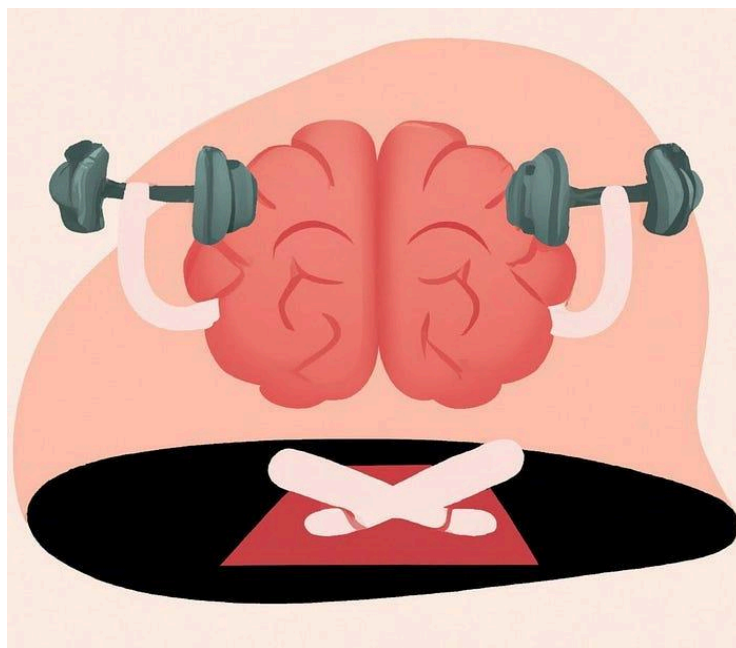


SO... WHAT IS MENTAL FITNESS EXACTLY?

Mental fitness, yoga, mindfulness... There are lots of “cool words” that catch on, especially if the name sounds exotic. We all know it, we buy into it, then we talk, and talk about it, and as we do the words wear out to end up fading away. It is for that very reason that I wanted to write an article about this concept that is starting to lead the google search on the internet, a concept that, I hope, will go beyond fads in this current society we live in. I am referring to an integral practice recently recognized by science, they call it **MENTAL FITNESS**.



What is Mental Fitness?

Mental fitness, MF from now on, are specific exercises and practices that we can integrate into our lifestyle in order to promote a state of general “mental well-being” that translates into “physical well-being” and “emotional well-being”.

Well, in spite of everything, we take the brain as a reference in this MF thing, great, of course (hence the name), but have you ever tried to stop and think about all the variables that can affect the functioning of your brain? What you eat affects your brain, what you breathe affects your brain, what you hear and say affects your brain, even your own heartbeat affects your brain. This sounds basic, but we take it as a given, yes... You guessed right, everything we do can directly or indirectly influence our brains. And here is where Mental Fitness kicks in.

Yes, actions affect brains and brains affect actions, and that is why we need a bidirectional system that helps us keep everything in check in order to live better (and probably longer). On one hand MF is going to help you, through physical exercises and habits, to keep your brain in shape (the physical will change the mental); and on the other hand MF will change your actions and your physical world via mental exercises and practices (the mental will change the physical). All these things translate into better maintenance of physical faculties , increase in

mental agility, and overall better emotional balance, the prevention of diseases and deterioration of the brain in the future... In short: MF will increase the quality of your life, which should not only be measured in terms of duration, but in terms of “competences, state and ability”.



Why Mental Fitness is so important and how it works.

Here you will find the answer to almost all your existential questions like why do I keep tripping over the same stone all over again, why am I always late, why does he/she talk to me like that, why do I keep seeing this person when he/she hurts me or takes advantage of me? You get the idea.

The term “autopilot” will ring a bell. Our brains create neural pathways and these translate into problem solving and behavioral patterns in our daily lives. The

issue here is that the brain, or “the big lazy one” according to some neuroscientists, will execute those same neural connections by default if we don’t intervene to create new ones. In fact, the brain clings to what we have learned from experience and to our survival-related reactions (i.e. our behaviors coming from our reptilian brain). And yes, as you can assume, the brain loves repetition.

This tendency to repetitive effortless patterns in the brain has two problems:

1. **That you can continue doing the same thing for life even if it is bad for you** (no worries, the brain will rationalize the behavior so he can keep drinking bloody marys in the sun).
2. **That we do not always have the same context or circumstances when acting or making decisions.** It would be fine if we always faced the exact same thing in the exact same circumstances, but we don’t. That is why this “by default” reactions and solutions are usually not “the most appropriate” or “the best thing we could do” in a specific setup. Our bodies change, our system around us changes... we need to change our responses to that as well.

These two factors normally make life more difficult than it should be and can create a huge amount of discomfort and stress for individuals. Mental Fitness, in return, will help you come up with different solutions and will train your brain to deal with its surroundings and the optimization of its parts, from the frontal lobe to the amygdala. This, of course, includes better stress management and less friction between the human and the system.

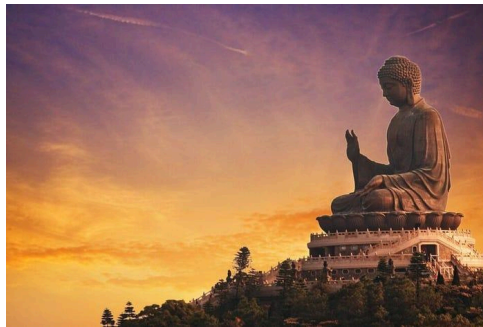
And how does this affect my life?

That is a very legit question... Well, much more than you can imagine, not to mention that, if you don't work on creating new neural circuits, you can lose cognitive faculties in the long, medium or, in extreme cases, short term.

Mental Fitness offers exercises and tools to exercise your brain so you can work on your own neuroplasticity, that is, on the creation of new neuronal connections and the regeneration of damaged connections in your brain. If you work on it you will notice the effects of your effort both in the short term (improvement in mental agility and emotional balance); and in the long term with a more agile memory, greater autonomy and better quality of life.

Where does Mental Fitness come from?

The term “Mental Fitness” or MF was first coined by author and speaker Simon Sinek in 2019. This term itself invites us to apply it more as an “ongoing, work in progress” thing, or as an inner journey that is never detached from the health of the body. Actually, the concept has been evolving, along with the studies and denominations of mental and somatic health over the years, having its origin mainly in Eastern religions, specifically in Buddhism.



Carl Gustav Jung, one of the fathers of psychology as we know it today, took these Tibetan practices and, together with his tribe of the “Circle of Eranos” studied, translated, and practiced many of these millenary tricks and remedies to calm and cure “the bad state of the mind”. Gradually, more people started to follow, private schools were formed, and some of them were finally consolidated in formal academies. Not everything was so sophisticated though, other groups

ended up being simple New Age communes... But what matters here is that things like meditation, mindfulness and visualizations linked to “non-theism” and secular communities, permeated the West and became a regulated practice backed by science.

It is indisputable that MF, in a way, draws from Buddhist and Taoist philosophies, but it is also a fact that, after more than ten years of thorough study, neuroscientists from different backgrounds have been adding more supported data to the concept of Mental Fitness. As a consequence of this, MF has been crossing, little by little, the bridge between the holistic field and the scientific field.

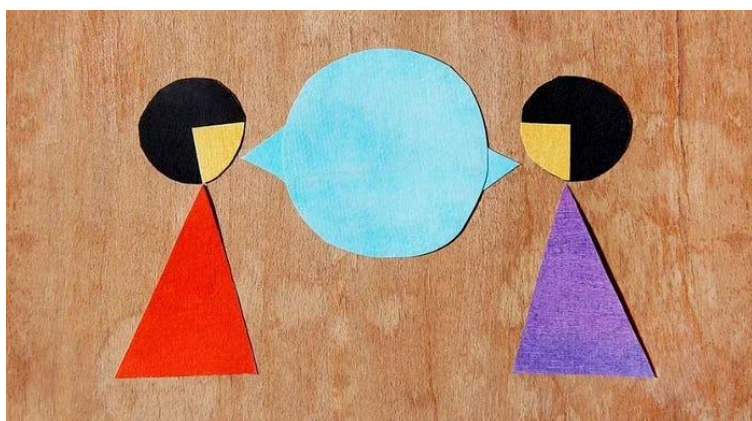


Benefits of Mental Fitness

To be more practical, which is what we're aiming for here... What are the benefits here for you? Here I tell you in broad strokes.

- **Ability to respond rather than react in your daily life.**
- **Improvement of your cognitive abilities:** Particularly concentration, memory, speed in processing, analyzing and synthesizing information, task management and organization, and skills related to speech, communication and creativity.
- **Mindfulness, or we should say Recollection or Contemplation** (and all natural causes of it including greater control and self awareness). Due to the connotations of the word related to stereotypes and other reductionistic ideas, I will try to avoid mentioning “mindfulness” as much as I can.
- **Greater control and self-awareness.** By being more aware of ourselves, by studying and knowing ourselves better, we can be the true masters of our own minds, our emotions and our body. Also, this causes the other benefits mentioned in this section, including the fact that we will likely improve our active listening skills, and that alone triggers changes in behavior and brain patterns at all levels.
- **Increased positivity:** As we said, with Recollection comes control over your thoughts and the ability to rewrite them from a different

angle. As a consequence, we will have more optimistic thoughts on a core subject or core goals, thoughts of a kinder and amore compassionate nature. That is just the result of analysis and deep knowledge about a situation or issue, the result of seeing the blacks, the whites and all the shades of gray.



- **Increased ability to solve new problems and learn new things.** This is just a natural result of having a greater control over your thoughts, mindfulness and a more positive attitude guided by motivation and curiosity.
- **Improved self-esteem and self-perception:** When you rethink your thoughts and beliefs this is usually almost an automatic reaction. You will certainly look at yourself differently, you will have more

self-confidence, more compassion and empathy towards yourself and others.

- **Increased activity, flexibility and physical agility.** Once you start working out and make a habit of it, even if it's just 20 minutes a day... It happens.
- **Acquisition of new skills:** If you start practicing MF, little by little you will realize that you are accumulating new skills, some that you could have never thought of, or that you could have sworn you would never have.
- **Improved sleep and rest:** Both physical and mental exercise cause you to rest better.
- **Reduced anxiety and stress.** At this point, you can imagine the reasons why. Sports, meditation and contemplation, control over your actions and thoughts, a better memory and an improvement on your organizational skills... your parasympathetic system should be active for the most part and yes, your anxiety and stress should not find much room to get settled.
- **Increased life expectancy and quality of life.** A long explanation here, I am not a doctor, nor do I pretend to be... But again, as a result of practices related to aspects like physical movement, abdominal breathing, good nutrition, good quality sleep, cultivating positive thoughts, practicing your communication,

relational, social and creative skills, etc. YOU WILL LIVE LONGER
AND BETTER.

To summarize: Mental Fitness is an integral system of practices that, hopefully, will start to be considered by members of society as an essential part of our educational system and lifestyle. Science finally demonstrates that, on one hand there are certain habits that favor the plasticity and development of the brain, which is not an isolated or static organ, but one that can truly change when exercised; and on the other hand, that there are certain physical, mental and emotional practices that can improve the general wellbeing, as well as the longevity of human life.