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uPLifted Series

An Informational Digest of EmpowerM3 by Coach Cindy



Mental Fitness for ADHD

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I've watched closely as newscasts aired spots on the status of mental health around the globe with suggestions on what we can do better. Recent reports show an increased rate of ADHD diagnosis in youth and adults, particularly in women, lengthy evaluation wait times, more and more practitioners closing their appointment books to new patients, and medication shortages. Social media is abuzz with reels and posts advocating for better mental health care and acceptance.

Wouldn't it be great if this awareness led to dissolving shame around mental health struggles, eased access to mental health care services, and support for quality living? Awareness is great. It indeed has helped shine a light on the crisis we are in. However, it's what happens next that matters in maintaining wellness.

In this month's uPLifted Series, I want to share a practice that can help ease suffering and move you from surviving to thriving. It's a practice called mental fitness. In this article, I will share what mental fitness is, some of its science, its relation to the ADHD brain, and how you can be devoted to your wellness for the rest of your life by practicing it daily.

This issue:

Mental Fitness for ADHD
PAGE 01

What is Mental Fitness?
PAGE 2

What does science say?
PAGE 3

Practicing Mental Fitness
PAGE 5

8 Ways to Add Mental
Fitness Into Your Day
PAGE 7

Meet Coach Cindy
PAGE 10



Society is accustomed to maintaining physical fitness. Unfortunately, we have left out a vital organ essential to our wellness- our brain. Both physical and mental fitness are lifelong commitments—one body, controlled by one brain. Often, we expect our mental fitness to do the heavy lifting without continued training. We expect our brain to run on all cylinders while depriving it of sleep, necessary water, healthy dietary fuel, and regular exercise. We expect our brains to lift a 25-pound dumbbell, rep after rep when we can only curl a 5-pound weight five times before dropping it to our toes.



What is Mental Fitness

You may ask, what exactly is mental fitness? Mental fitness is a full-spectrum practice of managing and maintaining your emotional state and thinking capacity. We often think of managing emotions only from a negative mindset standpoint. It makes sense to lessen the pain points caused by stress, overwhelm, or frustration. We want to derail the train when our negative thoughts take over. That's the troublesome side of emotions we want to grasp tightly. But having the ability to recognize boredom, impulsivity, and distraction is also vital to living fully. Intercepting feelings of loneliness, which the Surgeon General reported as the latest public health epidemic, is more critical to one's health than you may know. On the other side, excitement can be as energy-depleting as worry. As wonderful as it is to feel over the moon, this feeling can also cause havoc. We have one brain and one brain alone to nurture. Mental fitness makes a lasting difference in your quality of life whether you have a neurotypical brain or are neurodivergent. This is where mental fitness becomes so essential.



Fitness is more than a physical challenge it's a mental one, too.

(targetstudy.com, 2018)

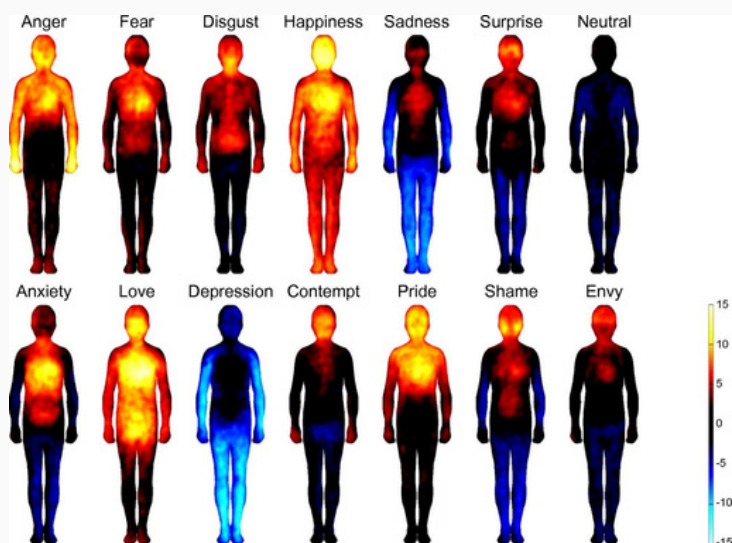


Mental fitness practice is the sustained ability to tune into the body. Mental fitness trains the brain to direct your attention. This practice can be directing attention to where negative and positive emotions are felt when you are feeling stressed, overwhelmed, excited, or the ability to notice you have slipped away lost in thought. Directing your attention from thinking to noticing your present experience strengthens the neuropathways connecting mind and body awareness. This is known as metacognition. As you tune into your body, your brain notices the feeling associated with emotions allowing you to intercept them before they take a firm hold.

What does the science say?

In 2014, a study was published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences by a team of Finnish researchers depicting emotional data in a topographical heat map showing where emotions create energy in the body. This heat map helps to spotlight where certain emotions manifest physical sensations in the body.

Figure 1. Bodily topography of basic (Upper) and nonbasic (Lower) emotions associated with words.



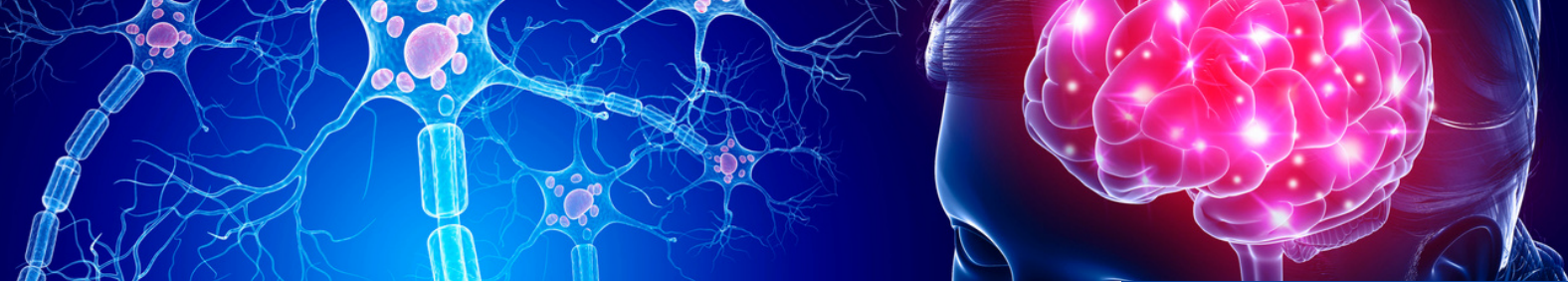
Notes. The body maps show regions whose activation increased (warm colors) or decreased (cool colors) when feeling each emotion. ($P < 0.05$ FDR corrected; $t > 1.94$). The color bar indicates the t-statistic range (Nummenmaa et al., 2014).



"When dealing with people, remember you are not dealing with creatures of logic, but with creatures of emotion."

DALE CARNEGIE





In 2018, the same group of researchers published a study connecting the intensity of emotions and the intensity of mental and physical sensations. Using heat mapping, they showed that the bodily feeling matched the strength of the feeling in the mind (Ukiomogbe, 2020).

Converting from negative to neutral or positive feelings requires being aware of where and how you feel emotions. Although it can be similar from person to person, knowing your emotional manifestation is essential if you want to manage the behavior that comes next. This may not be as innate as one would think, especially when you have ADHD.

The ADHD Brain

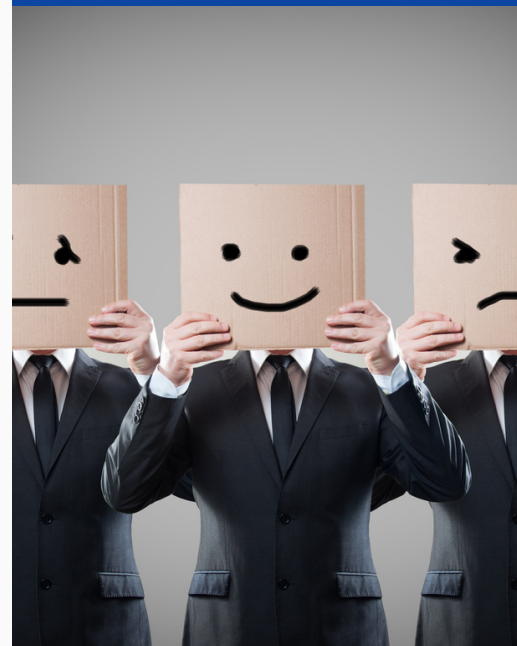
The image showing bodily topography of emotions is a valuable tool as you continue to link your mind and body together through mental fitness practice. For example, referring to the heat map image might help you recognize where a feeling you are thinking is felt in your body so you can intercept it when needed. Strengthening self-awareness is growing a critical executive function called metacognition.

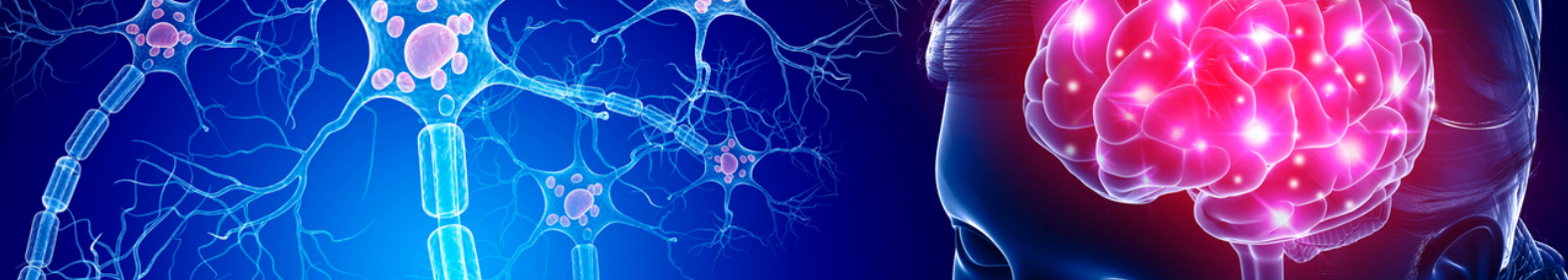
Metacognition, better known as the ability to have awareness, is a key executive function (EF) that starts to form at about eight years of age and strengthens until your mid-twenties (Fleur et al., 2021). Researchers from the University College of London found in a study that people with better cognition had more grey matter in the anterior right prefrontal cortex, an area shown to be smaller for ADHDers. This helps to explain the EF weakness in governing behavioral output and the ability to manage emotional control (Lopatin, 2021). Perhaps this is why people with ADHD say meditation and mindfulness don't work.



"75 percent of careers are derailed for reasons related to emotional competencies, including inability to handle interpersonal problems; unsatisfactory team leadership during times of difficulty or conflict; or inability to adapt to change or elicit trust."

-CENTER FOR CREATIVE LEADERSHIP





Practicing Mental Fitness

Mental fitness is different from meditation and mindfulness. Its practice allows you to train the brain to recognize body sensations paired with your emotions to de-escalate your knee-jerk reactions and regain control. Converting attention to the body activates the middle prefrontal cortex (MPFC), empathy circuitry, and the right brain (Chamine, 2016, p. 103). Activation in these brain regions generates empathy, exploration, innovation, navigation, and activation. This is why mental fitness practice is an excellent option to support the ADHD brain style. Your control lever starts with building body awareness.

Unfortunately, you may be doing the exact opposite of what your brain needs. Stop for a moment to honestly assess how often you turn to scroll on your phone, slip into a gaming or Netflix binge, or grab your favorite junk food or sugary drink when you are feeling bored, overwhelmed, or stressed.

Perhaps you turn up the music to distract your thoughts or push through stress by multi-tasking. You believe the lie that you can get it all done quicker if you push harder. You look for foods and drinks that either get you going or numb you out. Are you healthier for it?

I'm guessing it is safe to assume you're longing for a long, happy, and healthy life free from the struggles of your ADHD brain-style. If so, these all-too-common coping strategies you've been practicing are unhealthy, poor choices you can shift away from as you strengthen your mental fitness muscles. You've trained your brain to cope by tuning out. It's time to choose differently with intention.

Jody Michael from Forbes magazine writes, "Mental fitness is most critical and transformative whenever you feel stressed, frustrated or hindered in any way by your environment or by the people around you." (Michael, 2022)

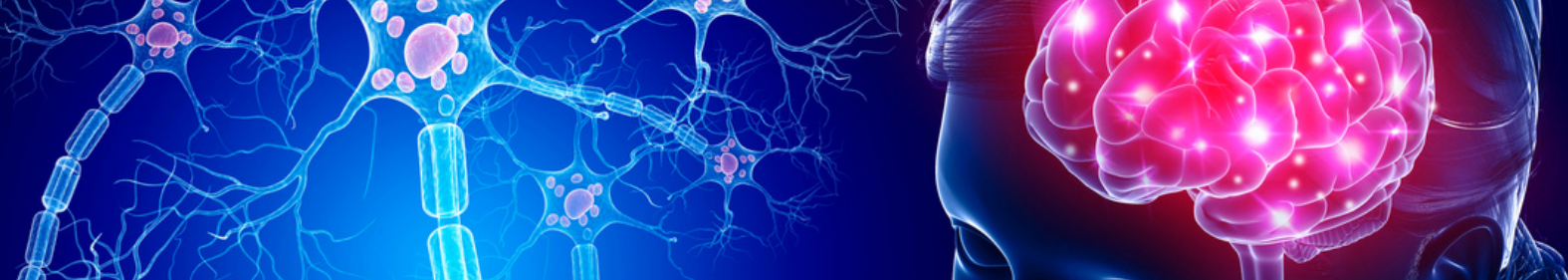
We've learned to cope by tuning out rather than pausing to tune in. Increased self-awareness strengthened through mental fitness can lessen the time spent in negative emotions and even out the energy consumed when in either extreme. In addition, with mental fitness practice, you will strengthen a vital executive function weakened in the ADHD brain. People with ADHD commonly experience intense emotions on both sides of the spectrum: extreme sadness and extreme happiness. Unfortunately, those witnessing the emotions often do not get their extremes, leading to even more shame for the person with ADHD.



Len's
Approach

How are you interacting
with your thought
stories?



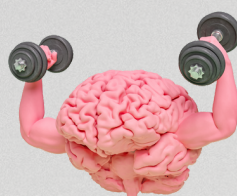


Now what?

Weave mental fitness practice throughout your day. Take notice of your senses. Mental fitness can be done anywhere, in any waking moment. You can devote 10 seconds or thirty minutes. You can do it sitting, walking, or in a meeting. You are not confined to an athletic clothing line or a gym membership. You are simply choosing to pause momentarily and take notice using your senses. It's that simple.

"One way to boost our willpower and focus is to manage our distractions instead of letting them manage us."

-DANIEL GOLEMAN



Mental Fitness Practices

Going to the gym is not required to strengthen your mental fitness, although you can do mental fitness while you are working out. Knowing that your mind will wander during mental fitness practice is important. The "lifting" involves noticing the wander and returning it to what you were tuning into. At first, your mind may wander a lot. That is perfectly okay and is part of strengthening your ability to command where your attention is. Allow yourself to be creative in how and where mental fitness exercises fit you. I am providing a sample list of practices here. Let them spark your ideas of where to tune in more to your sensations.



8 Ways to Add Mental Fitness Into Your Day.



Morning Scan

When you first wake, pause before getting out of bed. Notice how your body feels; cold or warm, stiff or relaxed, sharp or foggy. Let yourself notice the weight of your head on your pillow cradled in softness. Notice the texture of your bedding. The sounds around you. And what else?



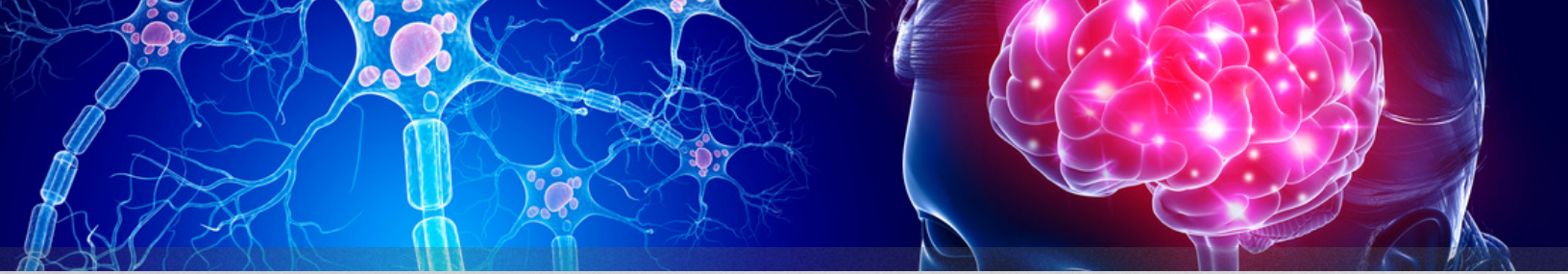
Eating and Drinking

eating and drinking is an excellent opportunity to take notice of your sensations. There is much to notice in texture, sound, taste, and smell. Intentional chewing and swallowing benefits digestion and the brain's ability to register when it is full.



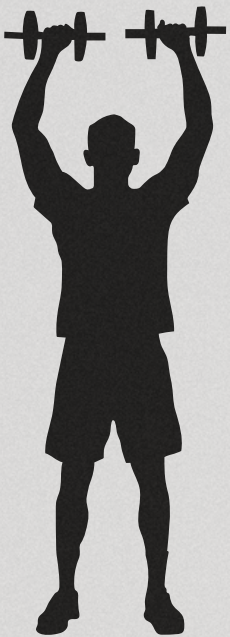
Washing Hands/Body

A perfect opportunity to get in some mental fitness is washing your hands or showering. You may be surprised at how much there is to notice. Bring your attention to the sensation of touching the faucet handles. Take notice of the handle's smoothness as you grip it to turn the water on. Notice the water as it flows over you and the soap as it lathers into bubbles, with water washing away all that is seen and unseen. Bring your attention back to the faucet handle as you turn off the water. What else can you notice?



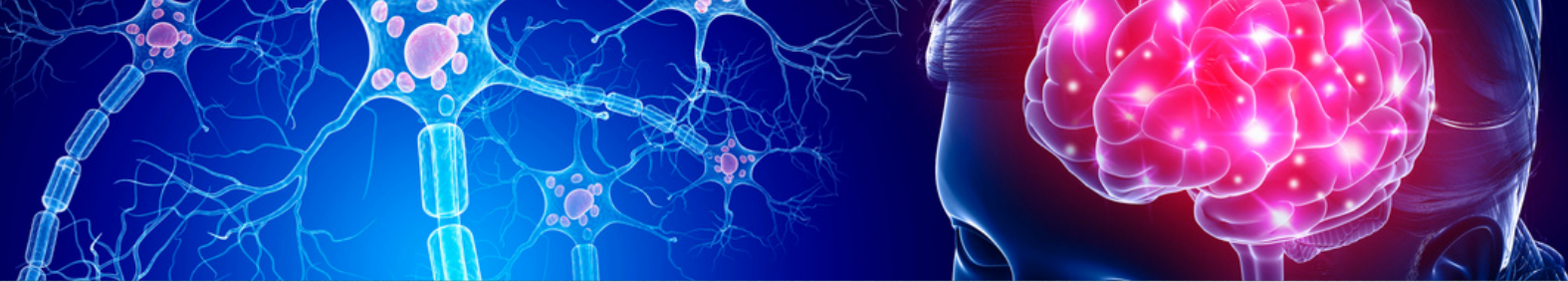
Chore-Time

Most chores become mundane, boring, or sometimes forgotten. You can bring interest back to chores by letting your senses speak. Which of your five senses have you been missing? Is there a smell or touch you never noticed before that you could tune into as your mental fitness practice? My favorite new awareness is the vibration of the vacuum cleaner. Before tuning in during this chore, I felt nothing more than the weight of pushing it all over. Now when I am intentional, I can feel the vibration of it working beneath my hand. Crazy weird. The same can be applied to washing dishes, wiping down the shower, washing a car, taking out the trash, mowing the grass, weeding the flower bed, or feeding your pet. Hint: The ADHD brain loves interest. How can you make your chores interesting by tuning into your senses and redirecting your thoughts when they wander off?



Exercising

Mental fitness during exercise can surprisingly take you further than you believe you are capable of. What do you notice while exercising? Start with the sensations within your muscles; a stretch, burn, or something else. As you tune in, does it ease or feel more intense? How can you meet your next rep in full form when shifting to your breathing? This is a powerful place to tune in as you move your body while noticing the world around you through your senses.



Walking

Practicing your mental fitness while walking is an excellent pairing for brain health. Recent studies have shown that getting in nature is rejuvenating and essential for wellness. Exercise is also a natural way to access dopamine. Pairing your

mental fitness practice with walking syncs your senses during movement. A commonly missed sensation you could notice during walking is the pressure of your foot contacting the ground. Most often, you may not notice that unless a pain signal is sent, like when there is a pebble in your shoe. You may notice the swing of your arms or the position of your head. What do you notice when you make subtle adjustments to the position of your moving body? What do you hear, smell, see, etc? Allow yourself to tune into the furthest sound and back to the nearest sound you can hear. See what it takes to notice the sound of your breathing. Again, when thoughts take over your mental fitness practice, simply recognize and redirect to what you notice in and around you.

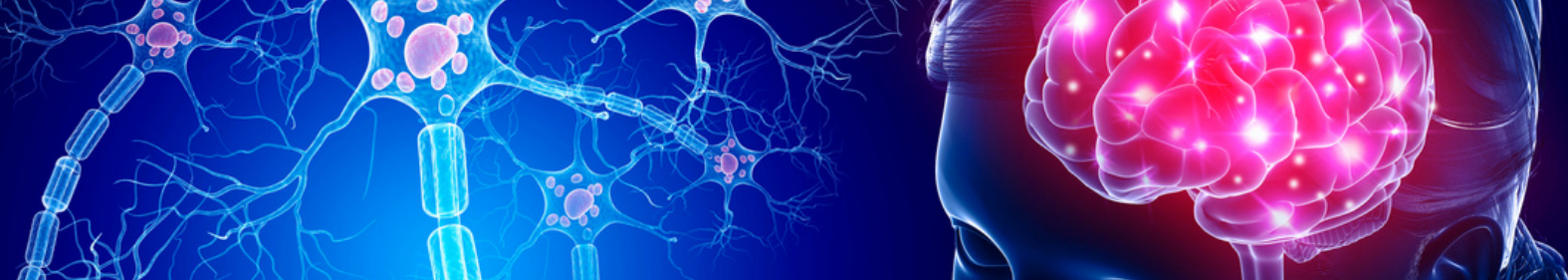


Listening to Music

Music is used for getting going, calming down, studying, or falling asleep. It has been shown in small studies to improve focus and attention by igniting parts of the brain responsible for auditory, visual/spatial, and motor processing. These areas of the brain directly support speech and language abilities, reading, reading comprehension, math, problem-solving, brain organization, focus, and attention issues. Tapping into the power of music can go a step further paired with mental fitness practice.



Using your choice of music, focus your attention on a certain instrument or the rhythm of the melody. Let your hearing pick up the subtle changes from note to note. Music, and sounds in general, excellent way to improve focus and attention.



Sitting

Taking notice of sitting is a perfect opportunity to get a lot of brain training. Fast Fact: The average American spends 6.5 waking hours sitting, and for teens, that number jumps to 8 hours (Searing, 2019). That's a lot of sitting time. Mental fitness can be paired with sitting down, adjusting yourself in your seat, or _____.

You tell me. This one may be trickier to remember to do. Still, one with tremendous opportunity knowing as much time as is spent sitting. How can you help yourself remember to feel your seat bones in the chair, your arms resting in a particular position, the placement of your head, and more? Add, what you hear, see and smell, and there's, even more to tune into while sitting. Key: How will you remember your mental fitness practice?

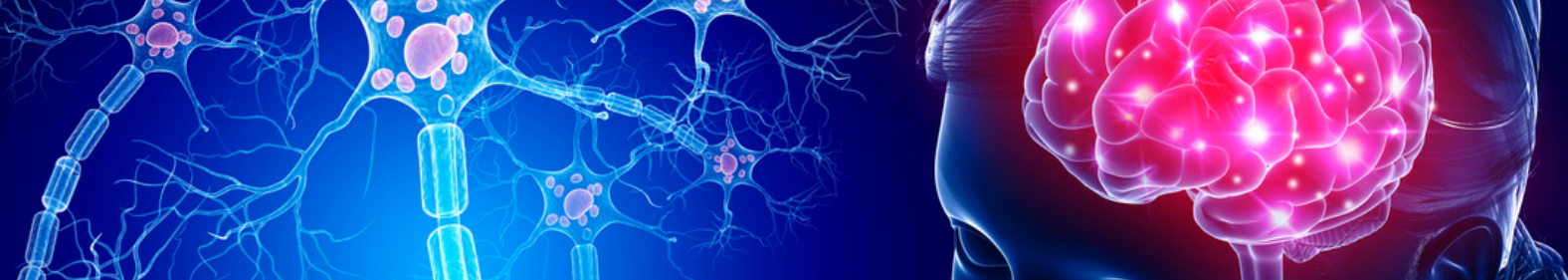


Habit Stacking- I already shared that working memory is often a struggle for the ADHD brain style. One way to help with forgetting is to tie the thing that is new to something that is already a habit. What habits do you have in place? I mean, the things you do that you do not think about doing that you could do now noticing your

body senses and surroundings? For people that find identifying habits difficult, I suggest taking note of your rituals, especially in the morning. Take notice step by step of what you do in the morning from the moment you wake. You might be surprised by what you get done out of habit. Once you know your habits, tie a mental fitness workout to one of them to start. In time, keep adding in more. This is like getting yourself set for a three-legged race. The habit will help your new habit be a winner.



For me, my first habit pair was adding my mental fitness workout to sipping my morning coffee. My coffee is not something I will miss. Therefore, I knew I could successfully tune into my senses while sipping it. Now, drinking my coffee is even more enjoyable. And, because I have slowed down, I am not drinking as much. A win-win!



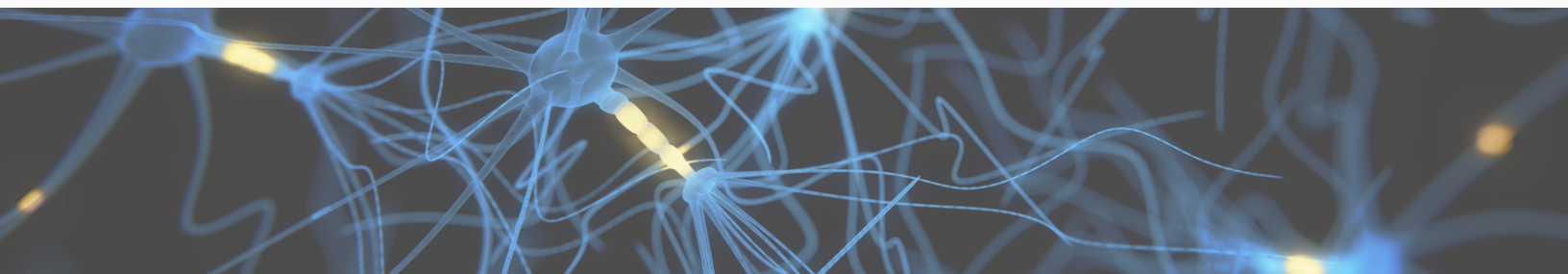
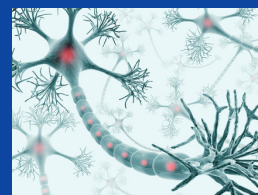
It's a wrap

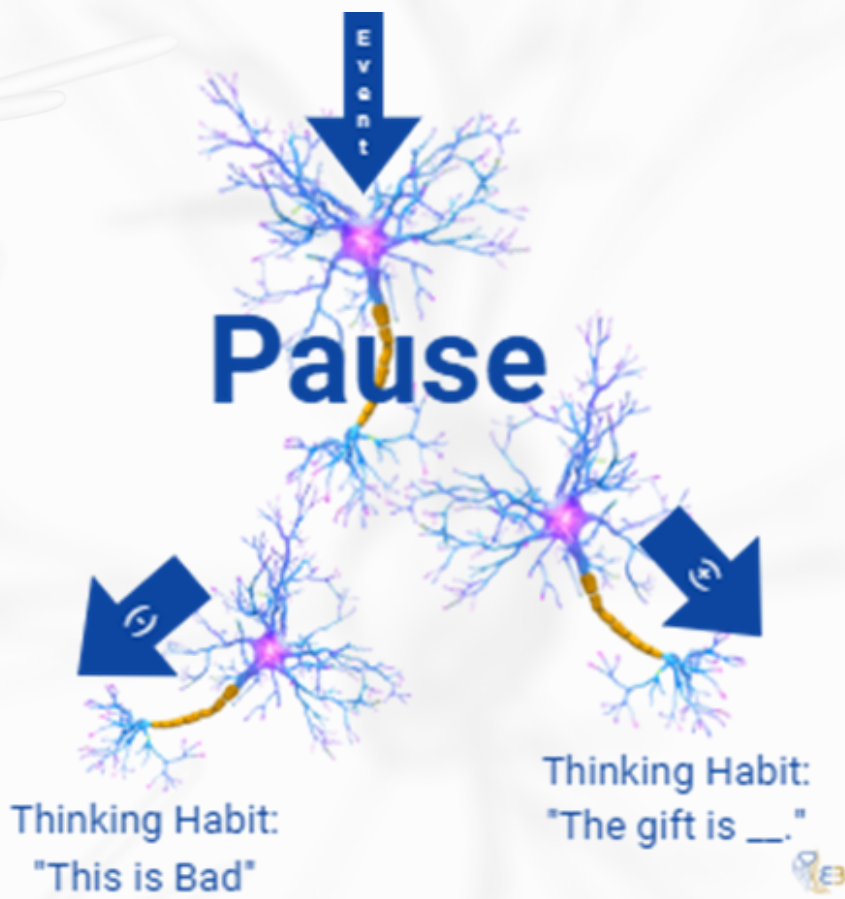
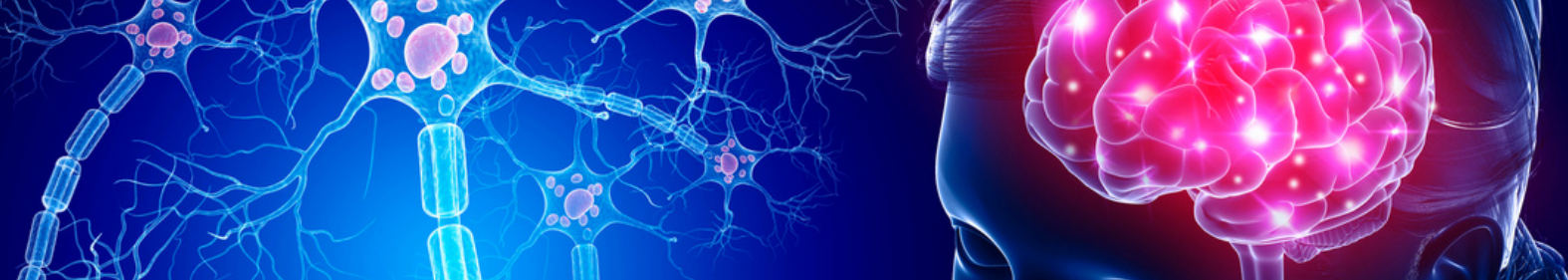
Mental fitness strengthens executive function skills and stabilizes emotional behavior by training the brain to notice bodily sensations and responses to the outside world. I will confess, yes, mental fitness is a simple practice; remembering to do it is the hard part. I have mentioned this before, but knowing you will forget is critical to success. I do not want you to fall into the thinking trap of, "I suck at this," when you forget. Forgetfulness is a chief complaint for many suffering from ADHD. Working memory, the ability to remember, touches another crucial executive function often weakened with ADHD. With mental fitness practice, you consciously strengthen your habit of pausing to notice your body using your senses by executing working memory. Every time you practice intentional presence, it's like lifting a weight at the gym. You are strengthening your awareness, which is also critical for the ADHD brain.

I have been practicing mental fitness guided by Positive Intelligence® for over two years. I recently completed the mastery program, where I spent six months digging into my self-sabotaging thinking habits. I strengthened my ability to intercept them by pausing and then choosing to accept or convert them into a gift or opportunity, moving toward greater happiness. The practice of mental fitness allows you to move into a thriving brain where creativity blooms and possibilities take action.

Let's not forget that the little emotions are the great captains of our lives and we obey them without realizing it.

-VINCENT VAN GOGH

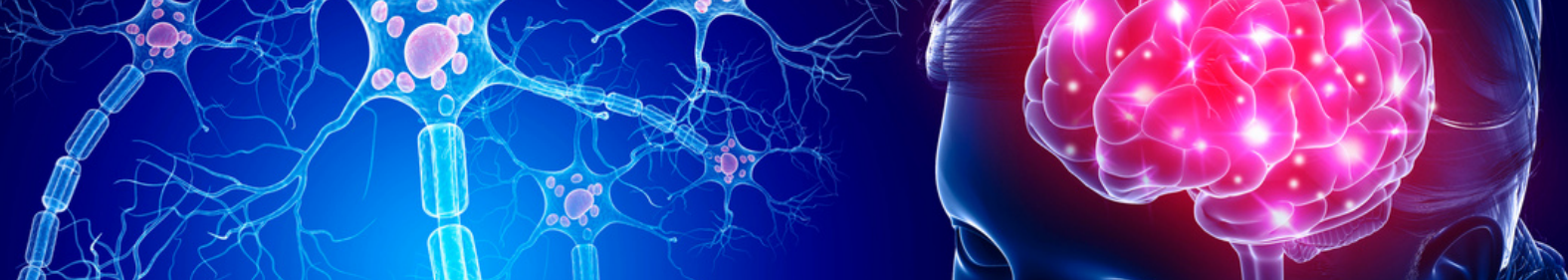




A quote by Mike Matoney states, ***"You can't think your way into better action. You must act your way into better thinking."*** When you practice mental fitness, you activate the brain region where you can have empathy, be explorative, innovate ideas, navigate forward, and start. When you build your self-awareness by tying your thinking and feeling state together, you are better equipped to remove your hand from the hot stove where you are swirling with thinking habits that are not serving you best. Your ability to intercept these

thought patterns is the shift of pre-wired neurons firing from your primitive survival brain, the amygdala, to activating the prosperous, thriving area of the brain, the prefrontal cortex. This is brain science. Which mental fitness habit will you start today to live a better life now?

BE YOUR OWN 



Hello

Thank you for joining me. My name is Cynthia North, but people know me as Cindy. I am ACC Certified Life Coach with the ICF as a Certified ADHD Life Coach (CALC) and a trained PQ Coach™ member with Positive Intelligence® devoted to partnering with clients to create self-success within ADHD and living life. I work with all ages having a special interest in how the brain affects the outcome. I help ADHDers and stuck people move from crippled in doubt to capable with clarity. I have expanded to offer personalized Mental Fitness Coaching through Shirzad Chamine's Positive Intelligence® Program. New possibilities bloom with deeper self-awareness and through the strength in your mental fitness. I have an innate desire to empower others no matter what difficulties they face with or without ADHD. I believe everyone is worthy of stepping forward out of stuck.

ADHD has touched me personally and professionally.

I know first-hand how ADHD symptoms and behavior can wreak havoc on family dynamics, school, and work success. I chose to become a Certified ADHD Life Coach as well as a member of Positive Intelligence® as a PQ Coach™ because I want others to discover their greatness within ADHD strengths while working with their executive functioning challenges through a positive mindset. I am where I am today because of my two dynamic ADHD children. They both teach me and open my mind to more each day. Their needs were beyond a hug, discipline, structure, or praise. So I sought professional help, ultimately finding a trained ADHD Life Coach. And here I am serving people who want different and deserve ease and flow.

Life experiences have made way for opportunity. I am on a journey to slay stigmas surrounding brain differences. Finding a Life Coach to empower my child led me to become a Certified ADHD Life Coach myself to serve others past their stuck ways and ADHD stigmas. Choosing to strengthen your inner self is where Empower M3 starts. The work is an inside job where your "M3" begins. Connecting your heart and brain with a Coach creates empowerment opportunities. EmpowerM3 - is where the 3 connect to take flight.

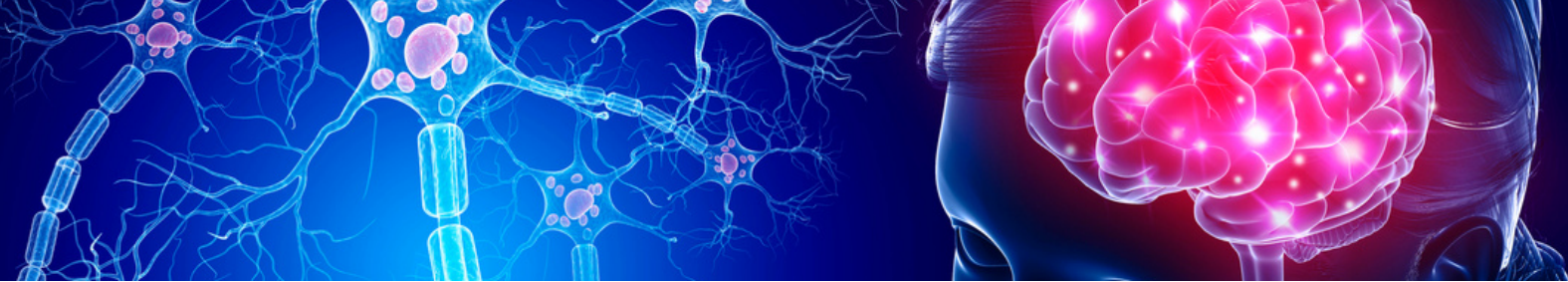


There is a more extraordinary tomorrow when your discovery starts today.

ADHD is not
something you
outgrow. ADHD
is something
you grow with.

— CINDY NORTH,
LIFE COACH AND AUTHOR



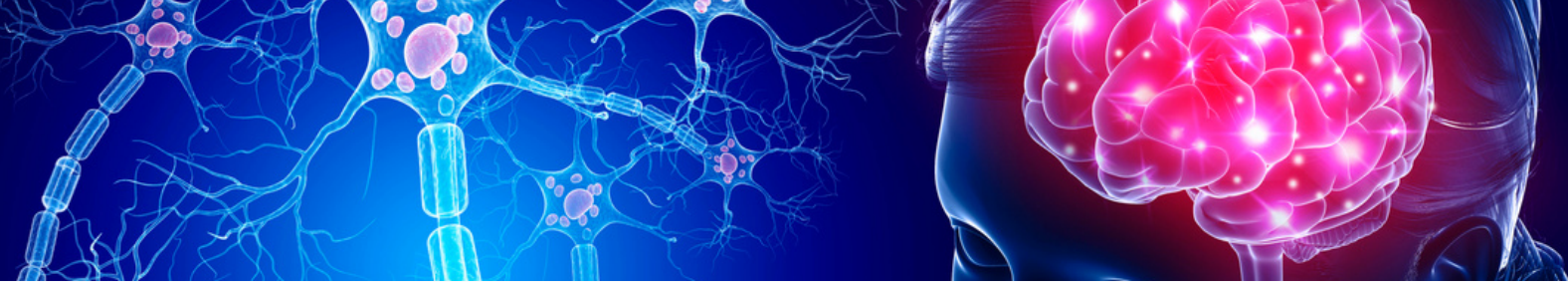


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Notes & Takeaways



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