# Protecting your Mental Health with Mental Fitness

The stigma around some mental health issues such as anxiety and depression have improved in recent years.

However, there remains major barriers to good mental health for many. This is despite the fact that (according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare):

1. An estimated one-in-two Australians will face mental ill-health at some point in their lives,

2. 25% of Australians will experience an anxiety condition in their lifetime, and

3. depression is the number one cause of non-fatal disability in Australia (23%).

We know that when we do lots of cardio-vascular or resistance exercise, we become more physically fit as we develop and strengthen our muscles. This logic can be applied to mental health too, and it's called mental fitness.

Regularly partaking in these exercises can provide us more space to choose how to respond to any given situation, whether that situation is a forethought, an external stimulus, or a feeling. As a result, we are less likely to sustain emotional injury.

There are four key areas that encompass your mental fitness: **Mind, Body, Spirit and Community.**

Working on (or exercising) any one of these aspects of mental fitness can improve your overall mental wellbeing. The initial challenge is understanding which areas you naturally do quite well in and the ones where you need to improve. Once you've done that, it's about setting goals to improve the more neglected areas.

### Mind

**What is it?**
Your state of mind during any given situation is a key factor in how you act and make decisions. If you're in a good state of mind, you're more likely to perceive an external shock in a more positive light and, therefore, be better equipped to deal with the setback.

**How do you improve?**
There are two key aspects to improving your state of mind.

**1) Developing a growth mindset**
People with a growth mindset believe that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts and that, although people may differ (in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments), everyone can change and grow through application and experience. Engaging in a growth mindset is easier than you might think, and can be improved by:

1. Trying something that is outside your comfort zone.

2. Changing your mindset when you fail to tell yourself that "I might need to work on this for longer to get better" rather than "I'm not good at this".

3. Acknowledging and embracing imperfections as part of life and viewing challenges as opportunities to try something new.

## 2) Practicing mindfulness

Mindfulness provides us with the capacity to move out of this hyper-aroused state into one that is calmer, more reflective and allows us to respond rather than automatically react. People who practice mindfulness find that they are less likely to worry about the future or mull over the past.

Practicing mindfulness includes:

1. Taking breaks from social media.

2. Taking moments to pay attention to things around you such as the breeze in the air or a bird in the sky.

3. Engaging in prayer or meditation.

### Body

## What is it?

The mind and body are a complex inter-connected system that is so important to your mental health. Ultimately, looking after your physical health has a major impact on the brain and our moods.

## How do you improve?

There are a number of aspects of mental fitness related to 'body', including:

### 1) Exercise

The most obvious body-related factor is exercise. Exercise does more than help your muscles. It also improves mood, reduces stress, increases self-esteem, decreases cognitive decline and reduces feelings of depression and anxiousness.

### 2) Nutrition

The relationship between our diet and our mental health is complex. However, research shows a link between what we eat and how we feel. You don't have to make big changes to your diet, but lowering the number of takeaways and snacking less, for example, can help you feel better. One diet recommended for good physical and mental health is the Mediterranean diet.

### 3) Sleep

Perhaps the most important element, though, is sleep. Routinely sleeping less than six or seven hours a night diminishes our immune system, increases our risk of cancer, stroke and congestive heart failure, and contributes to all major mental health conditions, including depression and anxiety.

Cutting down alcohol, tobacco, reducing prescription drugs where possible, and eliminating recreational drugs altogether can help us sleep better. Here are some other pointers if you want to improve your sleep.

1. Practice meditation, yoga or deep abdominal breathing before bed.

2. Write a list of things that need to be done tomorrow and put it to one side - don't think about it when in bed.

3. Exercise during the day.

4. Avoid looking at a bright screen before trying to get to sleep.

5. Avoid caffeine, alcohol or nicotine in the evenings.

6. Don't lounge in bed during the day – your bed should be associated with nighttime sleep.

7. Take a warm shower before bed.

8. Keep the bedroom at a cool temperature.

9. Wear earplugs, a mask or purchase block out blinds if necessary.

### Spirit

## What is it?

Spirituality encourages people to have better relationships with themselves, others, and the unknown. It can help you deal with stress by giving you a sense of peace, purpose, and forgiveness.

## How do you improve?

There are two key categories in 'spirit', these are:

### 1) Connection with nature

Numerous studies have demonstrated that people surrounded by trees have better mental health outcomes than people who live in a home without greenery or easy access to it. Improving your connection with nature is simple:

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1. Walk through a green park.

2. Cultivate a garden.

3. Care for an animal.

4. Meditation.

5. Practice mindfulness.

### 2) Finding meaning in work

Because we spend so much time in the workplace, finding a sense of purpose is vitally important to the overall enjoyment of our lives. Discovering this sense of purpose doesn't necessarily lie in changing your job, but rather changing your perspective of it. So, work out what drives you and what purpose you're fulfilling in your job.

## Community

### What is it?

People who are more socially connected to family, friends, or their community are happier, physically healthier and live longer, with fewer mental health problems than people who are less well connected.

### How do you improve?

Community encompasses two key factors.

### 1) Social connection

Research has shown that loneliness increases the prominence of depression, along with a number of negative physical health impacts like cognitive performance, immune system, vascular problems, inflammation and heart disease. So, friendships and human connections, no matter how small they may seem, are vitally important to our mental health.

### 2) Giving

When we give, our bodies produce feel-good hormones such as oxytocin, serotonin and dopamine. The great thing about giving is that these hormones are addictive! So, if you give once, then you're more likely to want to do it again.

You can receive the wellbeing boost that giving provides by:

1. Spending money on others.

2. Spending time with others.

3. Performing acts of kindness.

4. Complimenting someone.

5. Making someone laugh.

6. Telling someone you like and respect about your positive feelings.

If your mental health is impacting your everyday life, talking to a mental health counsellor can help. Call one of our friendly team on **1300 687 327** or visit **our website** to get in touch with a mental health professional.