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University Network for Innovation,
Technology and Engineering

Student Well-Being guide How do I feel?

Inclusion, Diversity and Well-being

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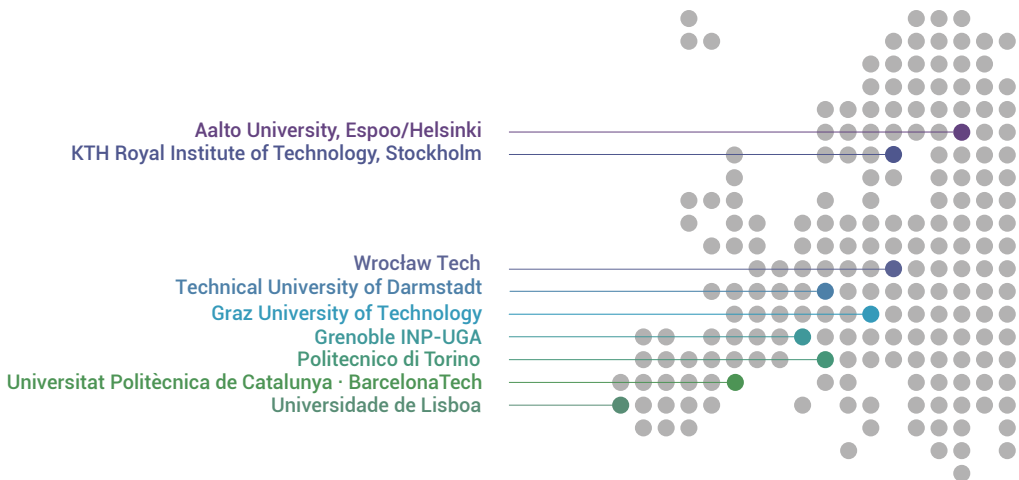
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Methodology & Development process of the well-being guides

One of the tasks that Community 3 has been working on the development of a well-being guide. Through research into existing documents, numerous discussion rounds, and working meetings within the community, it was agreed that this guide should serve as a handout for both students and staff at all UNITE! universities. At the end of the development process, a printed product will be provided for students in their welcome packs and given to employees at the start of their employment at their university. It was also agreed by the community that this guide should be visually appealing and extremely concise in terms of text. A more detailed, multi-layered version can be displayed as a service on the university websites.

The community has followed several steps to achieve this goal:

1. Reviewing existing documents already available at the universities that contain information on mental health and well-being,
2. Researching best practices and examples from other universities,
3. Discussing the available materials and subsequently defining the dimensions that are key for each university's own guide,
4. Collaborative creation of a master document outlining the content dimensions of the guide. This step also includes literature research and the collection of sources,
5. Condensing and reducing the content to a level that is tailored to the target groups, translating the texts into easily understandable language,
6. Development of a visual language that is understandable for the target group,
7. Production of an infographic,
8. Production of a print template.

The aim of the well-being guide is to sensitise students and employees to the topic of mental health and well-being and to provide initial, easy-to-implement recommendations for action.

This is intended to strengthen the aspect of self-care and also draw attention to the support offered by the university, which is an expression of organisational care.

What contribution does this guide make to the wellbeing of students ?

This guide summarises the common challenges that students face in their daily life, demonstrating typical situations to identify with, asking helpful questions for the readers to reflect on, providing first actions to make changes in their lives, and showing resources to explore further to sustain their physical, mental and emotional well-being.

*Between stimulus and response
there is a space.*

*In that space is
our power to choose our response.*

*In our response lies
our growth and our freedom.*

- Viktor E. Frankl -

In this sense, may this guide provide the readers with the best possible support to find individual solutions.

Students' challenges: what affects their wellbeing

Continuous learning, obtaining a degree, pursuing a particular profession, or making a radical career change are all means to an end. What really matters in the end? Your own well-being is an important end to keep in mind – otherwise your career is not sustainable.

We want to succeed and do well, but is it easy to achieve these goals? We sleep too little, we exercise too little, social media competes for our time. It constantly feeds us stimuli and creates pressure by offering 'perfect life stories.' We feel that we are always in a hurry. We demand too much of ourselves, or feel that others demand too much of us. All these elements can lead to feelings of loneliness, anxiety, risk of burnout, and self-criticism.

What can we do? The ability to study means a student's ability to work, and it is a combination of several interconnected factors. Personal resources, study skills, teaching and counselling, and a supportive study environment all have significant impacts on how well a student performs.

Study well-being comprises subjective experiences of an individual. They are manifested, for example, as feelings of coping and through the effort expended.

Helpful questions

Do you sleep well? How energetic do you feel? When was the last time you exercised?

What are you interested in? What makes you happy? When was the last time you laughed?

Do you have friends who can support you and whom you can support? How do you spend your time with friends and family?

Can you identify one situation when you felt overwhelmed or anxious? What physical symptoms did you have at the time?

Typical situation

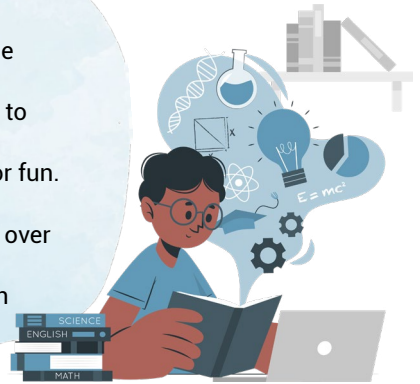
Adam wakes up every morning at 5 am and he reviews his lectures.

He works very hard and long hours every day to perfect his assignments.

He rarely goes outside to see his friends or for fun.

Adam does not get enough sleep or exercise because he prioritises his academic success over his health.

He usually eats something quickly in between studying.



First actions to make changes

- 1 Be aware of your emotions and physical condition. At the end of the day, reflect on what you have felt. Identify what made you happy or put you under pressure. Accept your feelings.
- 2 Turn off electronic devices for an hour. With the time gained, read a book, go to the forest or go to bed earlier. Or just simply spend time by yourself, even if you feel bored.
- 3 Even if you are busy, take breaks. Stretch for a moment, close your eyes and breathe deeply, go outside for five minutes.
- 4 Think about what you have done well today.
- 5 Meet your friends or have a lunch with your coworkers.

To go further

- *How does psychological safety establish the foundation for learning, innovation and creativity?* www.aalto.fi
- *Toxic positivity - how does positivity become poisonous?* www.aalto.fi
- *Are you a friend or a constant critic of yourself? Why is self-compassion worthwhile?* www.aalto.fi
- *Group flow: what is it and how to achieve it?* www.aalto.fi
- *Corrosive interaction or high-quality connections?* www.aalto.fi
- *Move Your Brain! – How does movement increase wellbeing?* www.aalto.fi

Self-care: Healthy life behaviors and support actions to the wellbeing

The world of work has changed significantly in recent years. The demands on female employees have increased significantly. A high workload, time and deadline pressure, as well as frequent interruptions in everyday work, are also among the most common stress factors.

Technical innovations, constant accessibility, and the abundance of information can also be perceived as stressful. The consequences of these developments include psychological stress, burnout, or an increase in mental illnesses. Initial research findings show that good self-care is becoming increasingly important and has a preventative benefit.

Healthy lifestyle habits, such as regular physical activity, eating a balanced diet, and getting enough sleep, are critical for maintaining a healthy body weight, preventing disease, and promoting overall well-being. Supportive well-being measures, such as social support, emotional connections, and a nurturing environment, can have a significant impact on mental health and emotional well-being. Research suggests that people who practise healthy lifestyle habits and receive social support may have a lower risk of depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems.

Helpful questions

What are you doing already to feel happy? Be proud of it!

Observe what you have done regarding eating. When did you rest? With whom did you talk? What were your most prominent feelings?

Which other well-being life behaviours would have the most beneficial impact on your physical, mental, or emotional health?

Typical situation

The study schedule is fully booked: lessons, learning time, writing a paper, and it is hard to find time for some short powerful practices to get 'new fresh energy'.

The awareness of what our body needs on a daily basis in order to stay well and feel energised is sometimes already present. However, the overload that we experience in our daily life hinders us from engaging in quick body movements, stretching while walking to the bathroom, practising a short breathing technique, or doing a one-minute meditation. We often come up with excuses, even when we can feel the immediate benefits of self-care moments in our physical, mental and emotional well-being.



First actions to make changes

- 1 Choose only ONE new healthy habit (e.g. eating healthy food, 5 minutes of meditation to start your day, 15 minutes of physical activity you love, 5 minutes of breathing techniques, meeting a friend, etc.) that you want to implement in your daily life.
- 2 Before you go to bed, visualize yourself doing this new habit precisely the next day and repeat this evening ritual every day. See and notice how easy it is to establish a new healthy routine on a daily basis. If you can do it once, you can do it as often as you like with other habits.
- 3 Be proud and grateful for yourself. Notice how good it feels to be you and appreciate the important step you have taken towards self-confidence and self-worth.

Stress management

The purpose of stress is to manage the changes that occur in our lives. Today's society is rapidly changing and we are witnessing an increase in stress at all levels. Work schedules are becoming increasingly demanding. It is not possible to continually adapt. We have physical and psychological limits to respect. Hence, it is important to not neglect stress reactions and our behaviour to it.

Stress is defined as 'each individual's assessment of their relationship with the environment in so far as it may exceed their resources and affect their well-being' (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The body and mind respond to a stimulus and subsequently re-establish a stable state called 'homeostasis'. If the stress is too significant, exceeding the body and mind's normal capacity to respond, it becomes deleterious. There are three phases to the stress syndrome: a general alarm reaction, with the activation of several biological, cognitive and emotion systems; the resistance of the body, mind and emotions, as all systems return to normal; but if the stressful stimulus persists, the system loses its ability to resist and enters the exhaustion phase. Stress may generate three types of reactions: the 'fight or flight' active responses described by Walter Bradford Cannon in 1929 or more passive mode response known as 'inhibition'.

The stress reaction is triggered by an external or internal stimulus. We need to distinguish between two types of stress: positive stress and chronic stress. Positive stress is vital for survival. In certain circumstances (for example, stress before an exam), it is beneficial and appropriate. Chronic stress, however, is not clearly defined in time. It is difficult to determine what triggered it and why it persists. It is associated with a loss of concentration, and hence attention deficit disorder, difficulty in communicating and making appropriate decisions, and a loss of empathy. It creates a state of permanent dissatisfaction, irritation and unease.

Body tensions accumulate. There are different ways to approach stress management and strengthen our ability to adapt: psychological, emotional and body awareness.

Typical situation

Physical and mental health challenges
Job or study withdrawal
Boredom, distraction
Increasing demands
Increasing self-criticism

Helpful questions



What are the stress factors in your institution? Can you identify them? What are your possibilities for changing them? If none, how can you best adapt in order to protect yourself?

What are your stress factors linked to your relationships? Can you identify their origins? How would you evaluate your capacity to adapt? If is not sufficient, what can you do to improve these relationships?

Can you identify any internal stress factors that are more related to your personal life (e.g. family health issues or economic problems)? Have you got someone to talk to about this? Are you aware of what services and support the university provides?

First actions to make changes

- 1 In order to prevent stress, we need to recognise stress signals at an early stage, avoid getting overwhelmed, and create a calm mindset from time to time. You may try some mindfulness or relaxation activities.
- 2 In a more analytical approach, seek support and try to identify the underlying causes of stress (internal stressors). This will enable you to function with greater confidence and coping skills.

To go further

Doing What Matters in Times of Stress

www.who.int



Alert signals

Warning of deteriorating emotional well-being include increased agitation, irritability, neglect of physical self-care such as hygiene and nutrition, and a decline in the management of daily tasks. It is important to pay attention to these signs so that you can make changes early on.

Typical situation

An initial indication of declining emotional health often manifests as a notable increase of tiredness as well as agitation and irritability. Instances of becoming easily upset with both circumstances and individuals become more frequent. Frustration with one's life may emerge, alongside difficulties in managing one's temper or finding inner calm. It is not unusual to also start to withdraw from social situations and isolate oneself. Pay attention if you feel uncharacteristically tired, angry, anxious, agitated, or moody.

You may notice a decline in your emotional well-being when you begin neglecting your physical self-care. This could include skipping meals and disregarding proper hygiene practices. Your environment may also become cluttered, with dishes piling up in the sink, laundry accumulating in baskets, and an empty fridge. These once-basic but essential tasks might start to feel overwhelming, or slip from your attention altogether.



Helpful questions

How many times have I felt irritable in the last week? More than usual?

Have I found it difficult to find solutions to problems?

What have I done to resolve situations that cause me frustration?

What are my usual sources of calm?

First actions to make changes

- 1 Emotions can sometimes be wonderful and sometimes exhausting and frightening, but they always show us what we are lacking. Gradually mastering effective coping strategies can offer long-term benefits. Determine which strategies resonate with you and which do not. There are two primary types of coping mechanisms: emotion-focused and problem-focused strategies.
- 2 Problem-focused coping involves altering the situation by removing a stressor from your life. For instance, if you receive a lower-than-expected exam grade despite your perceived performance, employing a problem-focused approach entails talking to your teacher to devise a plan for improvement. This proactive strategy fosters a sense of confidence in your ability to excel in future exams.
- 3 Emotion-focused coping helps you take care of your feelings when you either do not want to change your situation, or when circumstances are out of your control. For instance, when mourning the loss of a loved one, it becomes crucial to address your emotions in a healthy manner, acknowledging the unchangeable nature of the circumstance. This may involve talking with friends and engaging in activities that you enjoy.
- 4 There is not always one best way to proceed. Instead, it is up to you to decide which coping skill is likely to work best for you in a particular situation.
- 5 You do not have to struggle in silence. Open up to someone about it, whether it be a friend, a colleague, a family member, or a professional.

My actions for the world

Humans have an innate drive to contribute to the world. Cooperative behaviour and the desire to help the community are embedded in human nature on one hand. On the other hand, there are self-interest and personal needs, lack of awareness, convenience and habits, or social and cultural influences on our behaviour. In order to fulfil our need to contribute to the world, some inner development is required. 'Fortunately, modern research shows that the inner abilities we need to face and overcome these complex challenges can be developed. What is missing is a keen insight into what abilities, qualities or skills we need to foster among individuals, groups and organisations that play crucial roles in working to fulfil these visions.'



Typical situation

Often you have several tasks to fulfil at the same time, like presenting the results of a group task while writing a paper and studying for an upcoming exam.

You feel overwhelmed, want to be perfect in every challenge you face. You overthink the requirements, compare yourself with your fellow students, and sometimes you struggle with thoughts like *'Am I really good enough for this?'* You may find yourself recalling past mistakes in your exams, which intensifies negative thoughts and emotions.

You would love to contribute your ideas to the group because they have the potential to change knowledge in this field for many people, but you are unsure about yourself, your strengths and abilities, making it feel more comfortable to hold back and rely on other students' capabilities.

Helpful questions

What is the most important goal for a sustainable world?

What first step can you take in your daily life to contribute to this goal?

What are you willing to do for the greater good, even if it is uncomfortable for you in some way?

First actions to make changes

- 1 Be open and cultivate a learning mindset: Actively seek feedback from others and view it as an opportunity for growth rather than criticism. Incorporate constructive feedback to improve your skills and performance. Cultivate a habit of lifelong learning by staying curious and seeking out new knowledge and experiences. This could involve reading books, taking courses, attending workshops, or engaging in discussions with experts in your field. Be willing to try new things and step outside your comfort zone. Experimentation fosters creativity and innovation, allowing you to explore different approaches and discover what works best for you.
- 2 Practise trust in the good intentions of others: Entrust others with tasks and responsibilities, allowing them to demonstrate their capabilities and build your confidence in their abilities. Provide clear instructions, offer support when needed, and allow them the autonomy to complete the task in their own way. Communicate openly: Foster an environment of open communication where team members feel comfortable sharing their ideas, concerns, and feedback. Encourage transparency and honesty in all interactions, which builds trust by demonstrating mutual respect and integrity. Recognise and celebrate the achievements of others, whether big or small. Showing appreciation for their efforts reinforces trust and encourages continued collaboration and contribution to the team's goals.
- 3 Practise empathy and compassion: Engage in active listening by fully concentrating on others when they speak, giving them your full attention, and demonstrating understanding through verbal and non-verbal cues. This shows that you value their perspective and are empathetic to their experiences. Put yourself in their shoes: Make an effort to understand the feelings and perspectives of others by imagining yourself in their situation. Consider their emotions, motivations, and challenges, which can help you respond with empathy and compassion rather than judgment or indifference. Show compassion by offering support and assistance to those in need. Whether it is lending a listening ear, providing practical help, or offering words of encouragement, demonstrating empathy through actions can make a meaningful difference in someone's life.

