

Evidence-Based Foundations of the 21 Days of Mental Fitness Workout

The 21 Days of Mental Fitness workout aims to initiate new habits and improve overall mental fitness.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HABIT FORMING

Habits play a significant role in daily life, influencing nearly half of our actions and decisions¹. The 21 Days of Mental Fitness workout program aims to initiate the development of habits that promote mental wellbeing among participants. Routines offer consistency and predictability, which reduces uncertainty and anxiety². Additionally, regular routines, such as exercise or relaxation practices, function as effective coping mechanisms against stress³.



PROGRAM OUTCOMES

- **Initial Development of New Habits:** Participants initiate simple yet effective activities to establish regular mental fitness practices, reinforcing and promoting daily routines.
- **Experimentation and Learning:** Participants explore a variety of evidence-based strategies aimed at improving wellbeing, gaining insights into methods that resonate best with their personal mental health preferences and needs.
- **Inspiration and Motivation:** Participants maintain motivation and inspiration through shared journeys with mental health experts, well-known faces and everyday heroes, fostering a supportive environment for participation and stigma reduction.
- **Build Mental Fitness:** Participants gain tools to better cope with life's challenges, nurture deeper connections, and face personal challenges with greater resilience and confidence.

¹ (Wood, W., & Rünger, D. (2016). Psychology of habit. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 67, 289-314); (Wood, W., & Neal, D. T. (2007). A new look at habits and the habit-goal interface. *Psychological Review*, 114(4), 843-863)

² (Almeida, D. M., & Horn, M. C. (2004). Is daily life more stressful during middle adulthood? How healthy adults rate their daily experiences. *Journal of Aging and Health*, 16(4), 458-478)

³ (Steptoe, A., et al. (2005). Stability and change in health behaviours as predictors of baseline and 10-year follow-up levels of perceived stress and psychological distress. *Psychological Medicine*, 35(08), 1313-1323)

OUR APPROACH

Daily Engagement & Support

- **Daily Habits Formation:** Repetition and consistency are key to forming new habits. Research shows that performing an activity daily helps to establish it as a routine, making it more likely to be maintained long-term.
- **Positive Reinforcement:** Regular positive reinforcement, such as daily messages of encouragement, can enhance motivation and persistence. Positive feedback loops are crucial for maintaining engagement and fostering a sense of achievement.



Behavioural Activation & Engagement

- **Behavioural Activation:** Behavioural activation, which involves scheduling positive activities, is an evidence-based intervention for depression. Daily activities can improve mood and overall mental health by encouraging regular engagement in enjoyable or meaningful tasks.
- **Microlearning Benefits:** The microlearning approach, which involves short, focused activities, is effective for skill acquisition and habit formation. Daily, bite-sized activities can be more manageable and less overwhelming, promoting sustained engagement.



Access & Convenience

- **Digital Interventions:** Digital mental health interventions, including email programs, have been shown to be effective in improving mental health outcomes. These interventions offer accessibility and convenience, making them suitable for a broad audience.
- **Customisation and Personalisation:** Personalised digital interventions, like tailored daily emails, are more effective than generic ones. Customised content can increase relevance and engagement, leading to better outcomes.



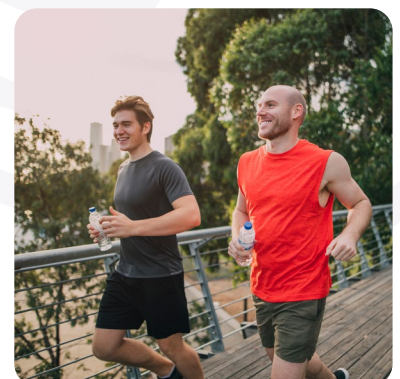
Community & Inspiration

- **Social Proof and Celebrity Influence:** Social proof and the influence of celebrities can significantly boost motivation and adherence. Messages of encouragement from well-known personalities can enhance credibility and inspire participants to stay committed.
- **Mental Health Stigma Reduction:** Frequent, normalised communication about mental fitness can help reduce stigma. Regularly receiving mental health content can promote openness and acceptance of mental health practices.



Routine & Consistency

- **Consistency and Routine:** Consistent routines provide a sense of structure and predictability, which can be especially beneficial for mental health. Regularly scheduled activities help to create a stable framework within which individuals can manage stress and anxiety.
- **Scheduled Reminders:** Scheduled reminders, such as daily emails, enhance adherence to routines and activities. Studies indicate that regular prompts can significantly increase engagement and the likelihood of completing tasks.



Daily References

Day 0

Research shows us that repetition and consistency are key to forming new habits, which is why we're going to email you at the same time, every day for the next 21 days. Studies indicate that performing an activity daily helps to establish it as a routine, making it more likely to be maintained long-term. Lally, P., Van Jaarsveld, C. H. M., Potts, H. W. W., & Wardle, J. (2010). How are habits formed: Modelling habit formation in the real world. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 40(6), 998-1009. doi:10.1002/ejsp.674.

Day 1

The Gotcha4Life Mental Fitness Check-in was developed in collaboration with our trusted partner, Brendan McNicholas, Registered Psychologist, Dalugo Psychology Consultancy. We thank Brendan for his support in the development of the Mental Fitness Check-in. Building mental fitness is about promoting adaptive functioning and resilience. Our Mental Fitness Check-in questionnaire provides an evidenced based framework to understand key habits and traits that can help people keep track of, and build their mental fitness. Although the Mental Fitness Check-in may not capture all elements of mental fitness, higher scores appear to indicate areas of current strength, and lower scores may indicate opportunities to improve an individual's mental fitness.

Day 2

This study highlights that spending time walking in nature, especially with social interaction, such as walking with a friend, enhances mental wellbeing by combining the restorative effects of nature with the benefits of social connectedness. Korpela, K. M., Ylén, M., Tyrväinen, L., & Silvennoinen, H. (2010). "Favourite green, waterside and urban environments, restorative experiences and perceived health in Finland." *Health Promotion International*, 25(2), 200-209.

Day 3

This study found that labelling emotions reduces activity in the amygdala, a region of the brain associated with emotional responses, highlighting that putting our feelings into words can enhance our ability to manage our emotions more effectively. Lieberman, M. D., Inagaki, T. K., Tabibnia, G., & Crockett, M. J. (2017). "Putting feelings into words: Affect labelling disrupts amygdala activity in response to affective stimuli." *Psychological Science*, 18(5), 421-428.

The Feelings Wheel was developed by psychologist Gloria Willcox, and offers a method for people to talk about and understand their emotions. The wheel has been used to help people recognise, express, create, and change their feelings. Willcox, G. (1982). *The Feeling Wheel: A tool for expanding awareness of emotions and increasing spontaneity and intimacy*. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 12(4), 274-276. <https://doi.org/10.1177/036215378201200411>

Day 4

Research has shown that mindfulness meditation can significantly reduce anxiety, depression, and pain, and improve overall quality of life. Goyal, M., Singh, S., Sibinga, E. M., Gould, N. F., Rowland-Seymour, A., Sharma, R., ... & Haythornthwaite, J. A. (2014). "Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Health Benefits: A Meta-Analysis." *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 174(3), 357-368.

Day 5

This research found that consistent morning routines improve alertness and mood throughout the day, while evening routines enhance relaxation and sleep quality. The study suggests that

structured routines provide psychological stability, reduce stress, and promote a sense of control over one's environment: Gruber, R., Cassoff, J., & Knäuper, B. (2014). The effects of daily routines on sleep quality and mental health. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*.

Day 6

Research shows that self-care practices can significantly improve emotional adaptability and overall mental wellbeing. Engaging in activities that promote self-care helps reduce stress and enhance resilience. [Source: "Self-Care Strategies for Stress Management: A Systematic Review." *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 2021.]

Day 7

This research highlights the significant impact of exercise on mental health. The study adjusted for publication bias, affirming that regular physical activity not only improves physical health but also plays a crucial role in alleviating symptoms of depression. Research conducted by Schuch, P. B., Vancampfort, D., Richards, J., Rosenbaum, S., Ward, P. B., & Stubbs, B. (2016). Exercise as a treatment for depression: A meta-analysis adjusting for publication bias. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 77, 42-51.

Day 8

This study found that participants who reduced their screen time experienced significant improvements in mental health, with decreases in anxiety and depression symptoms and better sleep quality. The results suggest that reducing screen time can have positive effects on overall mental wellbeing. Myers, C. A., & Crowther, N. A. (2019). Screen time reduction and mental health: Effects on anxiety, depression, and sleep. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 42(4), 637-648.

Day 9

This study explains that reflective practices help individuals process their experiences, understand their emotions, and develop greater self-awareness. Mann, K., Gordon, J., & MacLeod, A. (2009). The role of reflection in enhancing learning in a coaching context. *Advances in Health Sciences Education*, 14(4), 595-621.

Day 10

This academic review highlights how music can influence mood and emotions, enhance cognitive performance, and promote social cohesion. The study underscores the ability of music to reduce stress, improve mood, and facilitate emotional expression. Hallam, S. (2010). The power of music: Its impact on the intellectual, social and personal development of children and young people. *International Journal of Music Education*, 28(3), 269-289.

Day 11

The author of this review compiles evidence from various studies showing that engaging in altruistic behaviours, such as acts of kindness, is associated with higher levels of happiness, lower levels of depression, and improved physical health outcomes. The review highlights how being kind to others can activate the brain's reward system, leading to a "helper's high," and positively impacting overall well-being. Post, S. G. (2005). Altruism, happiness, and health: It's good to be good. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 12(2), 66-77.

Day 12

Dadirri is a word from the Ngan'gikurrungurr and Ngen'giwumirri languages of the Aboriginal people of the Daly River region and refers to the Aboriginal practice of deep listening. The practice of deep listening is used in certain counselling and therapeutic methods. Korff, J 2023, Deep listening (dadirri), <https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/education/deep-listening-dadirri>

This research concluded that exposure to natural environments is associated with lower levels of stress and better mental health outcomes, including reduced levels of anxiety and depression. Bowler, D. E., Buyung-Ali, L. M., Knight, T. M., & Pullin, A. S. (2010). A systematic review of evidence for the added benefits to health of exposure to natural environments. *BMC Public Health*, 10, 456.

Day 13

This article highlights that strong social connections are associated with lower levels of anxiety and depression, greater well-being, and even increased longevity. Regularly checking in with friends and loved ones helps reinforce these social bonds, which are essential for emotional support and resilience. Umberson, D., & Montez, J. K. (2010). Social relationships and health: A flashpoint for health policy. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 51(Suppl), S54-S66.

Day 14

This research argues that the ability to identify and label emotions accurately is crucial for managing emotional responses. It highlights that using an emotion wheel to identify specific emotions and analysing what triggers these emotions, is beneficial as increasing emotional awareness leads to better emotional regulation and psychological health. Lane, R. D., Quinlan, D. M., Schwartz, G. E., Walker, P. A., & Zeitlin, S. B. (1990). The role of emotional awareness in the regulation of emotions: A developmental perspective. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 31(5), 789-798.

Day 15

This research shows that sharing personal experiences and emotions with others can significantly enhance emotional wellbeing and social connectedness. Such practices promote empathy, reduce feelings of isolation, and foster a sense of belonging. Pennebaker, J. W., & Seagal, J. D. (1999). Forming a story: The health benefits of narrative. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 55(10), 1243-1254.

Day 16

This research reviews the effects of disclosing stressful and emotional experiences. It shows that sharing worries, either through talking or writing, has a significant positive impact on mental and physical health, reducing stress and promoting psychological wellbeing. Frattaroli, J. (2006). Experimental disclosure and its moderators: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 132(6), 823-865.

Day 17

This research highlights how engaging in simple positive activities, such as taking gratitude photos, can significantly increase well-being by enhancing positive emotions and reducing negative ones. Lyubomirsky, S., & Layous, K. (2013). How do simple positive activities increase well-being? *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22(1), 57-62.

This study found that expressing gratitude, such as through writing gratitude letters or notes, can significantly improve happiness and life satisfaction. The act of conveying gratitude enhances social bonds and personal well-being. Emmons, R. A., & McCullough, M. E. (2003). Counting blessings versus burdens: An experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being in daily life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(2), 377-389.

This study validates the "Three Good Things" exercise, showing that participants who wrote down three positive events each day experienced increased happiness and reduced depressive symptoms over time. Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist*, 60(5), 410-421.

Day 18

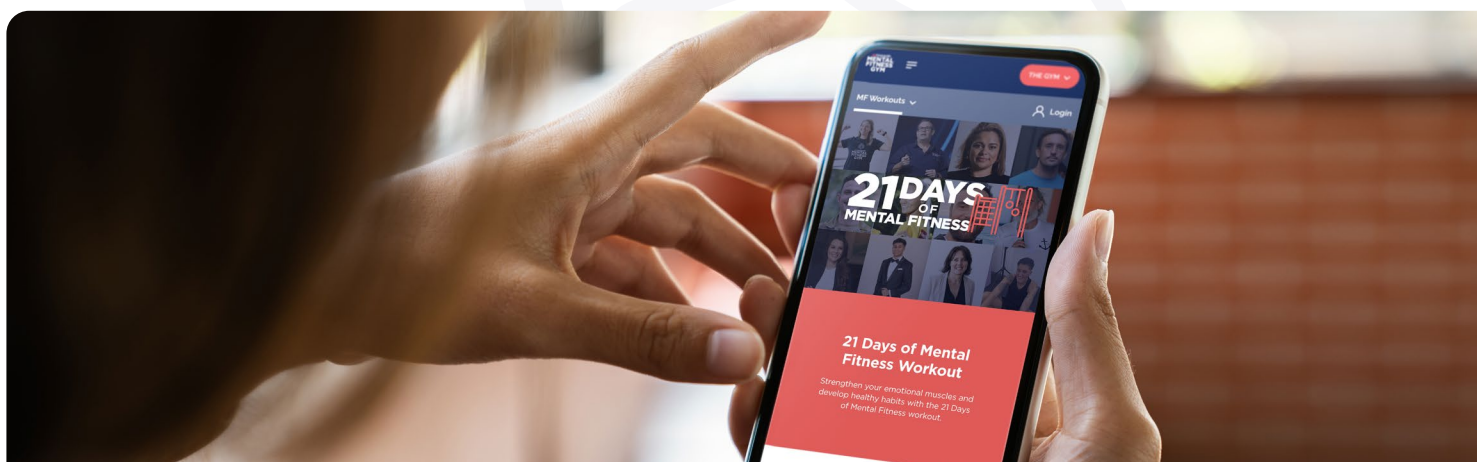
This study explores the relationship between perceived control and well-being. It suggests that individuals who believe they have control over their lives tend to experience better psychological and physical health outcomes. Thus, by focusing on what one can control, individuals may enhance their overall well-being. Lachman, M. E., & Weaver, S. L. (1998). The Sense of Control as a Moderator of Social Class Differences in Health and Well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74(3), 763-773.

Day 19

This study supports the importance of reflection and self-compassion in maintaining mental wellbeing. Taking time to acknowledge and celebrate your achievements can enhance motivation and resilience. [Source: "The Role of Self-Compassion in Well-Being," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2011.]

Day 20

This paper reviews the impact of friendships on psychological well-being across the lifespan. It highlights that supportive friendships are associated with better mental health outcomes, including lower levels of depression and anxiety. Being a good friend can provide a sense of purpose, belonging, and emotional support, which are crucial for mental well-being. Hartup, W. W., & Stevens, N. (1997). Friendships and Adaptation in the Life Course. *Psychological Bulletin*, 121(3), 355-370.



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Disclaimer

The information in our Mental Fitness Gym Workouts is not intended as a substitute for medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Gotcha4Life does not provide counselling or crisis support services. You can connect with mental health professionals for confidential 1-on-1 support and advice by calling Beyond Blue on 1300 22 4636 at any time or visit beyondblue.org.au. If someone you care about is experiencing emotional distress, please contact Lifeline who are there to listen and support you, 24 hours a day on 13 11 14. If someone's life is in danger, call 000.

For additional information and detailed references, please refer to the full articles and studies.