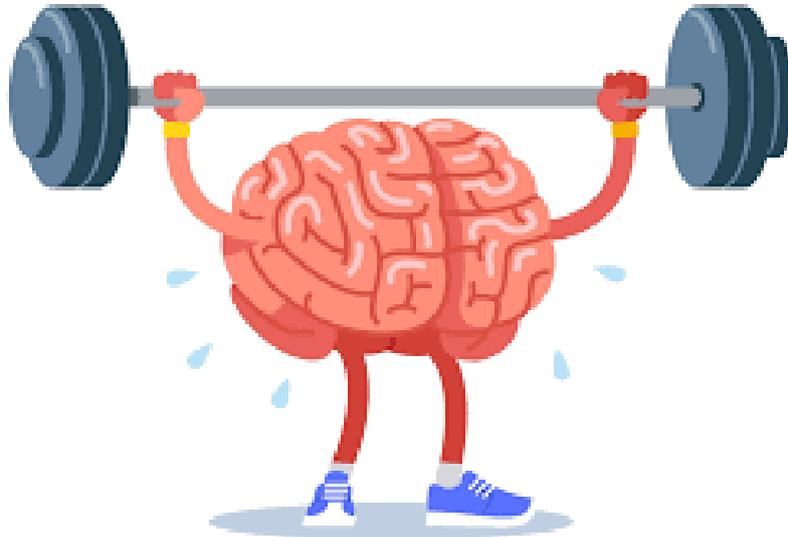




ST HELEN &  
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# How to be Mentally Fit (and Strong!)

## A Middle School Guide



# Mental Fitness

So what is mental fitness? I'm not talking about intelligence, I mean your mental and emotional fitness.

Just as we all have levels of physical health and fitness, we all have levels of mental health and fitness. All of us can improve our physical fitness, and all of us can also improve our mental fitness. Getting physically fitter takes work and effort, and it's the same with mental fitness. And in the same way as keeping ourselves physically fit helps us stay healthy, keeping ourselves mentally fit helps us to have the best possible mental health – and be happier!

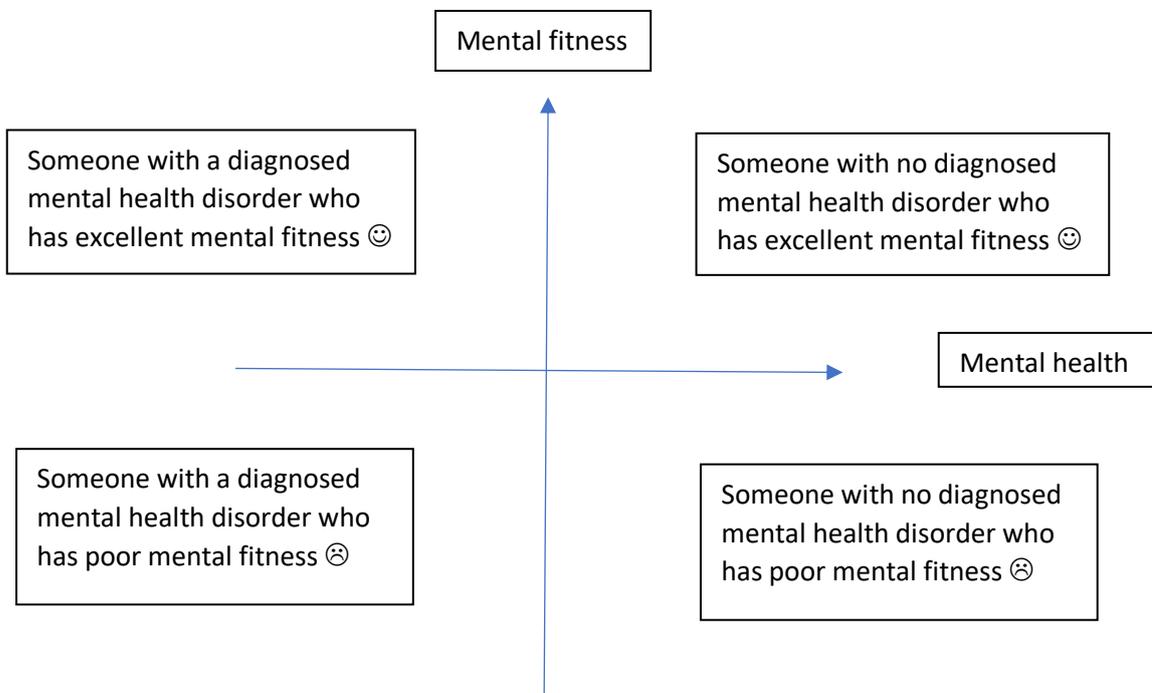
**What is happiness?** It's about **how** you live your life, rather than the circumstances in which you live your life: 'Happiness is not a matter of the stuff you have, or whether you are beautiful, healthy, powerful or rich. A happy life is not one in which you just **have** these things... A happy life is one in which you **deal well** with these things that you have – and cope well with illness, poverty and loss of status, if these things happen to you.'

Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*

Some people have a mental health diagnosis and it is important they get the right support, but they can also benefit from developing their mental fitness.

What it is really important to understand is that YOU can make a difference to your mental fitness, and so to how happy you are.

So how can you make sure you stay 'above the line' in the diagram below? Read on for suggestions! There is space throughout this booklet for you to make notes and record any strategies you use or would like to try to work on your mental fitness.



# Developing Your Mental Fitness: Top Tips

## Community and Connectedness

Just connecting with other people, family and friends, is good for developing mental fitness.

### Talk to someone



If you are feeling sad or stressed, bottling up your feelings is not the best way to manage them. You can't just put a lid on feelings and hope they will go away – or even that the lid will stay on! But you also don't want to load your friends down. Solution? Talk to a trusted adult: your parents, tutor/teacher/Head of Section, school counsellor... we are all your support team. And remember, none of us are superhuman. We all sometimes get tired or overwhelmed by how we feel. **If you need help, ask for it!**

### Care for others



Even the smallest act can count, whether it's a smile, a thank you or a kind word. Larger acts, like volunteering (which many of you do for the Duke of Edinburgh's Award) can also improve mental fitness. The time and energy you invest in being kind pays back with interest to make you feel happier.

## Use your mind

### Mindfulness



Be more aware of **the present moment**, including your thoughts and feelings, your body and the world around you. Connect with your body and the sensations it is experiencing – connect with the world around you.

### Be grateful



There is a research that shows that grateful people are happier! Thinking about what is GOOD ☺ in your life rather than focusing on the bad stuff helps develop mental fitness. Try thinking of three things every day that you are grateful for! If you can't manage three, think of one thing. Making this part of your bedtime ritual/routine can help you end the day positively.

'If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude.'

Maya Angelou

## Taking care of yourself physically

Taking care of your body is a big part of taking care of your mind – the two are interconnected!

### Be active



Exercise releases chemicals in the brain that make you feel good. Regular exercise can boost your self-esteem and help you concentrate and sleep better, as well as keep you physically healthy. It doesn't have to be running or going to the gym – find something you enjoy: cycling, dancing, tennis... Whatever you enjoy, make it part of your life! Top Tip: if you don't enjoy something, you are more likely to give up, so find something you like – maybe exercise with friends?

### Eat well and stay hydrated



Your brain needs a mix of nutrients in order to stay healthy and function well, just like the other organs in your body. A diet that's good for your physical health is also good for your mental health.

### Get enough sleep



We all know how much harder life is when we are tired! Teenagers need sleep - studies suggest nine hours a night. Work on good sleep habits and make sure you get enough sleep. If you are struggling with this, talk to an adult.

Some sleep tips:

- Keep your bedroom dark and not too hot OR cold
- Create a pre-bedtime 'ritual' or routine. A bath or shower can help.
- Digital detox: no screens for at least an hour before bedtime
- Be careful when and what you eat. Think about caffeine (in lots of soft drinks), sugar and protein (protein-rich foods will give you an energy boost)
- "Brain dump": if your brain is whirling, try writing your nagging thoughts down and leaving them on the page.

'Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes...including you.'

Anne Lamott



What can you try, to develop your mental fitness?

# Stress

This is a stress bucket. Everyone has one, and its size depends on an individual's situation eg if someone has experienced a lot of personal trauma, theirs is likely to be smaller.

The first thing to remember is that stress is inevitable – things happen in life that cause us to feel stressed. But not all stress is bad. Deadlines, the demands of excellence, and so on, all come with stress; that stress can bring out our peak performance.

When your body detects stress, a small region in the base of the brain called the hypothalamus reacts by stimulating the body to produce hormones that include adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones help you to deal with any threats or pressure you are facing through flight/fight/freeze – they helped our

ancestors run away from wild animals! The problem comes when you're constantly stressed, your body stays in a state of high alert. You can't live at that pace all the time. You can 'snap' and say or do things that you really wish afterwards that you hadn't! This can damage relationships which lead to you feeling unhappy. We need periods of intense engagement and periods of retreat and relaxation—otherwise we'll burn out.

So what you need to do is use the tap! You need to find relaxing and/or endorphin-producing activities that allow stress to drain from your stress bucket, so it doesn't fill up and overflow. Some great 'taps' include

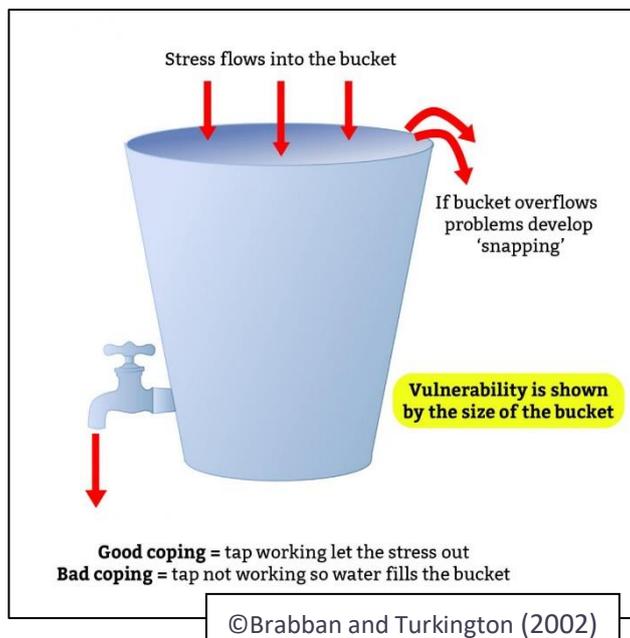
- Sport and exercise, especially getting outside!
- Creativity: art, craft, writing, music, dance...
- A good book!
- Mindfulness
- Getting enough sleep

It is important to practise **self-care**: spend some time **every day** doing something you enjoy. You can manage 30 minutes! Keep emptying your stress bucket regularly, rather than waiting for it to fill up – but learn to recognise the warning signs when it is getting full!

Anxiety is a normal and healthy function, and much of the anxiety that you express is a sign that you are aware of your surroundings, mindful of your growing responsibilities, and frightened of things that are, in fact, scary! A great deal of time, stress is just operating as your friend. Change and stress go hand in hand - even if a change is positive. Your lives are filled with change: your bodies and brains are transforming, your academic workload is increasing, and social relationships are constantly evolving. The anxiety that comes with stretching to face these and other challenges is part of how humans develop strength. To develop physical strength, you have to slowly push your levels of physical endurance, building up strength through resistance training and similarly, you should see a challenge as an extraordinary weight training program for your mind. You are going to walk out of it tougher and stronger than you have ever been.

In strength training you can't just lift weights day after day after day - in order to get the full benefits from the workout, your muscles need a chance to recover and repair. The same holds true for the brain. Accept that some level of stress is inevitable, spend less time worrying about it and more time focusing on how you can build in recovery time. The good news is your mind recovers a lot faster than your muscles do. But you need to restore yourself so you can go right back in for another workout. Your job is to work out how you like to recover. What's the system that really works for you?

- Dr Lisa Damour (psychologist)



# Managing Time

Think about your typical week, including your activities before, during and after the school day. Where can you schedule in some 'you time', to help you empty out your stress bucket?

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Before school/ form time					
Lunch time					
After school					
Weekend	Saturday:				
	Sunday:				

This is my student-based version of the Eisenhower Matrix (invented and used by President Eisenhower) – it is a productivity tool that can be a useful way to prioritise things so they get done!

	Urgent	Not urgent
Important	<p><b>Quadrant 1: Urgent and Important DO NOW</b></p> <p>Time-sensitive tasks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Urgent homework</li> <li>Revision for test/exam</li> </ul>	<p><b>Quadrant 1: Not urgent but important DECIDE</b> <i>schedule, before urgent</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Homework not due in tomorrow</li> <li>Mental fitness-building including family/fun time</li> </ul>
Not important	<p><b>Quadrant 3: Urgent but not important DELEGATE</b></p> <p>Can someone else do this for you? Is this something you need to be doing at all?</p>	<p><b>Quadrant 1: Not urgent or important DELETE/DELAY</b></p> <p>You don't need to do it, so don't – or if it's something you want to do (eg Netflix), delay until the important stuff is done.</p>

Be clear on the difference:  
 important: of great significance or value  
 urgent: requiring immediate action or attention  
 Things can seem urgent but do not be fooled! They are not necessarily important.  
 Do not sacrifice what is important to what seems urgent – self-care is vitally important but may never seem urgent.

'What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important.'  
 Dwight D. Eisenhower

# Managing work

There will be times when homework/tests etc feel overwhelming, or work seems too hard. Top tips:

- Face up to the difficulty – don't pretend it isn't there
- Talk to your subject teacher
- Talk to your tutor
- **Never judge your inside by someone's outside (#liferule)** – they could be struggling too.
- Don't give up: intellectual fitness takes work and learning generally happens outside your comfort zone. If you're finding it hard, that's normal!
  - Discard fear of failure; instead expect it. You succeed BY failing and learning from it.
  - Even if you haven't got it yet, you will get there with effort. Get comfortable with 'that doesn't make sense' and turn it into 'that doesn't make sense yet'.
  - Be curious: replace 'I'm dreading this' with 'I wonder what this will be like'
- Boundary your homework time to the allocated amount of FOCUSED study and make sure you don't sacrifice sleep for homework!
- Think about how, where and when you work best at different tasks.
- Don't procrastinate!

'If I were to let my life be taken over by what is urgent,  
I might very well never get around to what is essential.'  
Henri Nouwen



Think about what YOU find hard and what strategies you can try.

Also think about **how**, **where** and **when** you work best at different tasks.

# Managing emotions

Mental fitness does not mean being happy all the time! Instead, it is about having an emotional response **appropriate** to what is going on. All emotions have their place. Sometimes things happen that will result in you feeling angry, and sometimes you will feel sad. It is normal to feel low or anxious at times – it does not mean you ARE ‘anxious’ or ‘depressed’.

It is good to recognise - pay attention to - how you feel, so you can move through it more effectively. For example:

- Embarrassment can be a signal that you’ve gone wrong somewhere and need to correct your direction
- Guilt may mean you need to apologise and make something right
- Doubt makes you reassess your skills



Can you think of any other examples of how emotions can be indicators for an action you need to take?

## #lifskill: feelings are indicators not dictators

Hormones can affect your emotions – and as a teenager, you have a LOT of hormonal stuff going on. It can be helpful to recognise if you get particularly cross or easily upset just before your period starts, for example. Understanding why you may be feeling something helps you manage it better,

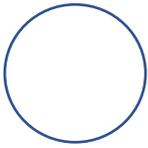
While it’s important to allow yourself to feel what you feel, rather than pretending it isn’t there or bottling it up, and to get support with managing feelings when you are struggling, **overthinking**, when you get stuck in going over and over what you’ve done and said, is not helpful. Rather than going round and round in circles in your head, distract your brain – try music, or one of the mental fitness building strategies.



Strategies for emotion overload and overthinking:

# Managing worry

## Put a ring around it



This is a great strategy for managing when you are feeling overwhelmed or worried about something. Basically, it means focusing on one thing at a time, breaking things down into chunks. It can also allow you to isolate a part of your life that is challenging you, so you can recognise that it's not EVERYTHING or ALWAYS, it's just this one thing that is difficult right now. Keep a sense of perspective – don't catastrophise!

## Knowing your boundaries



Identify what lies within your control and what lies beyond it. Visualising the blue circle of control can help with this. Put your energy and effort into what you can control – worrying and wishing about what is beyond that is pointless. You can, however, control HOW you respond to the things beyond your control.

Accept responsibility for what you do as well as what you can do, avoiding over-personalising ('it's all my fault') and over-externalising ('it's all their fault').

'If the problem can be remedied, then there is no need to worry about it. And if there is no solution, then there is no point in being worried, because nothing can be done about it anyway.'

Dalai Lama

## Reframing ABC

Make three columns on a piece of paper: A, B and C. In column A (activating event), write a time you faced something challenging, or think of a possible challenge (eg low mark in test), in B (belief) the negative belief that comes from that ('I'm rubbish at this') and in C the result (consequence) from this belief (dropped the subject). Now reframe the problem: B becomes positive ('I didn't get my revision right') and so does C (see teacher for help). The ABC strategy of thinking about event → belief → result is a helpful way of thinking about both positive and negative events, so you can develop the ability to observe and challenge your beliefs.

'Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow, it empties today of its strength.'

Corrie Ten Boom



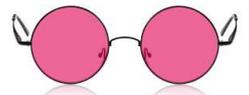
Try the 'Reframing ABC'

# Managing Friendships

Friends are brilliant, but we all know that friendship can be difficult. Here are some top tips to help you navigate the tricky waters of friendship:

1. What do you value in a friend? What makes someone a good friend? Think about those qualities, and then **be** the friend you want to have, and expect those qualities in your friends. Just as you want to be the best version of yourself, a good friend helps her friends be the best versions of themselves.
2. Find the people who 'get' you – your 'tribe'. Don't fall into the trap of making 'aspirational' friendships with other girls just because they are the 'cool ones'.
3. Remember: no one is a possession! Your friends can have other friends – can even \*gasp\* be part of more than one friendship group.
4. Be careful with jokes and banter.
5. Things change, people change and grow apart, and friendships fade. Always be kind, and have integrity:
  - Don't take sides
  - Don't spread gossip
  - Don't stir up things by 'She said you...'
  - A good rule is not to say anything behind someone's back that you wouldn't say to their face. And don't post something online that you wouldn't say to someone face to face
  - Sort problems out face to face rather than on social networks/by text

Remember that when things go wrong, we often find it hard to see clearly what is happening – we misunderstand and misread things. It's like wearing coloured glasses: you can't see true colours. **Just because you feel it, doesn't make it real** – your feelings are real, but that doesn't mean you are seeing what is happening accurately! Don't assume motivation – you are not a mind-reader!



## No excess baggage

It can be very easy to dump your worries on your friends. Imagine each worry as a bag. One bag quickly turns into more....



The best things you can do if your friend is loading you with worries is to tell an adult – you are their friend, not their counsellor, so help them get the support they need.



How are you going to be a good friend?

# Self-care

Here are some other things that help you build mental fitness and be happier:



**Music** can be a way to express and work through difficult emotions, whether you listen or play/sing. Singing, particularly in groups, releases endorphins, chemicals that make you feel good!

Taking a break – having some time off.

Doing something you are good at, something you enjoy, something creative; learning or trying something new.

Positive self-talk.

The **Wheel of Well-being** sums up how to be mentally fit:



## Wheel of Well-being



Be aware of the world around you and what you are feeling.

Reflecting on your experiences will help you.

Appreciate what matters to you.

Happiness comes from giving to others – whether time, money, attention or thanks.



Make a note of things you can try – thinking of strategies in advance really helps!

If I feel

I will/can

# Summary

So, key points to remember:

- Mental fitness can be developed and improved, just like physical fitness, but it takes work!
- Being mentally fit does NOT mean you will always feel happy, but it does mean you will be better prepared and more able to cope when bad stuff happens in life.
- You won't feel happy all the time – that is normal. You will still feel stressed at times – that is normal. Challenge helps us grow and learn, and progress happens outside your comfort zone!
- Successfully managing stress, through good mental fitness, will make you stronger.

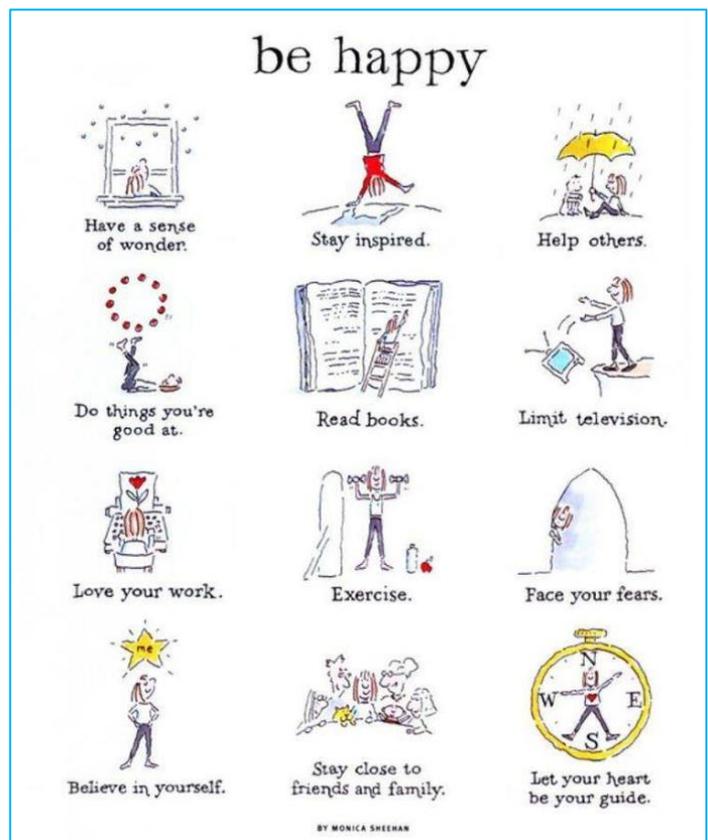
# School Values

Here is a reminder of our school values. Try to apply them to yourself and others, so be kind to, honest with and respect yourself as well as others.

- Kindness
- Respect
- Honesty
- Confidence
- Perseverance

Think about what these values mean to you, in practice.

For example, you can be kind to yourself by using the strategies in this booklet: developing your mental fitness, treating yourself like your best friend.



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These are the sources I used to make this booklet:

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