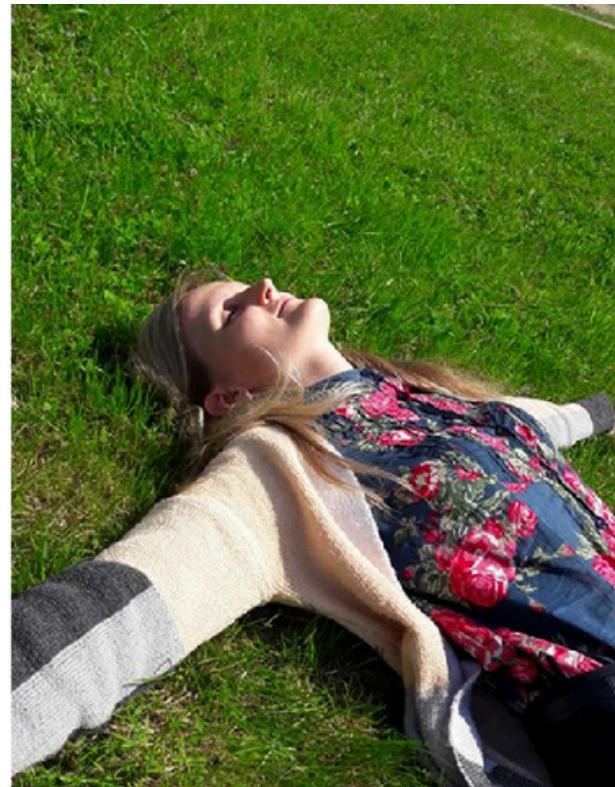




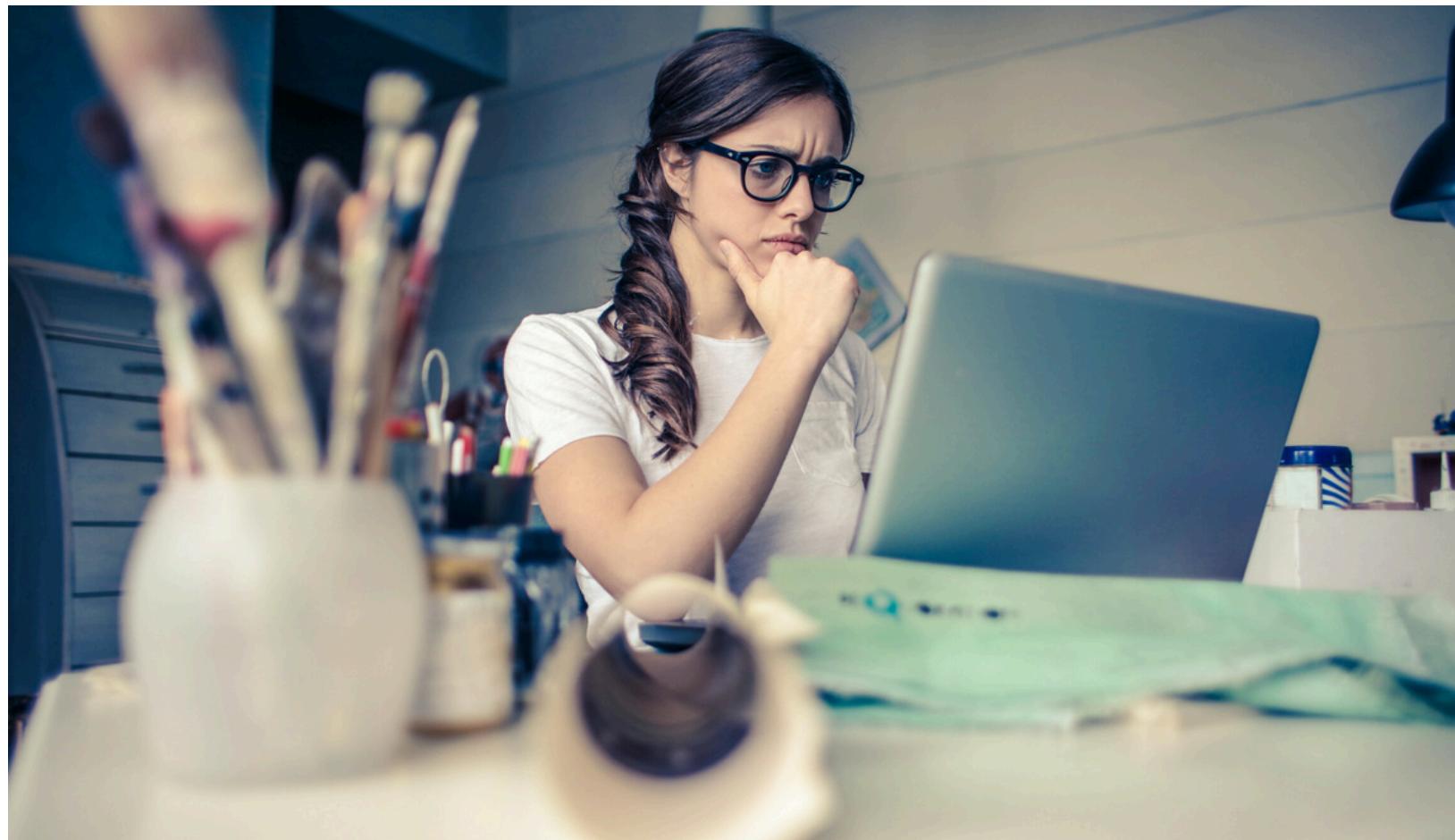
Calm Down and Stress: Recommendations

Student Affairs and Career Office



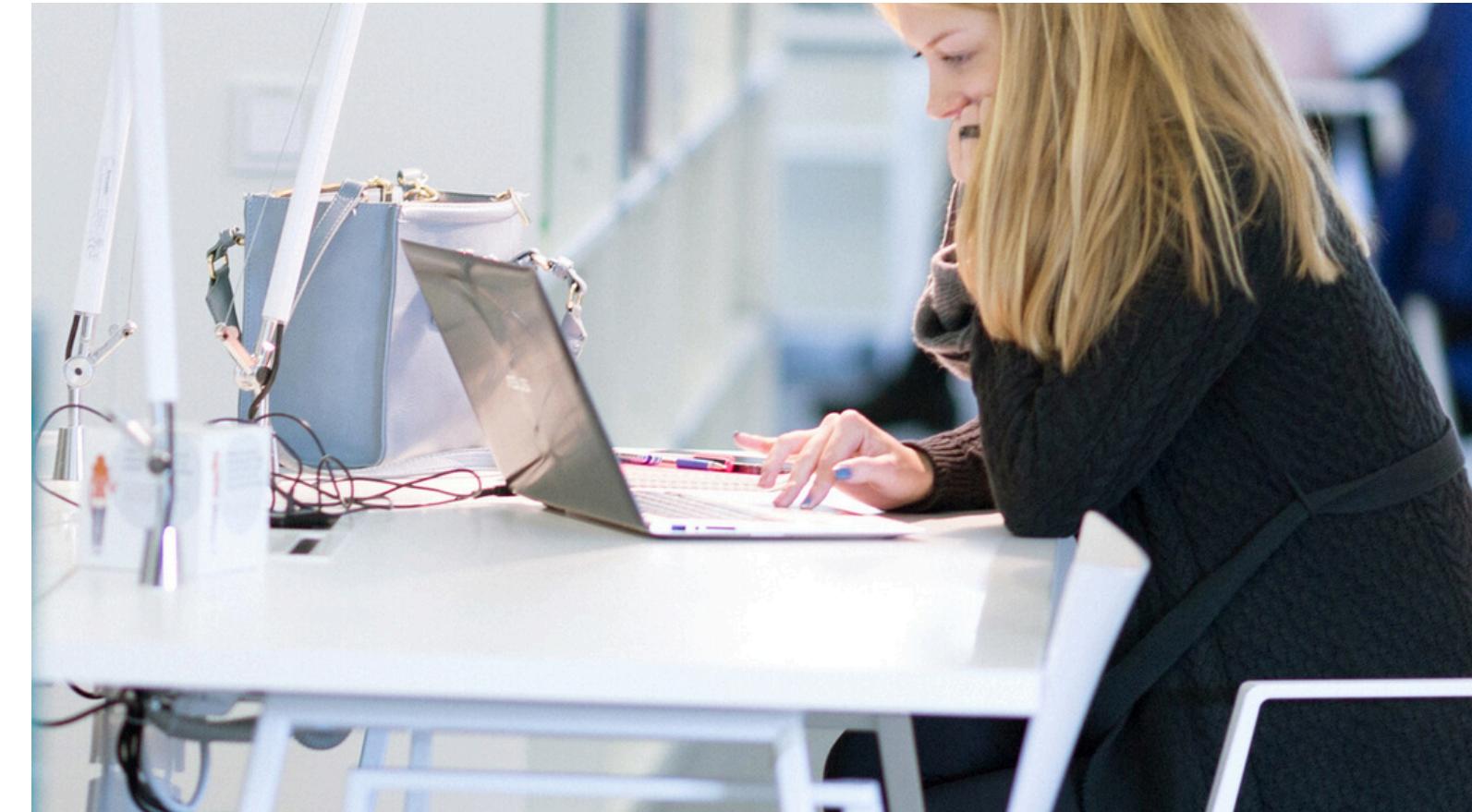
We need stress to survive

It visits us every time we encounter a new situation, either pleasant or unpleasant. We can feel stressed when we oversleep, take an exam, hear a compliment from our crush or... meet a lion around the corner (happens to everyone, right?). **Every situation similar to these requires us to adapt – to figure out what actions we should take and react.** Imagine what would happen if we were indifferent to everything, without any inner push to act. After oversleeping we would always skip the lectures, take an exam without the preparation. Our indifference would probably discourage our crush from showing any further attention, and having met the lion we... well, you can imagine what would happen.



“Stress is a non-specific response of the body to any demand.”

[H. Selye]



Make sure your stress level is optimal

The purpose of stress is to help us adapt: it motivates us to act, improves our concentration, activates parts of our brain that are responsible for decision-making, prepares our body to run or fight in case of physical danger. As you can see, **stress can be helpful...**

...unless there is too much of it. Then the effect is the think clearly, increases procrastination. Long-term stress can cause opposite: it affects our ability to concentrate and think clearly, increases procrastination. Long-term stress can cause cardiovascular and digestion problems, decrease our immune response and lead us to a burnout. That is why it is so important to practice self-care and learn how to manage your stress.

Part I. Get to know your stress

Knowing how you respond to stress can help you to recognize it before burning out and to use stress management techniques to calm down.

Researchers at Stanford University have identified **8 ways in which we respond to stress** based on brain research (one or more of these ways can apply to you)*.

Check the ones that describe your response to stress the best. Next to each type you will find a letter-code. In the next part of these recommendations this code will help you to choose the most suitable stress coping method.



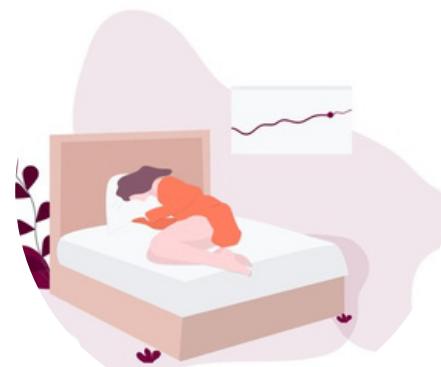
*Williams J, This New Brain Science Could Help You Unlock Better Mental Health // Thrive Global, Mental Health, 2019. Internet access: https://thriveglobal.com/stories/mental-health-biotypes-brain-science-leanne-williams-research-signs-stress/?utm_source=Recirc&utm_medium=Thrive&utm_campaign=MH



“Rumination” (R)

Your inner voice starts shouting critical thoughts, you rethink the same unpleasant situation a thousand times, imagining how could you behaved differently.

Coping methods: All



“Context Insensitivity” (CI)

You feel burned out and unmotivated to do anything. You might be late to submit your paper, but it doesn't bother you, although you used to care about it before.

Coping methods: 6-11, 13.



“Anxious Avoidance” (AA)

Stress causes clear physical changes such as muscle tension, palm sweating, and increased heartbeat. If the task is stressful, you start to procrastinate and avoid similar tasks.

Coping methods: 1, 2, 4-12, 15.



“Negative Bias” (NB)

It becomes difficult to think positively, and you can't get rid of thoughts that anything you do will result in a catastrophe.

Coping methods: 1-4, 6-10, 13, 14.



“Threat Response” (TR)

You become hypersensitive. Everyone seems to be against you, an innocent gaze or a joke told by a friend makes you feel suspicious. Automatic physical reactions, such as stiffness or tremor may arise.

Coping methods: 1, 2, 4-11, 13, 15.



“Emotional Numbness” (EN)

Activities, that you used to enjoy before, don't bring you any joy, important projects start to feel meaningless.

Coping methods: 5, 6, 8-11, 13.



“Cognitive Fog” (CF)

The brain feels foggy, your thinking loses its sharpness, it is difficult to make decisions, plan and suppress unwanted thoughts or emotions

Coping methods: 3, 6, 8-10, 15.



“Inattention” (I)

It becomes difficult to concentrate, to do the simplest tasks, you get distracted very quickly even if the deadline is near.

Coping methods: 3, 6, 8-10, 15.

Part II. Coping methods

Below you will find 15 methods for coping with stress recommended by health professionals, psychologists, and scientists. Next to each of them, you will see letter-codes of responses to stress types, that were just introduced. They will help you choose most suitable method(s) for coping with your type of stress. Keep in mind, that these are only recommendations. We encourage you to try all of them and see what suits you best.



Thinking Distortions (R, AA, NB, TR)

Thinking distortion is a certain tendency in thinking that causes unpleasant emotions. By recognizing these distortions, we can correct them and thus reduce unpleasant emotions. All in all, there are 12 of them, more or less common among all of us. Below you can find 6 most common thinking distortions, described by psychiatrist, professor D. Burns. You can find a complete list in his book “Feeling Good” (available at Vilnius university library).



“The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought against the other.”

[W. James]

1



“All or nothing”

You divide everything into *black and white*. If you don't do something perfectly, you feel like you're a complete loser. E.g., “I've got 8 from the exam, that means I am stupid.”

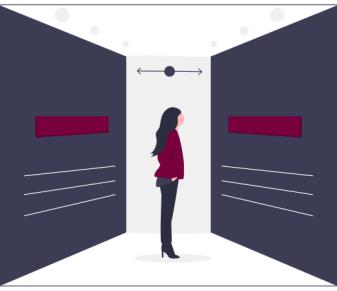
What to do: Before judging yourself, notice what you did good, instead of focusing on mistakes only. E.g., mark 8 means that 80 % of all questions answered were correct and only 20 % were wrong.



“Discounting the positive”

You reject a positive experience by claiming that *it doesn't count* for one reason or another. E.g., “I know that he said my Introduction looks good but I'm sure he was just being polite.”

What to do: Say *Thank you* for every compliment. When something pleasant happens, allow yourself to enjoy it.



“Overgeneralization”

You see every adverse event as an endless series of disasters. Such thoughts include the words *Always*, *Never*. E.g., “I forgot to prepare a presentation in time. I never do anything well.”

What to do: Look for arguments for and against. Which facts support and which deny the thought “I never do anything well”?



“Magical thinking”

You make a negative conclusion without any supporting facts. a) *mind reading* – “*He hates me*”, “*She wants me to do everything on my own*”; b) *future telling* – “*He will criticize me*”, “*I will fail*”.

What to do: Ask yourself what other future scenarios are possible. Think about positive options as well.



“Filtering”

You choose one negative detail and magnify it so that the reality begins to look gloomy. You ignore the good events. E.g., when the supervisor gives you feedback, you hear only the criticism.

What to do: Train yourself to look for positive or neutral moments, even in the most unpleasant situations. Try the Gratitude exercise (No. 13).



“Must” and “Should”

You have a very rigid view on how you or other people should behave. When it doesn't work, you feel stressed. E.g., “Everything I do, must be flawless [otherwise nobody will love me]”; “He should always be on time [if not - he doesn't respect me].”

What to do: Most of these rules were implemented by others to us during our childhood. Recognize them and create your own flexible rules.



2

Analyze your emotions (R, AA, NB, TR)

The next time you will feel down, ask yourself these questions:

1. What event / situation made me feel this way?
2. What thoughts run through my mind now?
3. Which thinking distortions do I recognize?
4. What are the facts?

If you still feel bad after that, remind yourself that all emotions, including unpleasant ones, come and go. Trust yourself to overcome them. You managed to do it in the past, right?



3

Grounding (5 senses exercise) (R, NB, I, CF)

In case of acute stress or if you start to overthink, try this short exercise.

Look around and:

- see 5 objects,
- touch – 4,
- hear – 3,
- smell – 2,
- taste – 1.

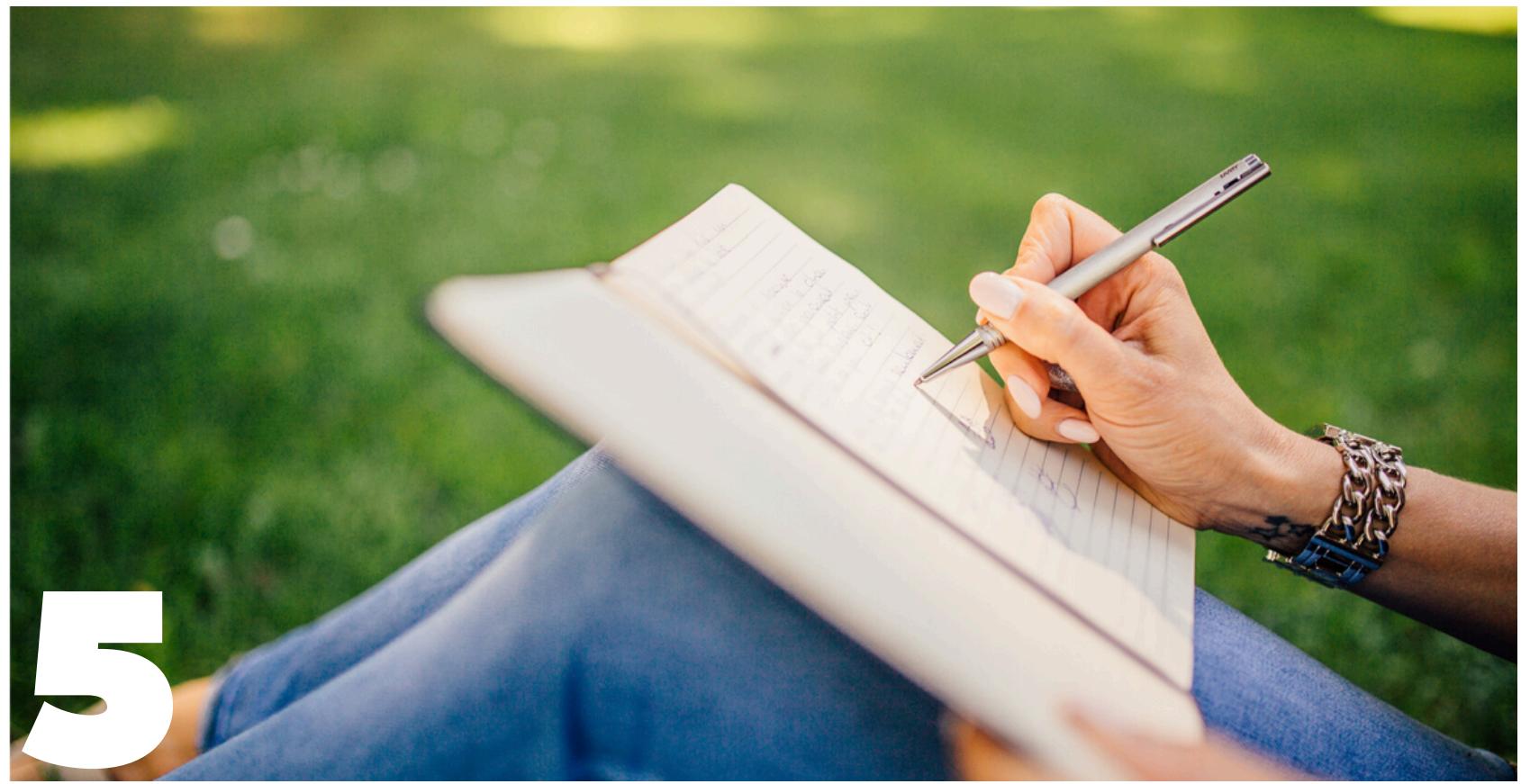
You should immediately notice decrease in unpleasant thoughts. To make this exercise work in stressful situations, practice it once a day, e.g., each time you turn on your computer. It will be useful when you feel stressed during an exam or before public speaking.



4

Visualization “Calm place” (R, AA, NB, TR)

Close your eyes. Breathe calmly for a minute or two. Relax your muscles more and more with every exhalation. Then imagine a place where you feel calm and safe. It might be a real or imagined place. Take your time to look around in that imagery. Explore it through 4 senses: what do you see - colours, forms, patterns; what do you feel when touching the objects around you; sounds you hear; scents that you smell. From time to time remind yourself that this is the place, where you can feel calm and safe. Stay with that feeling for a while.



5

Write your stress out (R, AA, TR, EN)

After an exhausting day, good old diary is a great way to let your feelings out, especially if irritating thoughts prevent you from falling asleep. Even if you are not a big fan of writing regularly, you can do it from time to time. If you feel anxious, if you find it difficult to understand what is happening inside of you, just take a piece of paper (it's more useful than computer because writing lets you express your emotions physically) and start writing. If you have no idea what to start with, begin with a sentence “I have no idea what to start with.” Keep writing for around 10- 15 minutes.



6

Meditation (All)

Currently one of the most popular science based meditation practices is called mindfulness. Actually, it is more than just meditation. Regular practices will help you:

- notice the signs of stress much faster;
- calm down physiological response of stress;
- stop the influx of thoughts;
- tolerate unpleasant emotions that you can't avoid;
- concentrate better.

If you want to try mindfulness, you can start with one of these apps: ["Smiling Mind"](#), ["Headspace"](#) or ["Waking up"](#).



7

The note to yourself (R, AA, NB, TR, CI)

When strong emotions overwhelm you, ask yourself which thoughts induce them (remember thinking distortions?) and reframe them. E.g., if you notice that you judge yourself for not trying hard enough and instead of encouraging you this thought makes you procrastinate, your note to yourself could be: *"I am good enough the way I am"*, *"I do as much as I can at the moment."* You can write it on a sticker and put it on the mirror, laptop, or set it as your password on device you use the most often.



8

Talk to someone (All)

Call your friend, mother or partner - anyone you trust. Share what's going on in your life, how do you feel. There's a Lithuanian proverb "A problem shared with a friend is only half a problem."



9

Go for a walk or jogging (All)

Monotonous physical activity helps you relax, intensive sport helps to distract yourself from situation that you can't solve at the moment. What is more, any kind of movement helps to burn stress hormones. So, any time you feel anxious, take your jacket, put comfortable shoes on and go outside!



10

Screen-free time before sleep (All)

Before going to sleep, give yourself 20-30 minutes of screen-free time. No computer, tablet or phone. This will help you to calm down and fall asleep easier. Use this time to read a book, talk to your partner, write a diary or meditate.



Write a letter (R, AA, TR, CI, EN)

If your stress is related to a particular person but you don't feel ready to talk to them about it, write them a letter. Write down everything you want to say, how you feel, do not censor yourself. Of course, don't send a letter like this. You can throw it away or burn it.

What would your best friend say to you? (All)

Sometimes the biggest source of stress is our inner critic. We blame ourselves for the smallest mistakes, social failures. When your mind is flooded by thoughts you would not wish for your biggest enemy, ask yourself: “If my best friend would be in this situation, what would I say to him / her?” Then say or write down the same words to yourself.

Gratitude diary (R, NB, TR, CI, EN)

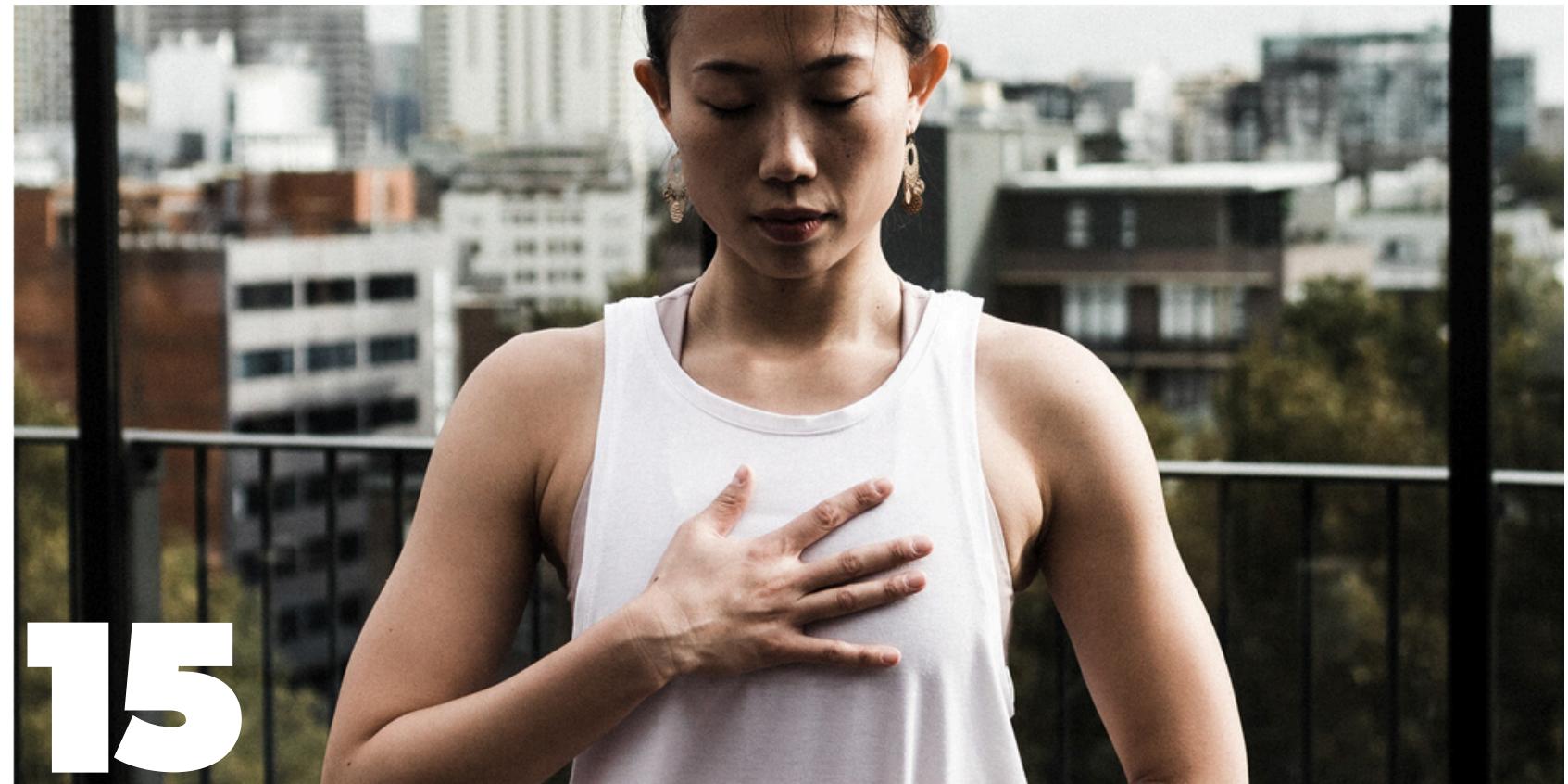
This is one of the three practices (together with meditation and helping others), that helps us to have more happiness in our lives. Reserve a few minutes every evening to remember 2-3 pleasant moments from the day that have just passed, e.g., “I had an amazing dinner”, “That joke made me laugh so hard!”



14

Worrying Time (R, NB)

Research shows that people, who set exact time to worry, significantly decrease rumination, stress levels and symptoms of depression compared to the traditional treatment alone. Set a time (5 to 15 minutes) in a day or a week for your anxiety. During that period, think about all the things that make you nervous. If you feel anxious at any other time, you can try to delay your anxiety until that dedicated time. That might help you to bring your attention back to more important tasks.



15

Breathing Exercise (R, AA, TR, I, CF)

When it's difficult to concentrate or you feel the rush of anxiety, start paying attention to your breathing. Make your breath-out longer than the breath-in. E.g., you can inhale for 4 seconds and exhale for 6. If you feel comfortable, you can prolong the exhalation to 8 s.

There are two important rules:

1. Start the exercise with breathing out. This will help you to avoid having too much oxygen in your lungs.
2. Try to breathe to your diaphragm: while breathing in your belly should extend and shrink while breathing out.

Part III. Habits for good mental health (All)

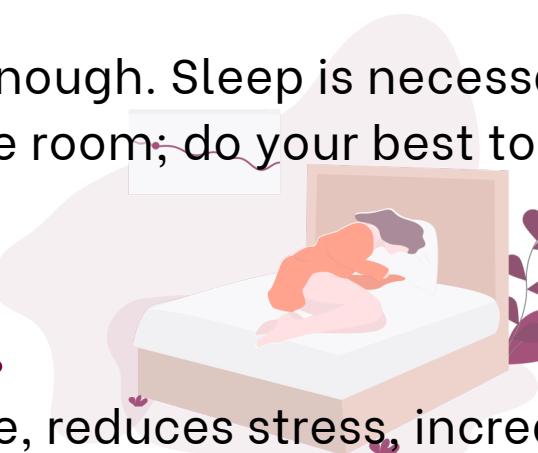
To keep your mind healthy, you have to take care of yourself every day. Below you will find the most important habits, which will help you sustain mental resilience.



“Put the oxygen mask on yourself first – THEN you can help others.”
[from aircraft safety instructions]

Get enough sleep.

If you feel tired all the time, make sure you sleep enough. Sleep is necessary for strong immune system and emotional health. Before going to sleep, avoid any screen time; ventilate the room; do your best to go to sleep and wake up at the same time.



Move. Spend some time in nature.

Physical activity, as well as spending time in nature, reduces stress, increases productivity, gives you energy and helps to relax. If you spend a lot of time sitting, stand up every hour, walk around for a few minutes. A lot of sport activities are offered by VU [Sports and Health Centre](#).



Socialize, find a hobby.

Regular social interactions are a must for every one of us. If it's difficult for you to find friends, join some [students' art or science clubs](#), [volunteer](#). Active leisure time is a great way to distract yourself from studies and to relax. Keep in touch with your family.



If needed, limit your time on social media.

Observe yourself. How do you feel after browsing social media? Do you feel inspired or anxious and disappointed? If social media makes you feel frustrated, if it affects your self-worth, limit the time spent there. Consider spending one day in a week without social media.

Learn to say “No”

Instead of trying to find more time for one more project in your already overloaded schedule, learn to say “No”. It is okay to reject an offer. By doing this, you show respect to your present obligations and make sure that they will be done well and fit into the deadline.

Don't hesitate to ask for help.

If you get stressed because of a specific task or situation, it might be enough to talk to your professor or a friend. If you feel that your stress might be reduced by a better time management or effective learning techniques, register for a career counseling session. However, if your problems lead your whole life and none of the advice work anymore, seek psychological help.



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Psychologists

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