

Is there such a thing as building ‘mental fitness’?

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Summary

We all know that we can build physical fitness, but is it possible to build mental fitness? The answer is YES and you’ve been kinda doing it most of your life. In this article I look more closely at the idea that we can build mental fitness, why you might focus on it, and how you do it. Arguably, just reading this article will give your mental fitness a teeny little kick forward :)

Most people I’ve met seem comfortable with the idea that an individual can build their physical fitness.

We’ve all known or seen someone who has transformed their health through exercise and diet.

Now this doesn’t necessarily mean we are all engaged in a program of physical fitness, but we are mindful that we could and generally understand the basics of how to do it.

Over the past couple of years, I’ve become interested in whether we can similarly build ‘mental fitness’.

Is it possible to train our minds in a similar way to how we train our bodies?

First up, let me explain what I mean by ‘mind’.

So, if all is going well, you have a brain in that head of yours. A lumpy thing that looks a bit like this (minus the pole sticking out of the bottom).



There are a whole bunch of experiences and capabilities that we understand emerge from, or are largely contributed to by our brains: consciousness, imagination, perception, thinking, judgement, language, memory, feelings/emotions, attention, intelligence, beliefs, identity (sense of self).

Collectively I refer to these capacities and experiences as one's 'mind'.

Training one's mind would therefore be any deliberate activity we engage in that improves the health of our brain and/or improves some aspect of mind.

So is this possible?

The answer as far as I can see is definitely YES. In fact, the person you are nowadays has been shaped by your brain's remarkable ability to learn and adapt. It is one of the things that has contributed to humans being a dominant species on earth.

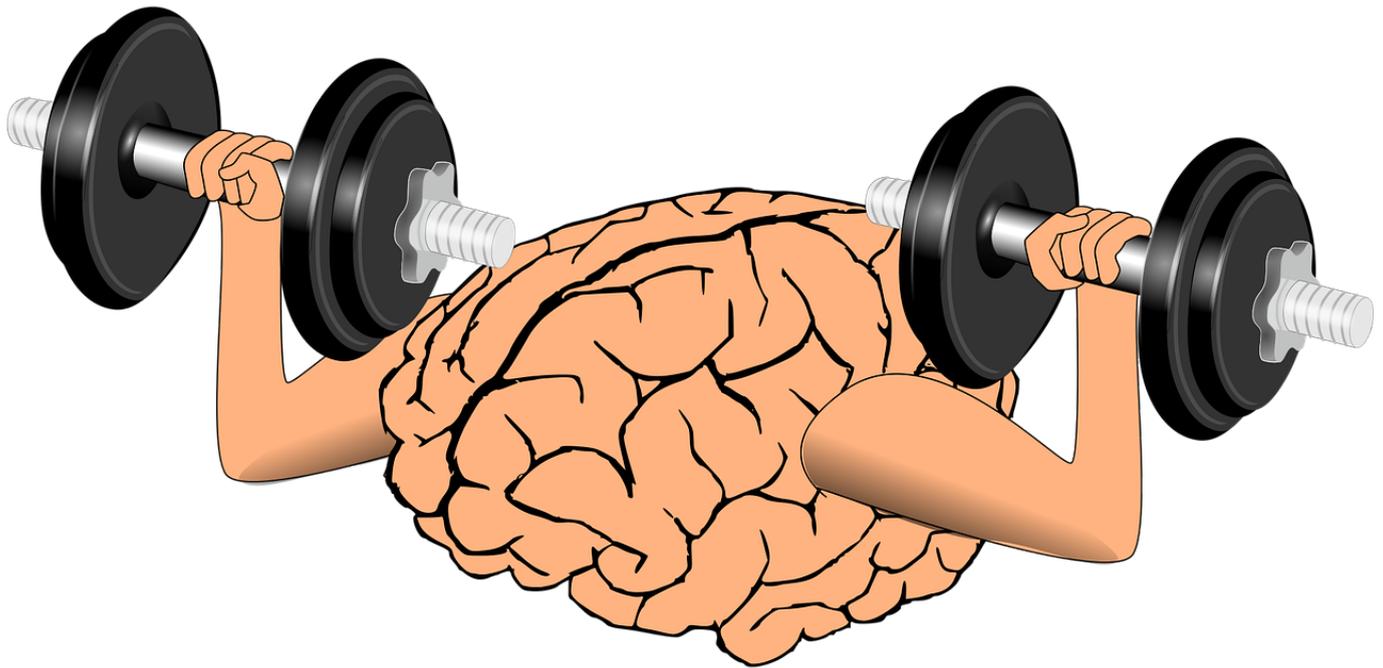
And there is no reason you can't keep that going.

Common ways of training our brain/mind

We don't have to look far to find uncontroversial examples of activities that help people train different aspects of their mind.

Education (e.g. school and university) - We spend a large chunk of our early life in education settings (e.g. school, university), acquiring knowledge and skills to help us in our lives. Whilst the speed and ease with which we learn does diminish with age, it doesn't disappear. We can return to education at any point in time in our lives to get a knowledge or skill 'top-up'. It doesn't have to be formal education either. It could simply include regular reading.

Therapy - Life is emotionally challenging and for many it can lead to difficulties in their emotional world. Mental health conditions like anxiety or depression can impact on the quality of a person's life. We know that psychological therapy can help people reduce or eliminate symptoms of anxiety and depression and thus live a more fulfilling and rewarding life. Psychological therapy leads to changes in the brain and how people think. It is a form of training for our emotional health.



Healthy body/ healthy mind - Our brains are biologically made up of the same basic stuff as the rest of our bodies. Therefore the things that we might do to look after our hearts or livers or stomach or muscles, such as regular exercise, good nutrition, good sleep, and low drug and alcohol use will also help look after our brains. Train your body well and you are also training your brain. It is why your personal trainer is so chirpy :)

Brain training - OK so this one is a little controversial, but we know that getting people to regularly practice activities that train attention, memory or perception can help them get better at those activities. The jury is out on just how much better it makes our lives, but it is evidence we can train specific skills. Think of people (whose brains aren't remarkable in anyway) who train themselves to do [amazing feats of memory](#). Think of that friend of yours who regularly does crossword puzzles and how good they've gotten at them over time.

Meditation - At the risk of oversimplifying, meditation puts us in contact with what it means to be conscious creatures. You can learn to observe the different aspects of mind (e.g. thoughts, feelings, memories), to quiet your mind, to detach from difficult experiences, to know more intimately the fundamental experience of consciousness. Regular meditators experience [changes to their brain](#) which may underlie the many benefits associated with meditation.

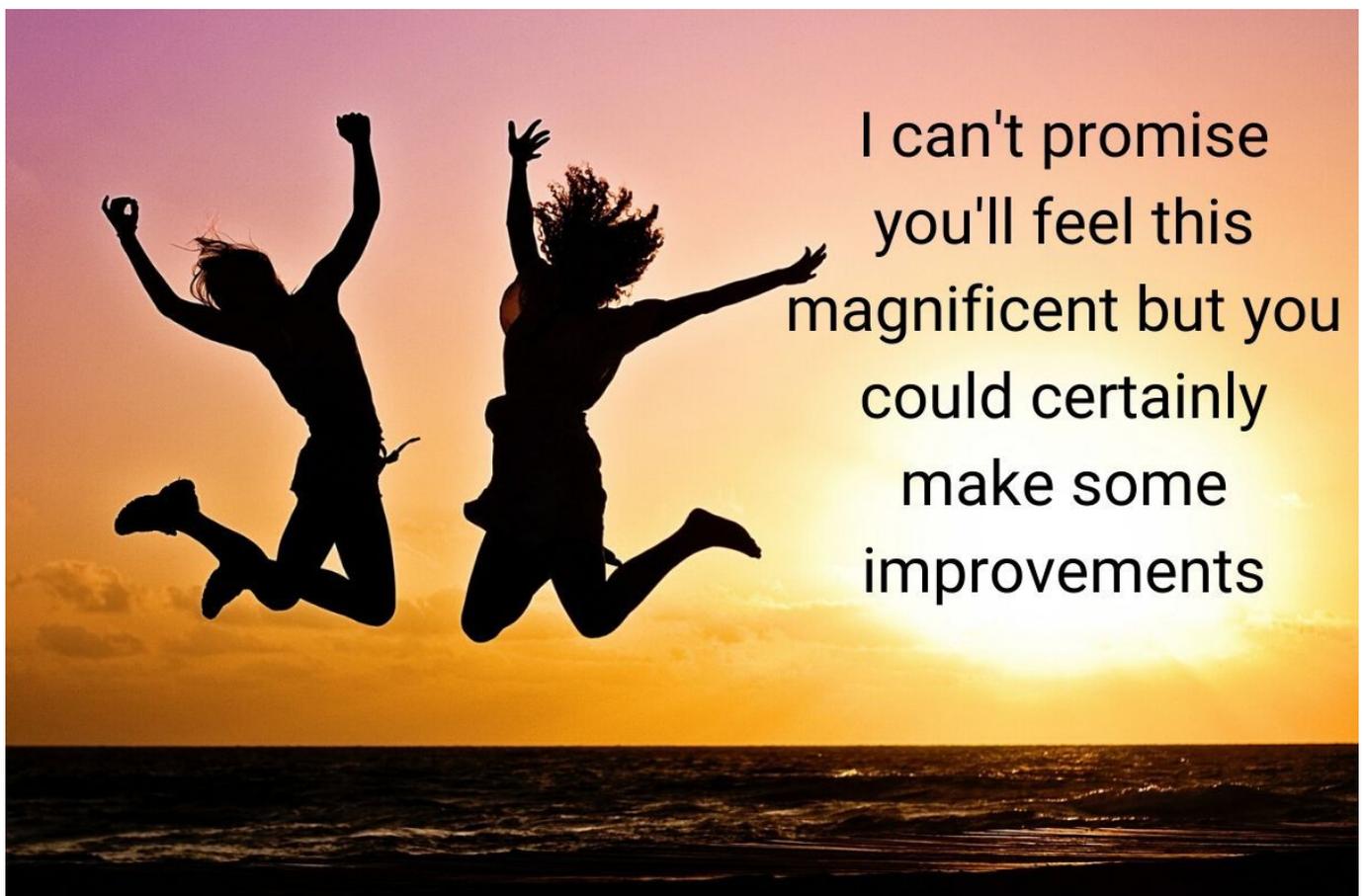
Medication - We use medications to assist or support different parts or processes in the body. For example, we take medications to reduce blood pressure or cholesterol. Why not the brain? A number of drugs can help with problems of thinking or feeling. For example individuals who are correctly diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) often experience significant psychological benefits (e.g. ability to concentrate) from drugs like methylphenidate.

Why would we bother training our minds?

At the core of why we would train our minds is that we all have psychological needs and getting those psychological needs met is what underpins a sense of connectedness and fulfillment and life satisfaction.

- Educate yourself and you feel more competent in the world
- Develop social skills and you feel more connected to others
- Get good at making positive changes in your life and pursuing your goals and you feel more in charge of your life
- Engage in therapy and you experience more positive emotion and less unpleasant emotions

When we build mental fitness, we realise a fundamental truth about being human, which is we have the capacity for growth and to realise our full potential.



I can't promise
you'll feel this
magnificent but you
could certainly
make some
improvements

Ok then, so how do I train my mind? How do I build mental fitness?

Well you could explore one of the options above:

Education - do a short course [online](#) or at [university](#)

Therapy - try one of a number of online programs for stress, anxiety or depression like [Mindspot](#) or [This Way Up](#).

Brain training - sign up for a free trial to a site like Lumosity or BrainHQ. Keep in mind though that the benefits these sites claim for their programs are likely overexaggerations. A simpler and cheaper method might be to do more puzzles.

Improve the health of your body - get your [diet](#), [physical activity levels](#) and [sleep](#) lined up with national guidelines. As your physical health improves, so will your mental health.

Meditate regularly - there are apps that can get you started. A good Australian one is [Smiling Mind](#). The one I use personally is [Waking Up](#).

Medication - organise to have a chat with your GP about the things you are struggling with. With appropriate diagnosis, there might be medical options. If you already have medications prescribed, look at your compliance (how reliably you are taking them) or if the side effects are too severe, book an appointment with GP to get a medication review.

But I also think that any commitment to some kind of ongoing self-improvement will help you build mental fitness.

Let me explain.

Anytime we make a conscious decision to try and improve some aspect of ourselves or our life, we use underlying psychological skills that if practised regularly, we get better at:

Self-reflection - better understanding ourselves, our strengths, weaknesses, habits etc

Goal setting - identifying things to strive for in life

Self-education - finding and using good quality information

Skill development - learning how to do new things

Emotional and behavioural regulation - managing strong emotions, resisting temptation

Self-experimentation - trying new things in life to see which ones make your life better

Habit formation - changing our daily routine to include healthy behaviours

Social engagement - being with and connecting to other people

Coping with failure and setbacks - handling disappointment, bouncing back after failure

Think of these psychological skills like mental muscles; the more we use them, the stronger they get. These psychological skills aren't just necessary for making lifestyle improvements; they are the skills that we draw on during times of difficulty or when we need to adapt to changes in our lives.

And you don't need to practice these with massive life changes.

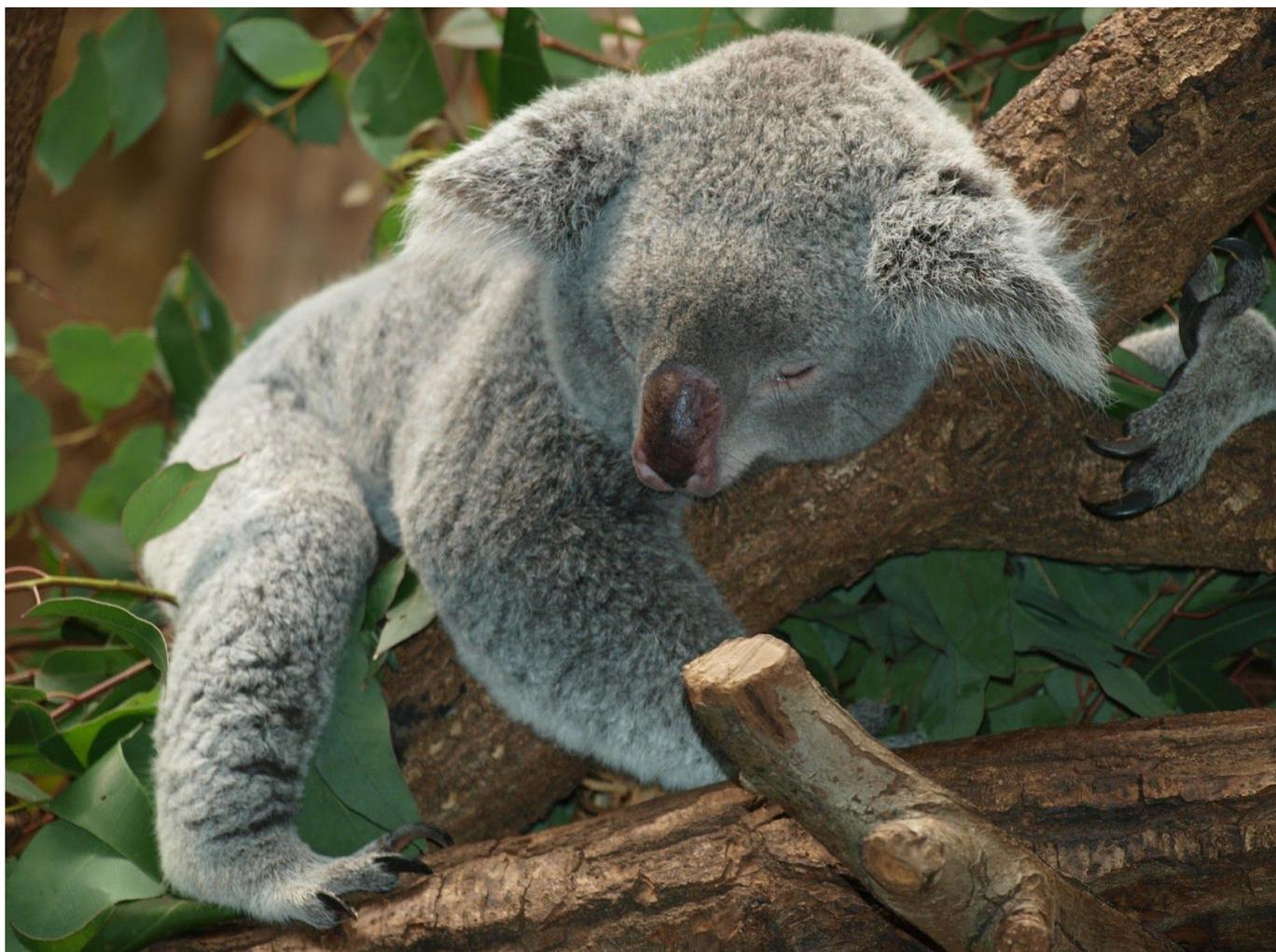
Maybe you start by getting an extra hour of sleep, using a standing desk at work, or making a small change to your diet.

Let me give you an example

A while back I decided to see if getting an extra hour of sleep per night would make my life better.

- I did some reading online and got the impression that I could potentially benefit from additional sleep (I was getting 7-8 hours normally). I set myself the goal of getting 9 hours per night.
- I modified my nighttime schedule so that I had finished all important tasks by 9.30.
- I spent a month diligently going to bed at 9.30 even on those nights when I was tempted to stay up late reading my phone or watching craptacular TV.

Fairly quickly I started noticing some benefits. During the day I felt like I could concentrate better and my mood was better.



Did it fix everything? Nope. But it made a number of things better. It inspired me to pursue further changes such as more exercise and trying new things.

When you commit to making small improvements to your life, you start to accumulate benefits. Yes, some don't work so well, but you learn a lot about yourself in the process. *Note: I am not doing so well with cutting my chocolate intake.*

What improvements should I make?

I've thought a bit about this issue, and honestly there are lots of things you could try.

I generally tend to recommend people start with the three pillars of physical health: exercise, diet, sleep.

From there, you can explore widely. I've summarised a few areas and starting points in a post [I wrote previously](#) for university students who are at a stage of their life where they are amassing new skills.

And know that the simple act of committing to small improvements in your life, is helping you build psychological skills that will change your experience of the world.

[Gareth](#) is a psychologist working at Flinders University. He writes and talks about mental fitness and self-improvement with the goal of giving people the knowledge they need to build better versions of themselves. He applies the same principles to his own life and uses his successes and failures as examples.

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