



## PART ONE: BE ACTIVE FOR YOUR MIND AND BODY

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▶ [Coping with stress](#)

▶ [Mental fitness tips](#)

▶ [Mind guide to physical activity](#)

*This first part of a [two-part article](#) explores the concept of mental fitness, and the role physical activity can play in enhancing our mental and physical well-being.*

Although you might have made a New Year's resolution to be more physically active, you might not realize that physical activity will also benefit your mental health.

"Physical fitness": these words have been a team for so long, it seems only natural that when we think about being fit, we think about our bodies.

But the fitness concept is getting a makeover, its horizons expanding from the purely physical to our emotional and mental well-being.

Being in good health means having good mental and good physical health. We need both for a well-balanced, productive life. The World Health Organization defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."

We know that nourishing our physical fitness gives us the strength to fight disease or injury. It makes sense then that nurturing our mental fitness will help build the resilience we need to cope with emotional stress.

### What is "mental fitness"?

Just as physical fitness enhances our physical health, mental fitness helps us to achieve and sustain a state of good mental health. When we are mentally fit, we are able to be creative, learn and take risks. We enjoy our environment and the people in it.

We can stand on a scale, measure percentage of body fat or test our endurance, flexibility and muscle tone to determine our how physically fit we are, but how do we know if we are mentally fit?

We can begin to consider our degree of mental fitness by understanding the characteristics of good mental health and gauging the way we react to or deal with daily occurrences in our lives: These characteristics include:

- **Realistic attitude** - Life can sometimes be disappointing but try to also look on the bright side of things.
- **Self-actualization** - Remember what is important to you in life; focus on your successes and learn from failures.
- **Emotional support** - It is important to build close ties with family, friends and support services in your community.
- **Flexibility** - Feel your feelings. Savor joy and laughter don't hide from sadness and fear. Talk openly about these feelings.
- **Resilience** - Handle stress, anger and anxiety the best you can; try not to let negative emotions bring you down for too long.

## Exercise wards off “winter blues”

Along with snow and chilly temperatures, winter brings Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) to approximately 2-3% of Canadians. Another 15% suffer from a milder depression known as the “winter blues”.

SAD and, to a lesser degree, the “blues”, have an impact on:

- Mood
- Sleep
- Appetite
- Energy levels
- Concentration

It is possible to exercise away the blues. Researchers say that physical activity:

- Acts as a distraction from the climate
- Provides a sense of control over health and body image
- Provides opportunities for pleasant social interaction

Here are a few tips:

- If you’re already active, try to maintain or increase your level of physical activity
- Exercise outdoors and during daylight hours
- When indoors, exercise near a window
- Build activity into your lifestyle: e.g. take the stairs or take public transit just partway to your destination

Being aware of the components of good mental health can help us to assess our own strengths and weaknesses as we try to improve our mental fitness.

This article was prepared by the Alberta Centre for Active Living in collaboration with the Canadian Mental Health Association. It can be found at [www.centre4activeliving.ca/publications/chn/feature-articles/](http://www.centre4activeliving.ca/publications/chn/feature-articles/).

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