

Here's a mental health workout that's as simple as ABC

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Trusting our instincts is vital for better mental health. Credit: [Shutterstock](#)

While we take physical workouts very seriously, there is much less said about the "workouts" that help us remain mentally agile and healthy. But just as with physical health, there are simple and practical ways that can help everyone to enjoy good mental health.

[Our research](#) has led us to a method for promoting mental health and wellbeing within communities, which follows a simple model that can be adopted by anyone.

An earlier study showed that [people intuitively know](#) what enhances their mental health, but they don't think about it on a daily basis. Unlike their [physical health](#), people rarely consider what they could or should be doing for their mental health.

At present, the [focus](#) in mental health campaigns is on treatment for mental disorders, the removal of stigma from talking about [mental health problems](#), early intervention and the reduction of risk factors which lead to illness.

But the burden of mental illness continues to rise – it is thought that an estimated 50% of people in [OECD countries](#) will experience mental illness in their lifetime, so there is a [need](#) to raise awareness in communities and to promote simple and practical steps to achieving and maintaining good mental health.

By building on research into what people can do to improve their mental health, we have developed an "ABC" model that can be easily adopted in everyday life. Known as "Act-Belong-Commit", the approach promotes keeping active, building stronger relationships with friends, family and community groups, and committing to hobbies, challenges and meaningful causes. Together they constitute a simple "do-it-yourself" approach to enhancing mental health.

By encouraging people to follow these principles, as well as collaborating with community groups that offer activities and opportunities for social participation, the method – currently implemented in [Australia](#) and [Denmark](#) – seeks to bring about long-term benefits to mental health in populations.

Act

Keep alert and engaged by keeping mentally, socially, spiritually and physically active.

Research has credited a lifestyle with plenty of activities outside work as fostering [positive emotions](#) and [protecting our brains](#) from decline. An active mind and body, particularly in the company of others, can be naturally rewarding and a healthy alternative to worrying, overthinking or engaging in substance use.

Belong

Develop a strong sense of belonging by keeping up friendships, joining groups, and participating in community activities.

Research has shown that our relationships with one another are fundamental to mental health in terms of [providing a sense of identity](#), acting as a source of [support](#), and being an important [coping resource](#) for dealing with [pain](#), [stress](#) and difficult life events.

Commit

Do things that provide meaning and purpose in life like taking up challenges, supporting a good cause and helping others.

A sense of meaning and purpose is vital to our well-being and has been

shown to help extend our [lives](#) and maintain a [healthy brain](#). Committing to a hobby, a challenge, a good cause or [helping others](#) can all boost feelings of self-worth and protect against feelings of [hopelessness and worthlessness](#).

Participating socially and contributing to the community can [preserve brain function](#), promote thoughts of "[making a difference](#)" and reduce feelings which aren't helpful for well-being, such as [self-centredness](#).

To show that these principles promote and protect mental health, we recently completed a series of observational studies on a nationally representative sample of adults in Ireland. People were interviewed at the start of the survey and then re-interviewed two years later.

We categorised the activities of participants into indicators of acting, belonging and committing. Engaging in various social and recreational activities, such as sport, going to films, eating out or travelling for pleasure were indicators of Act. Staying in touch with friends, family and community groups served as an indicator of Belong and the frequency of engaging in social and recreational activities was an indicator of Commit.

The results of these studies together demonstrate that higher levels of all three measures enhance [quality of life, life satisfaction, and self-rated mental health](#), protect people against developing [depression, anxiety and brain function decline](#), and lower the risk of people becoming dependent on [alcohol](#).

Our research has also shown that the approach is helping patients with [mental illnesses](#) and is now being used as a tool for recovery by [mental health professionals](#).

The campaign

The Act-Belong-Commit campaign aims to harness resources already present in communities – because the behaviours that promote mental health and well-being are everyday activities that most people are already doing or are readily available. Hence the campaign's focus is on raising awareness of this fact and validating the belief that these behaviours are good for mental health.

In both [Australia](#) and [Denmark](#) the campaign connects academics who can advise on the ABC method with a diverse range of community groups, including theatres, women's health groups and sport teams.

These partners are provided with training and resources such as [self-help guides](#) while advertising and event sponsorship help spread the campaign's message. Particular targets include schools, workplaces and people recovering from [mental illness](#).

In Australia, an annual [survey asks people](#) if they have heard of the campaign and, if so, how their beliefs and actions around mental health have changed. Twice a year, [surveys ask partners](#) how the campaign has affected their activities. Similar approaches are being used in Denmark. In this way, the campaign stays in touch with communities to constantly improve its methods.

By encouraging people to follow and prioritise this ABC approach, the campaign's simple messages could resonate in communities worldwide and sustain the mental health and well-being of people well into the future.

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