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# **How to Reach Peak Mental Fitness**

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# **Wellbeing in a Pandemic**

## Wellbeing in a Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way we work literally overnight. And even though we are taking our cautious first steps towards a 'new' normal, a large proportion of the workforce is still being actively encouraged to continue working from home. This means for many, that they will continue to face challenging work environments with whole families struggling to share the same space and other frustrations around IT connectivity and broadband speeds.

In this new world we find ourselves in, there is a need to be mindful of issues that are related to remote working and that might impact morale, be it a communication breakdown or colleagues feeling disconnected and isolated. The impact of shutting ourselves away is bound to have long-term effects on our physical and mental health and this is where wellbeing can help mitigate for the impact of remote working and lockdown and provide some of the support needed to maintain a healthy, productive workforce.

### What is mental fitness?

We all understand what physical fitness means but we rarely talk about mental fitness.

In fact, the same levels of training are required for both but instead of going to the gym to workout, mental fitness is all about improving performance through control of your state of psychological and emotional wellbeing.

It is about managing your internal capacities such as focus, attention and perspective to help engage productively in the work and home environments and it is a combination of all of these factors that lay the foundations for a range of skills and competencies that are so important in a business setting.

Covering everything that is important to people and their lives, mental fitness is said to raise productivity, cut absenteeism, and reduce physical illness: all of which are vital to economic survival as we turn the corner in fighting the virus.



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# About Mindfulness

## About Mindfulness

Mindfulness is one of the therapies being recommended by the NHS to help manage the high levels of stress caused by the pandemic.

So what is it? In simple terms, it means paying attention to what's happening in the present moment in the mind, body and external environment, with an attitude of curiosity and kindness. It is typically cultivated by a range of simple meditation practices, which aim to bring a greater awareness of thinking, feeling and behaviour patterns, and to develop the capacity to manage these with greater skill and compassion.

### It can:

- Refine awareness, focus and "flow" states
- Enhance wellbeing, positive mindset and mastery
- Cultivate calmness, clarity and emotional resilience
- Deepen team solidarity, collaboration and communication

## Mindfulness Training

Mindfulness practice is a little like learning a new language and takes time and practice as the mind is pre-set to automatically go into the future and finds it difficult to focus on the present.

The mindfulness training shown below is designed to bring about a shift from 'doing' to just 'being'. Instead of being goal driven, as so many spend their days, this mindful workout will help you to become aware of your own body and create a base for yourself that lets go of tension and allows you to think creatively.

For the best results, mindfulness practice involves sitting in a comfortable position with your feet planted on the floor and the spine upright. The eyes can be closed or rest a few feet in front while the hands are in the lap or on the knees. The attention is gently brought to rest on the sensations of the body - the feet on the floor, the pressure on the seat and the air passing through the nostrils. As the thoughts continue, you return again and again to these physical sensations, gently encouraging the mind not to get caught up in the thought processes but to observe their passage. This practice can be held for a few moments as a breathing pause in the middle of a busy day, or for half an hour in a quiet place first thing in the morning.

If your mind wanders off, bring it back and allow it to focus on the sensations in your body.:

- Sit comfortably
- Close eyes
- Take 3 deep breaths and think of your body resting and feel it against the ground
- Scan your body and become aware of all the tensions held in the body
- Bring your awareness down your body and work from your shoulders to your toes
- If your mind wanders off, patiently bring your awareness back to the shoulders and feel them become heavy
- Notice the sensations in your body
- Keep checking that your mind is not wandering – if other thoughts interrupt, be patient as training the mind is like training the body. It takes time to develop mental fitness

These instructions are taken from a practical session hosted by Luke Doherty in a recent webinar on 'How to reach peak fitness'. If you would prefer to watch and listen to Luke guiding you through a mindfulness practice, you can watch the webinar on demand at:

<https://www.myfirmsapp.co.uk/covid-19-support-resources/>



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# **Role of Mindfulness in the Workplace**

## **Role of Mindfulness in the Workplace**

Companies, big and small, are integrating mindfulness into their working day and reaping the benefits.

High-profile global corporations such as Google are viewed as pioneers in keeping people engaged in mindfulness practice and although they readily admit that some find it challenging, the company has found that the people who persist show increased wellbeing, focus and lowered stress.

To get into this different mindset, there will need to be a change in the way the team works. Some businesses are actively encouraging their team members to take mini breaks throughout the day and to do nothing but just, look out of the window. This might go against all that we know and understand but when working in a highly pressured environment, the mind cannot operate to its max all day, every day without burning out. Taking someone away from what they have to do, helps make it possible to think more strategically and can result in better decision making.

### **How is Google doing it?**

- Google offers classes and online resources for all staff.
- There are daily practice sessions in more than 35 offices around the world and day-long meditation retreats in five locations.
- It has embedded mindfulness in meetings: providing scripts and recordings for one- or two-minute meditations for the start of meetings.
- Google has incorporated an internal research element into its programme with a long-term study of participants. In addition, it has been looking at initiatives to encourage both teams and offices to practise together.

## **Transport for London**

Transport for London has offered mindfulness combined with other interventions like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) to staff and it has led to 71% reduction in days off for stress, anxiety and depression, while absences for all conditions dropped by 50% according to internal assessments.

## **Link between mindfulness and productivity**

Many organisations are recognising the tremendous benefits that mindfulness can bring with a direct link between mindfulness and productivity.

When focused training was delivered by a mindfulness coach over a period of three months, one company found that the sales team delivered the largest revenue generating quarter in the company's history. As a result, the company is now extending these mindfulness focused opportunities to all its team members.



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# **Techniques to Enhance Performance & Wellbeing**

## Mindfulness Techniques to Enhance Performance and Wellbeing

- Talk about everyone's concerns and make a regular time each week to analyse what the team felt about the week. It's not about what has been done, it's about how people felt during that time. Ask questions such as 'Was it a good week?', 'What were the challenges?' 'Self-reflection' sessions held regularly on a Friday can clear the decks for a new week ahead and give everyone the chance to download.
- Make time on a regular basis to talk through what every member of the team wants to achieve during the week and to take time to get rid of some of the pressure. Both in the sports environment and in the corporate world, this allows the team to return to their work with a greater clarity.
- Create a working situation that is much more about wellbeing and try to have conversations with the team at the right time, not six months down the line when it is too late to resolve a situation and change a mindset.
- Wellbeing is all about looking after the whole body so encourage team members to use a collaborative App such as 'Slack' and set up a fitness channel when it is easy to share a range of workouts and recipes for healthy eating.
- Don't be afraid to dream. One high achieving company founder has christened himself 'chief dreamer' and by training the mind, he can think more laterally about where the business should be focused.
- Form groups and find others in a similar position to talk to.
- Make it part of the working day to spend 15 minutes looking out of the window to bring about a change in mindset from all about being busy.
- Try to train the mind to use the rational and analytic mindset and steer away from constantly being goal driven.



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# **Wellbeing of Employees**

## **Protecting the Wellbeing of Employees**

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, an estimated 2.7 billion people, or more than 4 out of 5 workers in the global workforces, have been affected by lockdowns and stay-at-home measures.

While the first priority has been in terms of crisis response to ensure the health and safety of workers, this is set to change as we begin to emerge from this phase, according to Harvard Business Review.

Businesses will need to reinforce their commitment to well-being and purpose, addressing physical, psychological, and financial concerns at the workplace and at home, it says. It will be important to nurture the human element and support workers through the transition to recovery that forms part of the 'new' normal with an emphasis on ensuring safe spaces for those who come to the office and flexible working for those that have children still at home.

Workforces will be need to be led, prepared, and supported through the recovery phase and those employers that do so, it predicts will be better positioned to enter the next phase in the coming months and thrive.



# Mental Fitness

## Mental Fitness Workout

The brain needs a regular workout just like the body. This multi-pronged plan includes and integrates proven approaches like optimal nutrition, exercise, stress reduction, social interaction, sleep, and stimulating activities. By incorporating simple, specific changes into your daily routine, you can add years of enduring mental stamina and vitality.

Here are 10 tips to help reach peak mental fitness from Better Health Channel:

1. **Exercise for 30 minutes every day.** Physical exercise delivers oxygen to the brain. This can help to improve your memory, reasoning abilities and reaction times.
2. **Read often and read widely.** Keeping an active interest in the world around you will help to exercise your brain and improve your mental fitness.
3. **Boost your levels of vitamin B.** Eat plenty of wholegrain cereals, leafy greens and dairy foods. Vitamin B is essential to brain health.
4. **Challenge your intellect and memory.** Stretch yourself mentally by learning a new language, doing the cryptic crossword or playing chess. This is important for brain health and good for your social life.
5. **Take time to relax.** Excess stress hormones like cortisol can be harmful to the brain. Schedule regular periods of relaxation into your week.
6. **Take up a new hobby.** Learning something new gives the 'grey matter' a workout and builds neural pathways in the brain.
7. **Actively manage your health.** Conditions such as diabetes or heart disease can affect mental performance if not diagnosed and treated. Have regular check-ups with your doctor to prevent future problems.
8. **Engage in stimulating conversations.** Talk to friends and family about a wide range of topics. This gives your brain an opportunity to explore, examine and enquire.
9. **Take up a manual activity or craft.** Hobbies such as woodwork and sewing or activities like skipping require you to move both sides of the body at the same time, in precise movements. This can help to improve your spatial awareness and increase your reaction time.
10. **Exercise your brain with others.** Watch, question and answer game shows and enjoy the competitive spirit. Involve the family in regular games to test their general knowledge.

## Brain Foods

Just as there is no magic pill to prevent cognitive decline and encourage peak mental fitness, no single brain food can ensure a sharp brain as you age. Nutritionists emphasise that the most important strategy is to follow a healthy dietary pattern that includes a lot of fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains.

Research by Harvard Medical School shows that the best brain foods are the same ones that protect your heart and blood vessels and include:

**Green, leafy vegetables.** Leafy greens such as kale, spinach, collards, and broccoli are rich in brain-healthy nutrients like vitamin K, lutein, folate, and beta carotene. Research suggests these plant-based foods may help slow cognitive decline.

**Fatty fish.** Fatty fish are abundant sources of omega-3 fatty acids, healthy unsaturated fats that have been linked to lower blood levels of beta-amyloid—the protein that forms damaging clumps in the brains of people with Alzheimer's disease. Try to eat fish at least twice a week, but choose varieties that are low in mercury, such as salmon, cod, canned light tuna, and pollack. If you're not a fan of fish, ask your doctor about taking an omega-3 supplement, or choose terrestrial omega-3 sources such as flaxseeds, avocados, and walnuts.

**Berries.** Flavonoids, the natural plant pigments that give berries their brilliant hues, also help improve memory, research shows. In a 2012 study published in *Annals of Neurology*, researchers at Harvard's Brigham and Women's Hospital found that women who consumed two or more servings of strawberries and blueberries each week delayed memory decline by up to two-and-a-half years.

## Brain Foods

**Tea and coffee.** The caffeine in your morning cup of coffee or tea might offer more than just a short-term concentration boost. In a 2014 study published in *The Journal of Nutrition*, participants with higher caffeine consumption scored better on tests of mental function. Caffeine might also help solidify new memories, according to other research. Investigators at Johns Hopkins University asked participants to study a series of images and then take either a placebo or a 200-milligram caffeine tablet. More members of the caffeine group were able to correctly identify the images on the following day.

**Walnuts.** Nuts are excellent sources of protein and healthy fats, and one type of nut in particular might also improve memory. A 2015 study from UCLA linked higher walnut consumption to improved cognitive test scores. Walnuts are high in a type of omega-3 fatty acid called alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), which helps lower blood pressure and protects arteries. That's good for both the heart and brain.



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**Silver Linings**

## **Look After Your Body**

At times like these, it can be all too easy to fall into unhealthy patterns of behaviour that won't help our overall wellbeing. We have talked about reaching the peak of mental fitness, but it is also important to maintain physical fitness with workouts at home while gyms are still closed, go for regular walks or runs and get on your bike. Cycle shops are one of the few businesses to have seen a boon during the lockdown.

### **Silver linings**

This guide is all about thinking differently and taking time to relax to help deal with difficult emotions and improve our wellbeing.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed us in ways that are still undetermined, and the future will not be as we thought just a few months ago. As we all approach the next stage, there will be need to be a period of reflection to look at what has worked and what attitudes and practices will be required in the immediate future. There is no guarantee that the old ways will come back.

Making this level of turnaround will require innovation and team work to emerge stronger. The early 20th-century British explorer Ernest Shackleton once noted, "Optimism is true moral courage" and these qualities are needed more than ever as businesses make the decisions that will shape the next normal.



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# Useful Links

## Useful Links

<https://wellbeingeconomics.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Spending-review-to-ncrease-wellbeing-APPG-2019.pdf>

<https://www.wellbeingpeople.com/2017/08/28/googles-secret-workplace-wellbeing/>

<https://www.jacobs.com/sites/default/files/2020-05/jacobs-wellbeing-costs-of-covid-19-uk.pdf>

<https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/coronavirus-covid-19-staying-at-home-tips/>

<https://bigthink.com/videos/arianna-huffington-on-mindfulness-part-1>

<https://www.starlingminds.com/resources/blogs/mental-fitness-explained-by-a-cbt-psychologist/#:~:text=Mental%20fitness%20is%20defined%20as,in%20the%20past%20few%20years.>

<https://www.mindful.org/10-ways-mindful-work/>

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/foods-linked-to-better-brainpower>

<https://hbr.org/sponsored/2020/05/workforce-strategies-for-post-covid-19-recovery>

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/ten-tips/10-tips-to-improve-your-mental-fitness>

## **Tips From Luke Doherty on Reducing Anxiety**

<https://www.mindfulpeakperformance.com/>

[https://drive.google.com/open?id=1HMK\\_NaCKFu2gbcAd-UmQSLd8vjczHRA](https://drive.google.com/open?id=1HMK_NaCKFu2gbcAd-UmQSLd8vjczHRA)

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=15b4I-V1K-BrMIKWPWz2BfPP4Z2vmSFWJ>

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1t7KYJHapgA2bjjCMtIrLh811XbtRXLOS>



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