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Incorporating Mental Wellness Strategies: Evidence-Based Practices for Fitness Professionals

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Abstract

Introduction: Mental health involves the interrelation of mental, emotional, and behavioural well-being. Poor mental health impacts all aspects of our lives, such as the relationships we have with family, friends, and community, and our ability to work. Approximately one in three women and one in five men will experience depression in their lives. In 2020, the year of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a 26% increase in the number of people with anxiety and a 28% increase in the number of people with depressive disorders. Regular physical activity can reduce the risk of different mental disorders, such as anxiety and depression, and improve sleep and overall quality of life. By encouraging participants to exercise regularly, fitness professionals play a crucial role in addressing the mental health epidemic. Taking it a step further to include mental wellness practices as part of physical activity can potentially lead to even greater improvements in mental health. **Purpose:** This opinion paper aims to educate fitness professionals on the importance of mental health and to incorporate holistic, evidence-based exercise prescriptions grounded in psychological constructs such as growth mindset, gratitude, and mindfulness. **Conclusion:** Mindful fitness professionals can take an extra step to help their participants by incorporating gratitude and mindfulness practices into fitness programming, which can enhance a growth mindset and help lower barriers to exercise.

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Introduction

The mental well-being of people is a global health issue. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; CDC, 2025a), mental health involves the interrelation of mental, emotional, and behavioural well-being. Poor mental health affects all aspects of people's lives, including relationships with family, friends, and the community, as well as their ability to work (Dattani et al., 2023). Mental disorders among adults are common. Recent data released by the

World Health Organization (WHO; WHO, 2022) states that the most common mental disorders include depression and anxiety, which affect about 264 million people worldwide. Dattani et al. (2023) found that approximately one in three women and one in five men will experience depression in their lives. In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a 26% increase in the number of people with anxiety and a 28% increase in the number of people with depressive disorders (WHO, 2022).

Regular physical activity can reduce the risk of anxiety and depression, improve sleep, and enhance overall quality of life (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [US DHHS], 2018). Regular physical activity improves mood and self-esteem while lowering stress (Biddle, 2016). It can also enhance attention, focus, memory, cognition, and decision-making for up to two hours post-workout (Hallam et al., 2018).

Personal trainers and fitness instructors are trusted points of contact, as well as people to whom a client may disclose mental health issues or life stressors. Although these professionals are not trained to provide mental health support, they can still offer referrals, identify benefits, and suggest health-enhancing practices that can be beneficial. Educating individuals about the effects of regular physical activity on mental health is within the scope of practice for fitness professionals, enabling them to raise awareness of the benefits of a physically active lifestyle.

With exercise having the potential to be an effective therapeutic approach to managing mental health (Singh et al., 2025), fitness professionals need to understand and know how to incorporate strategies and provide an inclusive environment that fosters mental health through the inclusion of a growth mindset, gratitude, and mindfulness. This paper aims to share evidence on the relationship between these psychological constructs and mental health, providing strategies that fitness professionals can incorporate into their practice to support their clients' mental well-being.

Mental Well-being and the Affective Domain

Mental health and mental well-being are often used interchangeably; however, there are distinct differences between them. While mental health refers to the state of mental functioning, mental well-being is a more holistic concept, encompassing the overall state of mind. Wellness has been defined as the capacity to manage emotions effectively and have the autonomy to make decisions to help overcome stress (Manderscheid et al., 2010).

Mental well-being and the affective domain are closely related because they both involve emotions, feelings, and attitudes. The affective domain provides a framework for understanding and developing the emotional skills needed for achieving and maintaining mental wellness. Mental well-being is significantly influenced by a person's emotional state and their ability to navigate and manage emotions effectively. Individuals with good mental well-being are better able to identify, understand, and regulate their emotions effectively, as well as possess better coping skills, higher self-esteem, clearer thinking, and healthier relationships (CDC, 2024). This emotional intelligence and capacity for emotional regulation are fundamental components of the affective domain. Therefore, it is essential to include mental wellness practices to promote health, resiliency, and well-being.

Normalizing Mental Wellness

Mental health disorders are the new norm, yet the stigma surrounding mental health continues to challenge the management of those conditions. A mental health stigma refers to "negative attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes people may hold towards those who experience mental health conditions" (CDC, 2025b, "Key

Points,” Bullet 1). It may prevent individuals from seeking care or potentially lead to the discontinuation of treatment. Exercise professionals should play an advocacy role in promoting overall health and wellness. Removing the stigma, creating a supportive environment for open discussions about mental health, and encouraging individuals to seek help or utilize wellness practices in their routines can be beneficial. The following sections present research on the effects of growth mindset, gratitude, and mindfulness on mental health, with the aim of implementing evidence-based strategies to foster a supportive environment that helps reduce the stigma associated with mental health.

Theoretical Framework and Application ***Growth Mindset***

A “mindset” encompasses a group of beliefs that affect an individual’s behaviours and perceptions (John-Henderson et al., 2021). According to Dweck and Leggett (1988), there are two mindsets: fixed and growth. An individual with a fixed mindset believes that an attribute is unmodifiable. In contrast, an individual with a growth mindset believes an attribute can be changed through effort and action.

Neuroplasticity refers to the brain’s ability to change and adapt to new stimuli (Staneiu, 2023). It involves the formation of new neural pathways and the growth of new neurons (Staneiu, 2023). Growth mindset is closely related to neuroplasticity, as it conveys the idea that intelligence can be learned and improved, thereby supporting the concept of neuroplasticity (Staneiu, 2023). At the same time, as individuals learn from mistakes and persevere to accomplish

goals, new neural pathways will be developed and strengthened, which increases neuroplasticity. Their brains will be more active and able to adapt faster to difficulties (Patterson, 2022). When individuals believe their brains can generate new neurons and form fresh neural pathways, they may be more inclined to embrace a growth mindset, viewing intelligence and ability as adaptable rather than fixed (Staneiu, 2023).

While much of the foundational research on mindset has originated in academic settings, recent studies have expanded its application to the field of health. John-Henderson et al. (2021) found that a growth mindset was associated with higher levels of both light and moderate-to-vigorous physical activity. Biddle et al. (2003) found that having a growth mindset about athletic ability predicted motivation and enjoyment of physical education classes. A single online growth mindset intervention for obese children and adolescents significantly increased thoughts about health behaviour and decreased body dissatisfaction (Orvidas et al., 2020). The degree to which individuals believe that health is modifiable and can be changed through effort and choice may influence whether they engage in healthy behaviours (John-Henderson et al., 2021).

Individuals with a growth mindset are more likely to think that motivation to complete a task can be developed (Ng, 2018). They tend to cherish lifelong learning and work hard to accomplish tasks without incentives (Ng, 2018). As a result, a growth mindset can influence intrinsic motivation, as individuals with a growth mindset are more likely to engage in tasks for the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself (Ng, 2018). By cultivating a growth mindset that fosters intrinsic

motivation, fitness professionals can enhance the likelihood of their clients and participants continuing to exercise. Participants will be more open to the discomfort and challenges of exercise because they will view it as a skill that can be learned and developed.

Gratitude

Research has supported the relationship between gratitude and well-being (Wood et al., 2010). Gratitude relates to the ability to appreciate and acknowledge the good things in life, often in the context of appreciating someone else or a higher power, such as the divine or nature (Cunha et al., 2019). A gratitude practice can encourage individuals to be present and reflect on the positive aspects of their lives (Wood et al., 2010).

Gratitude has been linked with increased self-esteem, life satisfaction, positive affect, and well-being (Wood et al., 2010). Diniz et al. (2023) reported that gratitude interventions, which included gratitude journaling, gratitude expression, and gratitude contemplation, were associated with increased feelings of gratitude, higher life satisfaction, improved mental health, and reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression. They also increased affect, optimism, and prosocial behaviour and decreased worry and psychological pain (Diniz et al., 2023). Froh et al. (2009) discovered that gratitude among adolescents aged 11 to 13 years was positively related to hope, forgiveness, optimism, and positive affect. A longitudinal study by Wood et al. (2008) involving 156 undergraduate students aged 18 and 19 years found that gratitude was associated with lower stress levels.

According to the positive affect hypothesis, gratitude can cause positive emotions, improving well-being and life

satisfaction (Kaniuka et al., 2021). A study by Kaniuka et al. (2021) on gratitude and suicide risk among college students reported that greater gratitude was negatively related to drug use and alcohol use and decreased suicidal behaviour. Tolcher et al. (2024) reported that 8 weeks of gratitude interventions, which involved journaling and reflecting for a few minutes per day on things to be grateful for, significantly increased college students' well-being, happiness, and resilience. Negative affect also decreased significantly (Tolcher et al., 2024).

Mindfulness

John Kabat-Zinn (2003) defined mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (p. 145). Mindfulness involves deliberately focusing attention and being present with all experiences, with an attitude of openness and curiosity. It helps to observe and understand thoughts and feelings and choose how to respond, rather than reacting automatically (Shapiro et al., 2024). Being intentional in including mindful practices, or attention training, will help strengthen mindful awareness. According to Shapiro et al. (2024), mindfulness is composed of three core elements: intention, attention, and attitude, which occur simultaneously and mutually influence one another. Intentions elevate purpose and set direction, reminders of what is most important. Attention involves observation and being present in the moment. When attention is focused on negative things, the body becomes flooded with cortisol, the stress hormone. High cortisol levels have detrimental effects on health, contributing

to hypertension, a weakened immune response, fat buildup, and decreased libido, among other adverse outcomes. Mindfulness helps by focusing attention on the present moment and effectively managing emotions and choices. Attitude influences where and how attention is directed. Performance and well-being are intrinsically connected to having a kind and curious attitude. Kindness and curiosity also strengthen learning centres in the brain, expand perspectives, and increase creativity, resourcefulness, and innovation. Mindfully cultivating intention, attention, and attitude supports the creation of neural pathways, thereby rewiring the brain and fostering lasting change. These provide resilience to face life's difficulties, enhance the ability to handle challenges, and experience deeper joy (Shapiro et al., 2024).

Regular, intentional participation in mindful practices can have positive effects on overall health and well-being. Research suggests mindfulness training may lead to greater participation in physical activity. This phenomenon occurs more frequently in activities geared toward mindfulness or those with mindful components, such as yoga, Pilates, and Tai Chi; however, other mindfulness interventions can also provide benefits. Studies have found that mindfulness helps people stick with exercise programs, contributing to better adherence and long-term health benefits, as well as improved exercise self-efficacy and attitudes toward exercise (Li et al., 2013; Loucks et al., 2015; Ulmer et al., 2010). Even simple practices, such as focusing on the entire exercise experience, rather than just the initial difficulty, can lead to more positive feelings about exercise and increase intentions to engage in it (Ruby et al., 2011). Considering these benefits, mindfulness practices should be

integrated to support the development of effective, consistent exercise habits.

Application to Professional Practice

To cultivate a growth mindset, personal trainers and group fitness instructors can educate participants about growth mindset (Burnette et al., 2018; Orvidas et al., 2020). Personal trainers can introduce the concept of a growth mindset and neuroplasticity during their training sessions as topics of conversation. They can remind their participants that regular physical activity fosters neuroplasticity (Vorkapic et al., 2021). Group fitness instructors can give a “tip of the day” at the end of their classes and introduce the concept of a growth mindset in different sessions. Additionally, fitness professionals can utilize social media as a platform to motivate and educate participants on the importance of adopting a growth mindset in exercise. They can share educational posts to encourage participants to adopt a growth mindset as they work to establish an exercise routine. During conversations while training clients, personal trainers can share with participants how successful people have overcome failures (Burnette et al., 2018; Orvidas et al., 2020). Trainers could provide examples of previous clients or friends who have successfully overcome challenges, such as losing weight. It is important to emphasize that exercising regularly takes time, commitment, and patience. As such, it is a behaviour that could be developed with effort and commitment. Trainers could also share their personal experiences and journeys to being healthy. In this way, clients will have a direct role model to identify with (Burnette et al., 2018; Orvidas et al., 2020).

Fitness professionals can remind participants that developing healthy

habits, such as exercise, is modifiable and developable (Orvidas et al., 2020). By emphasizing the importance of effort and commitment in adopting or reinforcing healthy behaviours, fitness professionals can guide through success and adherence. Fitness professionals can use words of encouragement such as “I believe in you,” “I am proud of your commitment to lead a healthy lifestyle,” “I know you got this,” “Small steps at a time; commit to exercise this week,” “One week at a time,” “We are not born exercisers; we can develop adequate strategies to continue to exercise,” and “Fitness is a lifelong journey.”

To cultivate gratitude, fitness professionals can encourage their participants to write gratitude lists as a “take-home” assignment. At the end of the training sessions, personal trainers can discuss with their clients the benefits of gratitude and the gratitude list strategy. They can ask their clients to start by scheduling one or two days during the week to write down five things for which they are grateful. Clients can use a notebook or their phones to write. Trainers can also recommend completing the exercise for more than 4 weeks to get positive results. Trainers can keep participants accountable by sending text messages to check on their progress.

Grateful contemplation can encompass another strategy that could provide positive effects. Fitness professionals can include grateful contemplation during their sessions. Personal trainers can set aside 5 minutes during their training sessions to ask clients to reflect on the things or people they are grateful for that day. This could be incorporated as part of the cool-down or stretching component. Similarly, group fitness instructors could set time during the cool-down section to

engage in grateful contemplation. The instructors could play relaxing music and ask participants to close their eyes and reflect on their day and the things for which they may be grateful.

Several mindfulness practices can be incorporated into physical training and activities. Given that limited time is a significant barrier to physical activity, it is essential to consider this when selecting mindfulness exercises. Mindfulness can be integrated through both formal and informal practices. Formal mindfulness practice involves fitness professionals intentionally allocating time during the exercise program. Informal mindfulness involves finding mindful moments in everyday activities, such as eating or washing dishes, and bringing full attention to them (Birtwell et al., 2019). Examples of mindfulness practices include meditation, body scans, mindful movements such as breathing, listening, eating, and walking, as well as mental imagery.

Many of these practices can be implemented by the fitness professional during physical training. Encourage awareness of breathing and body sensations during stretching and exercise to enhance overall well-being. Different breathing techniques can be used before, during, and after the workout. Mental imagery practices can help the client relax and focus by visualizing the workout or specific skills before starting or during training. While performing a specific exercise, have the client focus on the muscles being worked, noticing the tension and release. Help the client learn how to express gratitude for the body’s abilities and the opportunity to move. If time allows, include activities that focus on mindful movement, such as yoga, Tai Chi, and Pilates.

Conclusion

This paper reviewed the significance of mental health and the research related to growth mindset, gratitude, and mindfulness as powerful tools to help enhance mental wellness. Fitness professionals play a crucial role in inspiring individuals to make positive and lasting changes that improve the quality of their lives. Being open and engaging in discussions about mental wellness will lead to more welcoming environments where clients can feel safe and supported. Emotions and mindsets can influence behaviours and overall health. Physical activity can improve mental health by decreasing and preventing conditions such as anxiety and depression, as well as improving mood and other aspects of well-being. Mindful fitness professionals can take an extra step to help their participants by incorporating gratitude and mindfulness practices, which can enhance a growth mindset and help lower barriers to exercise.

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