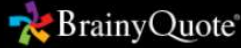


## BRIEF 4 - MENTAL FITNESS



**Good habits formed at youth  
make all the difference.**

Aristotle



When we want to get physically fit, we do this by adding regular exercise to our lives. The type of exercise we add to our lives depends on a range of factors:

- What our goals are – e.g. general fitness, rehabilitation, opportunities for socialising, competition sport
- What activities we think we'll enjoy, that is, our preferences. Some people like social activities. Others like solitary activities.
- What activities we think we can do, that is, our capabilities. For example, walking is a good basic start for lots of people, who might then progress upwards to jogging/running.

In practice, there are many activities we could do to improve our physical fitness: walking, hiking, running, cycling, weight training, swimming, and sports like tennis, football, cricket, soccer etc.

We could also engage in other activities that are not necessarily promoted as exercise, but which have positive impacts on our physical fitness, like gardening, outdoor photography, working on the car, cleaning, etc.

The key to building and sustaining some degree of physical fitness is that we do these activities regularly. If we only do them once or twice, the benefits physical fitness benefits are limited and not sustained. Instead they need to become part of our 'lifestyle'.

### WHAT ABOUT MENTAL FITNESS?

If we want to improve our mental wellbeing/ mental health (i.e. feeling happier, more content, more confident, more capable, more connected, more focused and more resilient), the same principles apply.

Namely, we need to add regular psychologically healthy activities to our lives, that is, build psychologically healthy habits.

The range of activities that we could add is quite large, because many activities have been shown to improve some aspect of our mental health.

**Mastering our emotions:** activities that help us generate positive emotions (e.g. gratitude, recalling positive events, acts of kindness) as well as activities that help us deal with negative emotions (e.g. expressive writing, relaxation, controlled breathing).

**Thinking effectively:** activities that help us think more clearly and flexibly (e.g. thought challenging, meditation).

**Self-awareness and understanding:** activities that promote continued self-reflection like journaling.

**Meaning and purpose:** activities that encourage us to find meaning and purpose in our lives like self-authoring (<https://selfauthoring.com/>) and also finding meaning in our work, through adding fun, social opportunities, reflecting on our contribution, setting goals and establishing routines.

**Building positive relationships:** activities that improve the quality of our personal relationships such as regular catch-ups, gift giving, shared experiences.

**Caring for your body:** activities that improve our physical health typically have a positive impact on our mental health like regular physical activity, healthy diet, regular sleep and limited drug/alcohol use.

**Financial control:** developing increased financial literacy and taking specific steps towards gaining financial control have been shown to improve wellbeing. This includes increasing saving, investing and paying off debts.

**Personal safety:** developing a coping plan (activities that we engage in when distressed) helps many during difficult times - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2017/12/01/my-coping-plan/>

**Shaping your environment:** activities like spending regular time in nature, and keeping our home and workplaces tidy have a positive impact on our mental health.

**Cognitive enhancement:** the use of substances and/or behaviour change to improve some aspect of our mental health. For example, regular moderate coffee intake is associated with small increases in productivity and mood. For some, cognitive enhancement includes the use of medications to treat poor mental health (e.g. anti-depressants).

**Advanced study skills:** activities that students engage in to improve their study ability and outcomes are associated with an increased ability to learn, and improved mood - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/09/05/good-student-academic-stuff/>.

**Work skills:** activities that help us get better at our primary activity (our work) can have a positive impact on our mental health because we feel more competent and this improves our opportunities for job progression. This includes engaging in regular professional development (i.e. ongoing training).

**Habit formation:** learning about the principles of how to change our behaviour, so we get better at modifying our lifestyle - <https://bit.ly/2DNEHMB>

**Helping others:** activities like volunteering which make us feel good because we are making a contribution to others.

## THE CHALLENGE OF THIS BRIEF

Your challenge, if you choose this brief, is to develop a device/ communication strategy / psychological aid that encourages people to add and sustain some psychologically healthy activities to their lifestyle, with the goal of improving some aspect of their mental health.

You can select from the previous list or go in search of activities that have been shown to have a positive impact on our mental health.

## READ/LEARN MORE

The term 'mental fitness' is not widely used, so searching this term specifically only yields a few results.

Instead focus on finding activities that have been shown to improve some aspect of mental health, namely making us feel:

1. More competent and capable
2. More in control
3. Happier and more vital
4. More engaged and connected with what we do
5. More engaged and connected with the people in our lives
6. Like we have a purpose, a reason to get up in the morning
7. Like we are achieving something
8. Like we are making a unique contribution to the world
9. Safe
10. Like we are a good person

Then focus on those activities that require some ongoing commitment on the part of the person and try to develop ways of convincing people to make that commitment.

If you need a good starting point for science-based wellbeing activities try <https://ggia.berkeley.edu/>

If you want to read more about mental fitness, try this collection of blog posts and chapters by the author of this brief – Dr Gareth Furber - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2019/03/22/an-introduction-to-mental-fitness-a-course-delivered-via-blog/>

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