

# Mental Fitness for Student Retention

Dr Gareth Furber  
eMental Health Project Officer  
Health, Counselling and Disability Services



# eMental Health Project Officer

- I maintain the following:
  - Student Health and Wellbeing Blog - [www.flinders.edu.au/studenthealth](http://www.flinders.edu.au/studenthealth)
  - Wellbeing for Academic Success FLO topic - <https://flo.flinders.edu.au/course/view.php?id=53137>
  - OASIS Website – [www.oasis.flinders.edu.au](http://www.oasis.flinders.edu.au) (SOON!)
  - Health, Counselling and Disability Website - [http://flinders.edu.au/current-students/healthandcounselling/healthandcounselling\\_home.cfm](http://flinders.edu.au/current-students/healthandcounselling/healthandcounselling_home.cfm)

# eMental Health Project Officer

- I talk about:



How to live a 'Life Worth Living'



Productivity – getting things done

# I draw on .....

- My discipline of psychology (I have a Clinical PhD)
- The health and mental health peer-reviewed literature
- My clinical colleagues
- My personal experience (absolutely a 'work in progress')

# What I want to talk with you about today....

- Explain the concept of **mental fitness**
- Examples of things you can do to build your **mental fitness**
- Reflection/discussion 1: What areas of **mental fitness** would I work on?
- Reflection/discussion 2: Is the topic of **mental fitness** one worth discussing with students?
- Reflection/discussion 3: 2019 – our plans for a **mental fitness** course and how you would embed mental fitness in your teaching

# Similar terms

- Resilience
- Good mental health
- Mental toughness
- Psychological wellbeing
- Healthy mind



# Mental Fitness

- “having a healthy and strong mind to allow you to handle the **challenges** and **opportunities** that life puts in front of you, without getting too worn out.” (Biteback)
- *“a state of psychosocial well-being, it means having a **positive** sense of how we feel, think, and act, which improves our ability to **enjoy** life. It contributes to our innate ability to be **self-determined** (competence, autonomy, relatedness).” (Government of New Brunswick!)*
- *“Mental fitness means keeping your **brain** and **emotional** health in tip-top shape.” (healthline)*

*“a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own **abilities**, can **cope** with the normal stresses of life, can work **productively**, and is able to make a **contribution** to his or her community.”*

World Health Organisation



# To understand it better...

- It is useful to draw an analogy with physical fitness

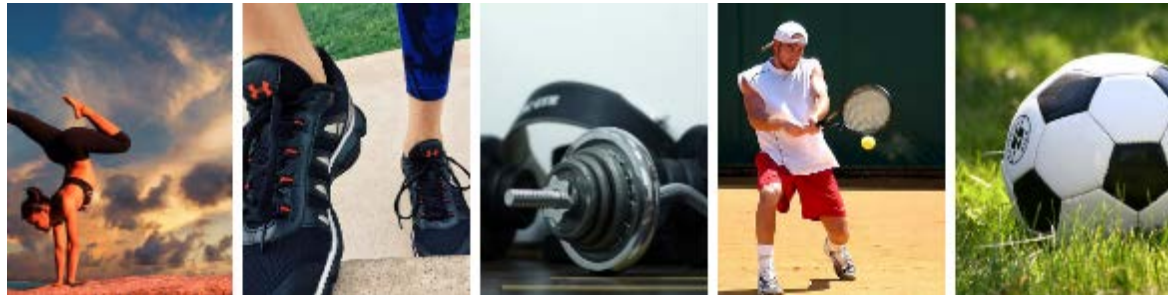


# Physical fitness

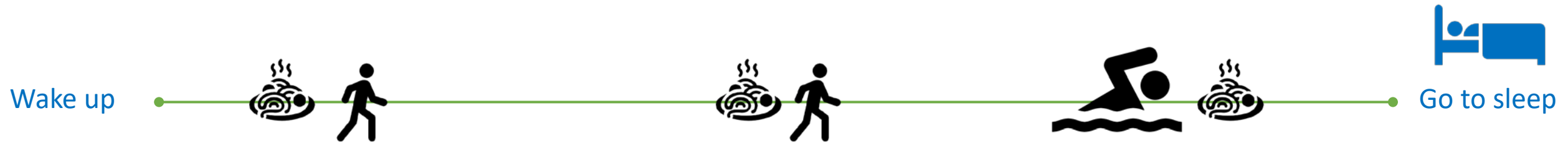
- Have the **physical resources** required to cope with the **physical demands** of life
- Levels/grades of fitness
- Domains of fitness: endurance, flexibility, body composition, speed, balance, coordination, reaction time, power, cardiorespiratory
- Achieved through effort
- How much effort depends on the demands you are trying to meet:
  - **Cope with everyday demands** (commuting, working etc)
  - **Sense of wellbeing** (feel good, prevent illness, manage illness/disability)
  - **Performance** (participate in recreational or competitive sports/ leisure activities)

# Physical fitness contd....

- There are many activities you can engage in, across the different domains to increase your physical fitness
- The knowledge and discipline required to increase physical fitness ranges from the very simple, to the highly complex
- There are resources/ professionals you can call on to help you in the process (e.g. personal trainers, physiotherapists etc)



# If you are pursuing physical fitness...



# Mental fitness

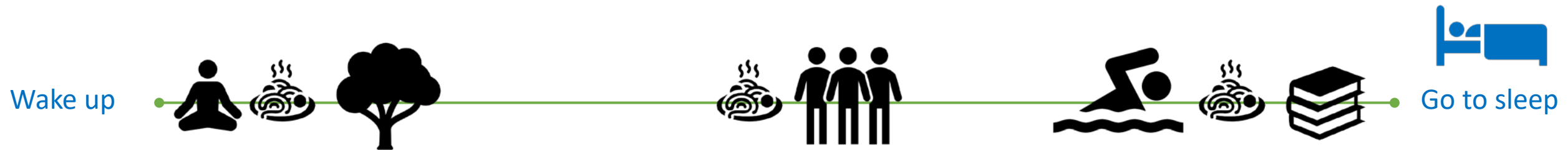
- Have the **psychological resources** required to meet the **psychological demands** of life
- Levels/ grades of mental fitness
- Domains of mental fitness (TBA)
- Achieved through effort
- How much effort depends on the demands you are trying to meet:
  - **Cope with everyday demands** (dealing with people, workload, making decisions, grief/loss, travel, body image, caregiving, information overload, expectations, cultural or societal demands, making money)
  - **Improve wellbeing** (feel good, prevent mental illness, manage mental illness/disability)
  - **High Performance** (study, academia/science, helping professions, business and innovation, competition – including sports)

# Mental fitness contd.....

- There are many activities that you can engage in to build mental fitness
- Like physical activity, these activities require knowledge and discipline
- There are resources/ professionals you can call on to help you in the process (e.g. psychologists, coaches, mental health professional, online self-help resources)



# Mental fitness as a collection of habits....



# Summary

The skills required to deal with the challenges of study are essentially the same set of skills required to cope and thrive in many aspects of life. I call these mental fitness skills.

Mental fitness is having the psychological resources required to **cope** with the everyday psychological demands of life, to **build** wellbeing and to be able to **perform** at a high level in specific domains.

Mental fitness can be achieved through the **deliberate** allocation of time and resources to mental fitness activities (habits). It is an **investment** made by you, for both immediate and also accumulating long-term gains.



# Domains of mental fitness

- **M**astering emotions
- **T**hinking effectively
- **S**elf-awareness and understanding
- **M**eaning and purpose
- **B**uilding positive relationships
- **C**aring for your body
- **F**inancial control
- **P**ersonal safety
- **S**haping your environment
- **C**ognitive enhancement
- **A**dvanced study skills
- **W**ork skills
- **H**abit formation
- **H**elping others

**MTSMBCFPSCAWHH**

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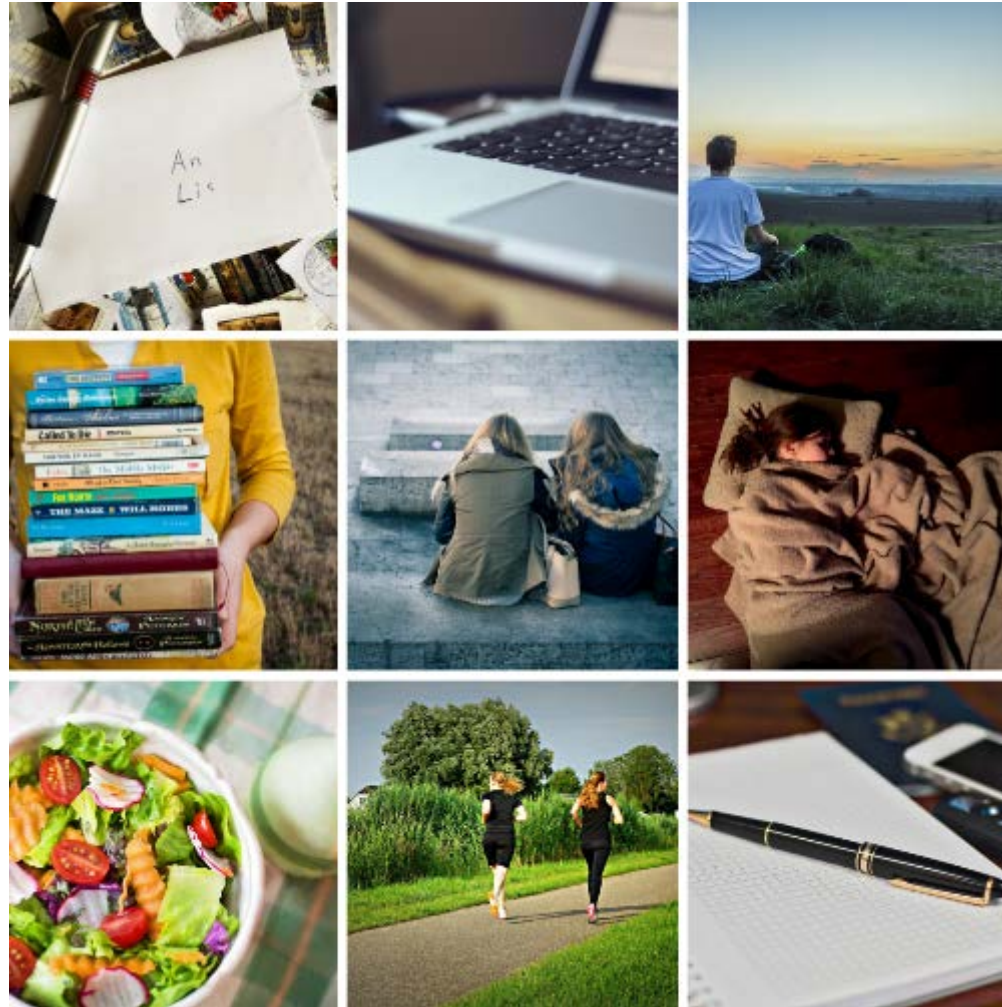
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# So what are the habits?



# Building positive emotion

At the end of each week, write down five things that you were grateful for in the previous week. Be specific and detailed. Identify who was involved and their intentions. Note the unusual and unexpected. Note the small things as well as the big ones.



# Managing unpleasant emotions

Sign up to do an online stress management course and learn how to use cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) to manage stress and difficult emotions.



<https://thiswayup.org.au/how-we-can-help/courses/coping-with-stress/>



# Thinking effectively - flexible attitude

Adopt a growth mindset, namely that success is achieved through effort, self-reflection and willingness to learn and fail, not through innate talent.



<https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2017/08/10/fixed-vs-growth-mindsets/>

# Self-awareness and understanding

Start  
meditating.  
Learn to  
observe the  
contents of  
your own mind.



<https://www.smilingmind.com.au/>

# Meaning, purpose and identity

At the end of each day, ask yourself how what you experienced that day links (or does not link) with the future you want for yourself.



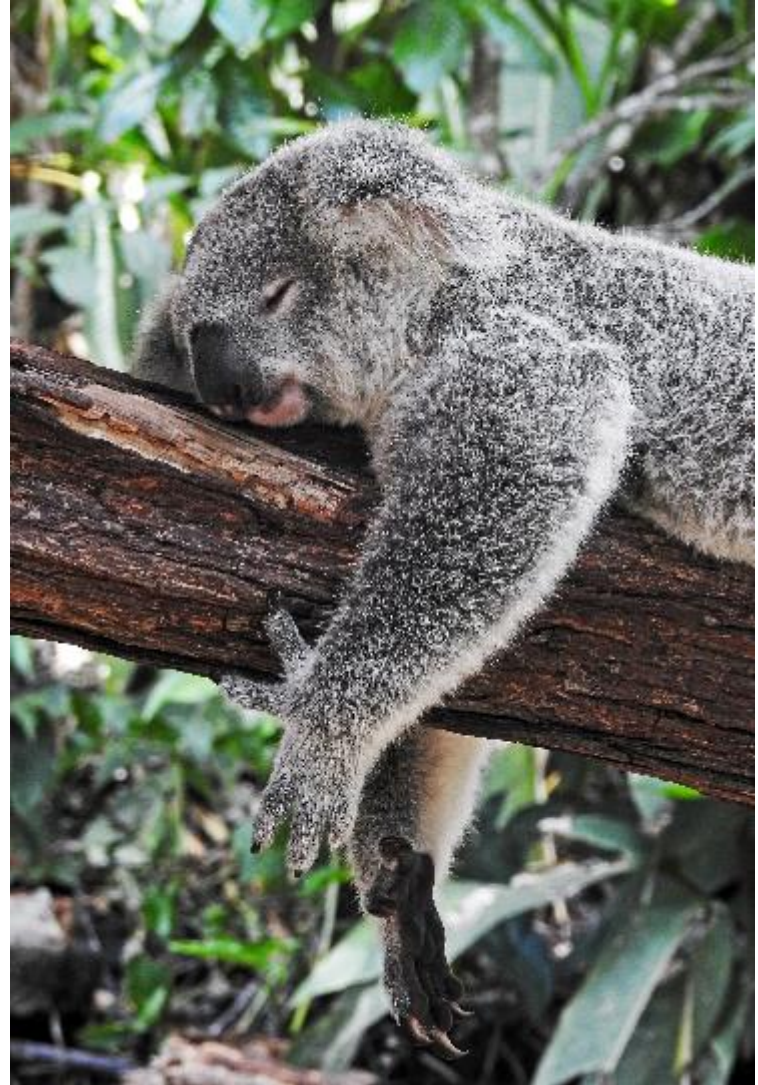
# Supportive relationships

Schedule time to catch up with people who make you feel good.



# Care for your body

Wake up at the same time each day and spend 10-20 minutes in the sun. This will help regulate your internal body clock.





# Study skills

Tackle  
procrastination.



<https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/04/12/self-guided-workbook-tackling-procrastination/>

# Shaping your environment

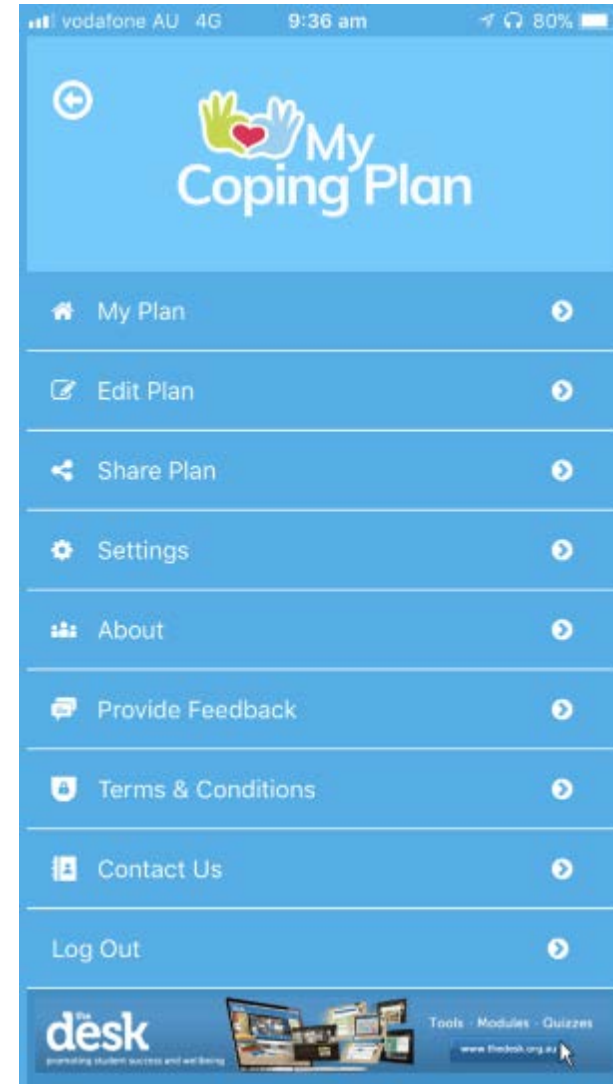
Create an enticing and efficient study/work space.



<https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/07/11/create-study-space-makes-want-study/>

# Personal safety

## Develop a Coping Plan.

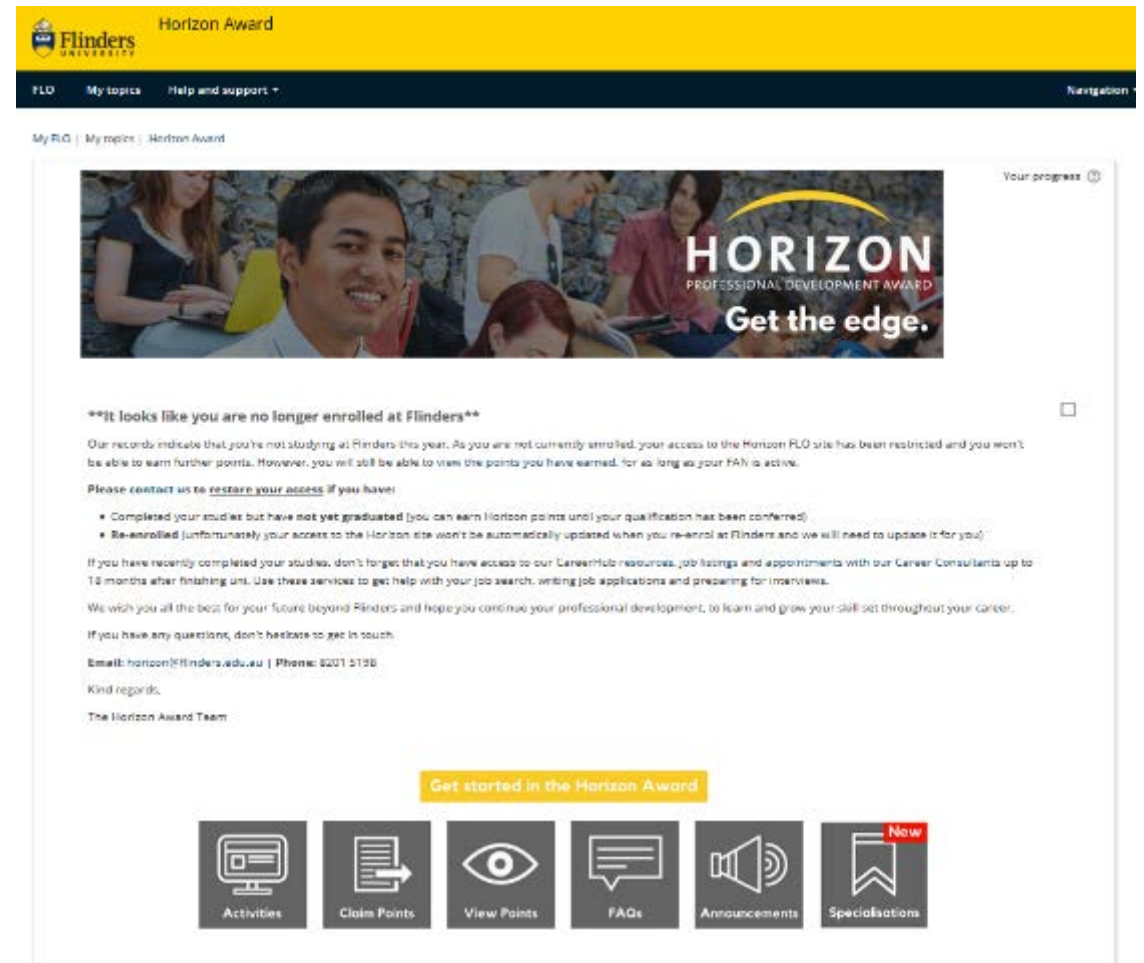


<https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2017/12/01/my-coping-plan/>



# Helping Others

Volunteer or  
become a  
mentor.



The screenshot shows the Flinders University Horizon Award website. At the top, there is a yellow header with the Flinders University logo and the text "Horizon Award". Below this is a dark blue navigation bar with "FLO", "My topics", "Help and support", and "Navigation". The main content area has a breadcrumb trail: "My FLO | My topics | Horizon Award". A banner image shows a group of students with the text "HORIZON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AWARD Get the edge." and "Your progress" in the top right corner. Below the banner, a message states: "\*\*It looks like you are no longer enrolled at Flinders\*\*". The message explains that access to the site has been restricted for non-enrolled students and provides instructions on how to restore access. At the bottom, there is a yellow button that says "Get started in the Horizon Award" and a row of six icons representing different site functions: Activities, Claim Points, View Points, FAQs, Announcements, and Specialisations.

Horizon Award

FLO My topics Help and support Navigation

My FLO | My topics | Horizon Award

Your progress

**HORIZON**  
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AWARD  
Get the edge.

**\*\*It looks like you are no longer enrolled at Flinders\*\***

Our records indicate that you're not studying at Flinders this year. As you are not currently enrolled, your access to the Horizon FLO site has been restricted and you won't be able to earn further points. However, you will still be able to view the points you have earned, for as long as your FAH is active.

Please contact us to restore your access if you have:

- Completed your studies but have **not yet graduated** (you can earn Horizon points until your qualification has been conferred)
- Re-enrolled** (unfortunately your access to the Horizon site won't be automatically updated when you re-enrol at Flinders and we will need to update it for you)

If you have recently completed your studies, don't forget that you have access to our CareerHub resources, job listings and appointments with our Career Consultants up to 18 months after finishing uni. Use these services to get help with your job search, writing job applications and preparing for interviews.

We wish you all the best for your future beyond Flinders and hope you continue your professional development, to learn and grow your skill set throughout your career.

If you have any questions, don't hesitate to get in touch.

Email: [horizon@flinders.edu.au](mailto:horizon@flinders.edu.au) | Phone: 8201 5158

Kind regards,  
The Horizon Award Team

Get started in the Horizon Award

Activities Claim Points View Points FAQs Announcements Specialisations

<https://flo.flinders.edu.au/course/view.php?id=16355>

Reflection/ discussion 1

What areas of mental fitness  
would I work on?



## Which Areas of Mental Fitness Could I Work On?

- Mastering emotions**
  - Do I commonly get derailed by feelings of anxiety, sadness, or anger? How good am I at managing these feelings?
  - Am I willing to experience a range of different emotions?
  - Do I know how to bring more positive emotions into my life?
- Thinking effectively**
  - Am I able to think critically and flexibly about different issues?
  - Do I have a mindset that helps me deal with setbacks and failure?
- Self-awareness and understanding**
  - Am I aware of my strengths and weaknesses?
  - Do I know the situations and contexts in which I thrive, and which I struggle?
  - Do I have a coherent sense of who I am across different settings?
- Meaning and purpose**
  - Do I know what I am working towards?
  - Do I know the kind of person that I want to be?
- Building positive relationships**
  - Do I feel like I have supportive people in my life?
  - Do I feel like I am a positive influence in other people's lives?
  - Do I feel like I belong?
- Caring for your body**
  - Do I make conscious choices in relation to looking after my physical health?
  - Am I healthy?
- Financial Control**
  - Do I feel in control of my financial situation?
  - Do I know how to manage money so that I can survive in the present moment but also save and invest for the future?
- Personal safety**
  - Do I feel safe in my own home or work?
  - Do I feel safe from myself?
- Shaping your environment**
  - Do I modify my environment in order to improve my own wellbeing and productivity?
- Cognitive enhancement**
  - Am I aware of (and use) strategies to improve my concentration, attention and productivity?
- Advanced study skills**
  - Do I know and use evidence-based techniques for learning?
- Work skills**
  - Am I aware of the different skills required for the workforce and which ones I am good at, and which ones I need to work on?
- Habit formation**
  - Am I good at building new habits?
- Helping others**
  - Can I identify where in my life I am doing things in order to improve the quality of life of others?

Reflection/ discussion 2

Is the topic of mental fitness one worth discussing with students?



# Is this concept relevant to university students and retention?

For	Against
<p>It offers to students improvements that are within their control</p> <p>There is choice and ability to individualise a mental fitness intervention</p> <p>Students are in a setting in which self-development is encouraged</p> <p>These are skills which are relevant across multiple domains of life. Personal reasons most highly cited reason for quitting a course</p> <p>GPA is an appropriate target for mental fitness interventions</p>	<p>It can direct attention away from systemic factors that need to change</p> <p>Strongest drivers of retention might not be individual factors</p> <p>It may be perceived as a shifting of responsibility onto students for wellbeing</p>

## Reflection/ discussion 3

Our plans for a **mental fitness** course and how you would embed mental fitness in your teaching



## Welcome!

Wellbeing for Academic Success is an initiative of Health, Counselling & Disability Services (HCDS) and OASIS.

In this topic, we are going to explore the many ways that you can enhance your studies through focusing on wellbeing and mental fitness.

This is a totally voluntary topic with no tests or grades or exams. It is an online space to discuss and share ideas around how you use mental fitness, resilience and mental health to improving your study experience and outcomes.

This topic is facilitated by the eMental Health Project Officer Dr Gareth Furber from HCDS.

There are **three** things you can do in this topic (with more to come over time):

1. Read, think about, and comment on articles on different aspects of wellbeing, mental fitness, productivity and mental health.
2. Ask Gareth a question about wellbeing, mental health or mental fitness.
3. Find out about the various wellbeing and productivity related programs being run by HCDS and OASIS (note: some of them are...



Read, think and comment on wellbeing-related articles



Ask the eMental Health Project Officer a question. Just click my profile and message me,

Announcements

Wellbeing articles and discussion

Available but not shown on topic page

# Mental Fitness Course

Brief lectures

Quizzes

Self-challenge exercises

to build new habits

Place to discuss progress

Q&A

Where to learn more

Mental Fitness Course



# Can you embed these concepts in teaching?

- Launch a Mental Fitness FLO Topic for 2019 – make lectures on each of these topics available for you to embed in your own courses
- Direct students to existing resources
  - [www.flinders.edu.au/studenthealth](http://www.flinders.edu.au/studenthealth)
  - Studyology – [www.flinders.edu.au/jointstudyology](http://www.flinders.edu.au/jointstudyology)
  - Mindfulness for Academic Success – [www.flinders.edu.au/mindfulacademic](http://www.flinders.edu.au/mindfulacademic)
- Contact me to make suggestions or requests about what to cover in the mental fitness course
- Collaborate with me to develop a resource specific to your area
- Ask if I can present to your students



<https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/06/27/prepare-mentally-work-placements/>



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## EVIDENCE-BASED STUDY TIPS (V1)

One of the most significant (and obvious) sources of stress for students is the academic workload.

Many students find the shift from high school or working life to University to be quite challenging.

One of the things that can help students adapt to the academic requirements of university is establishing good study habits.

In this tip-sheet (taken from <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/09/05/good-student-academic-stuff/>), we explore some of the most reliable and effective study methods.

For additional help with the academic side of University, see the Student Learning Centre - <http://www.flinders.edu.au/current-students/slc/>



## Health, Counselling and Disability Services

We provide confidential and professional health, counselling and disability services to all currently enrolled Flinders University students, including those studying completely online.

We can also assist students with issues related to bullying, discrimination, harassment, sexual harassment and victimisation (known as equal opportunity concerns).

### Health services

### Counselling services

### Disability services

### Equal opportunity services

#### » Feeling stressed?

Check out our guide on how to deal with the stresses of university life.

#### » Feeling safe on campus

Every student and staff member has the right to feel safe on campus.

#### » Information for staff and referrers

Staff can access a number of our services, and are also central to informing students about our services.

#### » eMental Health Project Officer

Get to know Dr Gareth Furber, and read his [health and wellbeing blog](#).

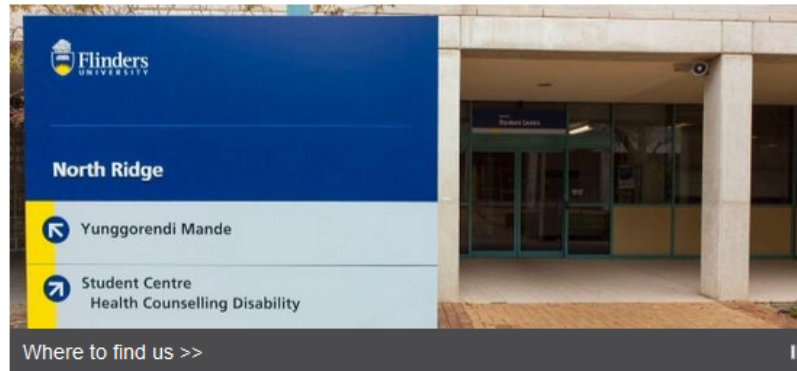
#### » Oasis

A faith friendly home away from home.

#### Find self-help mental health resources

Wherever you are on your mental health journey, [Head to Health](#) will help you find the information, resources, and services that most suit your needs. Whether you want to improve your overall sense of wellbeing, or you need help with something that is concerning you, or you are helping someone you care about—Head to Health can point you to great online mental health resources.

[Visit Head to Health](#)



Health services

Counselling services

Equal opportunity concerns

#### Contact us

We can be found at the Bedford Park campus of Flinders University.

Level 3, Student Services Centre next to the Sports Centre.

**Open:** 8:45am - 5pm, Monday - Friday  
**Tel:** (08) 8201 2118

[Where to find us](#)

#### Emergency, crisis and after-hours services

Flinders University now provides all students with a dedicated [Out-of-hours Crisis Line](#) for confidential support after-hours, on weekends and on public holidays. This new service can be contacted by phone on **1300 512 409** or by text on **0488 814 103**.

Other recommended emergency, crisis and after-hours health and counselling services can be found [here](#).

#### Provide feedback

We are constantly striving to enhance the service we provide.

If you'd like to provide feedback about the service you received from us, please contact the [Director of Health, Counselling and Disability Services, Jodie Zada](#).

#### Subscribe to keep up with our latest news

Name

Email

# Takeaway messages

- Mental fitness, like physical fitness is an investment you make in being able to cope with, prevent, and rise above the challenges of life. It is one of the foundations of wellbeing and performance.
- It may be a useful framework for delivering content to students that attempts to address common drivers of attrition: academic preparedness and social/emotional/personal wellbeing.
- Mental fitness is built by establishing regular good habits.
- In 2019, Health, Counselling and Disability Services will be launching an Introduction to Mental Fitness Course (most likely on FLO).
- Stay up-to-date with what we are doing by subscribing to the Student Health and Wellbeing Blog. [www.flinders.edu.au/studenthealth](http://www.flinders.edu.au/studenthealth)

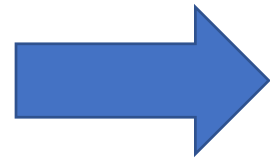


Do I have to do all of them?!



# Work placements

- Psychologically demanding
  - New culture
  - New schedule
  - New people
  - New content
  - Synthesise learning with reality
  - Novel situations
  - Pushed to the edge of your understanding and abilities
  - Increased workload
  - Additional time pressures





Panic  
Terror  
Self-doubt  
Stress



Excitement  
Happiness  
Contentment  
Confidence



'its too hard'  
'I can't do this'  
' I don't like this'  
'the people  
here suck'

I'm learning  
cool stuff'  
' I think I can  
do this'  
'the people  
here are cool'

# Mental Fitness

**Workplace resilience**

Adversity

Major life transitions

New culture

Build wellbeing



# Definitions


- “having a healthy and strong mind to allow you to handle the **challenges** and **opportunities** that life puts in front of you, without getting too worn out.” (Biteback)
- *“a state of psychosocial well-being, it means having a **positive** sense of how we feel, think, and act, which improves our ability to **enjoy** life. It contributes to our innate ability to be **self-determined** (competence, autonomy, relatedness).” (Government of New Brunswick!)*
- *“Mental fitness means keeping your **brain** and **emotional** health in tip-top shape.” (healthline)*

# Why mental fitness is relevant to you as a university student

- Your university degree is a microcosm of life:
  - **Everyday challenges** (time management, assignments, lectures, tutorials)
  - **Wellbeing challenges** (time pressures, workload, relationships, stress, expectations)
  - **High performance challenges** (competition, grading/assessment, sustained performance, time limitations)
- Building mental fitness helps you navigate these challenges.
- The habits you start building at this point in your life, will impact on your future health and wellbeing.

HEALTH, COUNSELLING AND  
DISABILITY SERVICES

# How to prepare psychologically for work placements



A DOCUMENT WRITTEN BY THE EMENTAL HEALTH  
PROJECT OFFICER

<https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/06/27/prepare-mentally-work-placements/>