

***Being active is more than
just being physically healthy***



The key to movement is to find something that feels good, something that helps process stress instead of adding to it, like a snowball fight, writes columnist Thorsten Gohl. Photo courtesy of Thorsten Gohl

Northern News Services

Living in the North is a unique experience — one filled with breathtaking landscapes, tight-knit communities, and endless opportunities for adventure. But it also comes with its own set of challenges. The long winters bring months of darkness. Remote locations can lead to isolation. Work demands often pile up, especially in small communities where people take on multiple roles. Stress, burnout, and seasonal affective disorder (SAD) are real struggles that many of us face.

I know this firsthand.

I am incredibly grateful for all the experiences that the North has allowed me to have. It has given me the chance to do what I love: supporting others, leading by role-modelling, trying to make a difference, and creating opportunities for youth to become the best versions of themselves. But it comes with a toll — the workload sometimes seems endless. The connection to those around me is missed and I lose track of the good habits that once kept me balanced.

Not just the weight of responsibility, sure, but the actual weight. The weight that was lost when I had a strong, consistent routine. I used to wake up to morning walks, work out throughout the day, find balance through meditation, table tennis, cross-country skiing, and strength training. And yes, I still managed to fit in 10 to 14 hours of work.

But slowly, those habits faded, replaced by the demands of work, my own expectations, and the never-ending to-do lists.

I even joked about creating a territorial sport organization for snowball fighting. Maybe that's not such a bad idea? Movement, laughter, and friendly competition — what better way to stay active and keep spirits high during the dark winter months? (If anyone is interested in joining the first-ever Snowball Fighting Championships, let's talk!)

There are days when the dark mornings blur into dark evenings, and it's hard to find the motivation to do anything beyond the essentials. But I've learned that movement, no matter how small, helps. Not just for physical well-being, but for mental clarity, emotional balance, and overall resilience.

The power of movement for mental health

Physical activity isn't just about staying fit, it's a tool for managing stress, improving mood, and regaining control

when life feels overwhelming. Science tells us that movement releases endorphins, reduces anxiety, and helps regulate sleep patterns. All things that are especially important when facing the unique challenges of the North.

For me, movement is more than just exercise. It's about connection. A walk along a frozen lake, feeling the crunch of snow underfoot. A few minutes of stretching before tackling another long workday. A ping pong rally with our eight-year-old Zander, who will be a territorial champion in the future. These moments remind me that I'm still present, still breathing and still grounded.

Overcoming the barriers to movement

We all know that being active is good for us, but in the North, it's easier said than done. When it's -40 C and pitch black, the last thing anyone wants to do is go outside for a walk. But movement doesn't always have to mean braving the cold. It can be shaking off stiffness with a quick dance session in the kitchen, stretching before that first sip of a morning coffee or getting a few steps in while brushing your teeth. Maybe it's walking to work or school instead of driving, or doing a few squats while waiting for the kettle to boil.

Sometimes, it's just about standing up and giving your body a little shake, resetting the energy and getting things moving again. And yes, even throwing a snowball counts.

Finding what works for you

Not everyone enjoys the same types of movement and that's okay. The key is to find something that feels good, something that helps process stress instead of adding to it. Maybe it's a slow walk under the northern lights and embracing the solitude. Maybe it's chopping wood, turning necessity into strength. Maybe it's setting up a space in your home for movement, however that looks for you. Or maybe it's using movement as a reason to connect with others, whether it's a virtual challenge, a game of shinny, or a family snowshoe outing.

Mental health is often pushed aside, especially in places where resilience is expected and work never seems to end. But we need to talk about it. We need to acknowledge the struggles and find ways to support each other.

Movement isn't the cure for everything, but it's a step, a literal step toward feeling better, thinking clearer, and finding balance in the chaos of Northern life. So if today feels

heavy, start with one small movement. A stretch. A deep breath. A short walk. It doesn't have to be much. It just has to be something. And if all else fails, grab a snowball and get ready for the first-ever Territorial Snowball Fighting Championship.

Who's in? We are all in this together.

Thorsten Gohl is the co-ordinator of Physical Literacy NWT.



GUEST COMMENT

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