a connection to spirit** – what connects us all as living beings? In terms of finding meaning and purpose in your own life, this isn't a bad starting point - https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_find_your_purpose_in_life

11. **Learning** – you're already doing that 😊



12. Reflect on your thinking

Which of the following 'thinking traps' do you reckon you fall into most commonly?

- Mind reading* – think you can tell what others are thinking – example, “I just know that they hate me”.
- Fortune-telling* – predicting that a situation will end negatively and acting in a way to make it come true – example, “I know for sure that I am going to fail my exam”.
- Black and white thinking* – looking at situations in terms of one extreme or another – example, “you either go to the gym regularly or there is no purpose at all”.
- Filtering* – only paying attention to the negatives of a situation – example, “that one person in the audience didn’t seem interested in my presentation so it must have been a flop”.
- Catastrophising* – taking a setback and amplifying it to the worst possible extent – example. “I missed that class which means I’ll fall behind and then not get my degree and never get a good job”.
- Over-generalisation* – taking one single event as evidence of a series of unending negative events – example, “I’m not good at music. I suck at everything”.
- Labelling* – attaching a negative label to yourself, rather than the event – example, “I failed that test, so I am a failure”.
- Personalisation* – everything others do or say is about you – example, “my boss was unhappy so it must have been something I did”.
- ‘Should’ statements* – immutable rules about how you or others should behave – example, “they should treat me better”.
- Emotional reasoning* – taking emotions as facts – example, “I feel boring so I must be boring”.
- Control fallacies* – assuming you are either in complete control or have no control – example, “its all out of my control” or “I can completely fix this”.
- Fairness fallacy* – assuming that life is fair – example, “they got concert tickets and I didn’t, its not fair”.
- Always being right* – assuming own actions and opinions are the right ones – “why can’t they see that I’m right about this”.

Consider doing an online CBT course to learn more about how your thinking governs your mood and behaviour - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2020/11/23/online-cbt-courses/>

13. **Daily habits and routines** – develop and maintain daily and weekly habits and routines that move you closer to your ideal life and self. Two great books for habit formation are *Tiny Habits* by BJ Fogg and *Atomic Habits* by James Clear.

Other useful links (I'll add to these over time)

For a few years now, the Greater Good in Action (GGIA) crew have been documenting practical and evidence-based activities for building wellbeing. Think of them as pre-packaged mental fitness workouts. There are currently 74 of them on their site. Pick one that appeals to you and give it a go. If it is helpful, explore further activities of that sort. <https://ggia.berkeley.edu/>

Complete the VIA Character Strengths Survey for insights into your values and virtues (the kind of person you want to be, your strengths) - <https://www.viacharacter.org/>

Consider adding one of these resources to your regular reading list. Includes good resources for mental health, relationships, better thinking, productivity, life skills - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2021/03/07/my-wellbeing-reading-list/>

Until next time.....

Check out some other handouts in our self-help library - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2020/03/10/counsellinghandouts/>

If you want to give feedback about this handout (loved it, hated it) you can do that at - <https://forms.office.com/r/NupkFQu40c>

