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# Mental Well-being on Campus — The Forum for You

The online forum  
booklet for  
further reading

# Mental Well-being on Campus — The Forum for Students

A guide for the prevention of mental health issues  
and for the improvement of mental health literacy



A programme by:



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## Welcome

### Dear students!

We are incredibly pleased to meet you—be it online since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the lecture hall or via this booklet.

For some of you, a lot of the information provided here is new because the topic of mental health is still not immediately relevant. Others are concerned with it more directly—maybe through their friends or family. And others still are right in the middle of it being personally affected themselves. We would like to welcome you all to “Mental Well-being on Campus”! We are sure that each of you will find something useful here, and we are really looking forward to our mutual exchange.

“Mental Well-being on Campus” has been around since 2014. Over 100 universities and colleges have already taken part in it—even including one in New York. We at Irrsinnig Menschlich, known in English as *Madly Human*, have developed this unique forum here in Leipzig, in Germany. What drives our work?—Well, it is your great feedback!

Our booklet is structured just like our online forums. As you can see from the screenshot, our “Mental Well-being on Campus” programme is presented by a team of two—a professional and a personal expert. Our mission: to inform, to educate and to establish contact as equal partners with people from the stigmatised group. This has been proven to be the most effective way to reduce the stigma attached to mental illness and to fight prejudices and discrimination against people with mental health issues.

## “Mental Well-being on Campus” in a nutshell

Through our programme, we turn the mental crises experienced by those in higher education into something that can be openly discussed, and we improve the health literacy of students and staff members. By this, we mean that we aim to reduce anxieties and prejudices, boost confidence, share knowledge, reduce drop-out rates and promote academic success. “Mental Well-being on Campus” has a universal and secondary preventive effect: we seek both to bring about personal change at a behavioural and a structural level and to give impetus to the promotion of prevention work and health support in higher education more broadly.

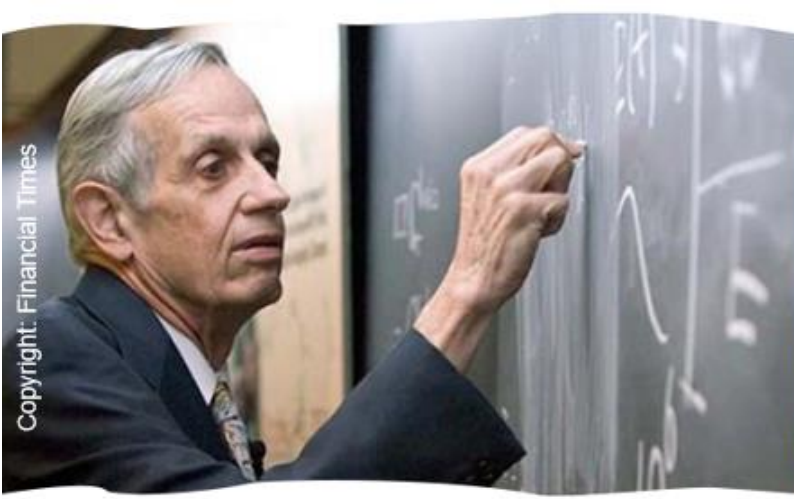
### With “Mental Well-being on Campus” we want to

- bring you confidence when pursuing your studies and help you to face life with hope and self-belief.
- share our experiences and become smarter together.
- create an atmosphere with you at your educational institution where it is normal to speak openly about mental health issues, find solutions together and promote mental well-being!

You are shapers of the future! You have an influence on how we as a society deal with mental health issues and how we take control of our lives with all their highs and lows. We are all able to overcome difficulties and to grow through our experiences. It feels good to know this with certainty, right?

### About us

Since our foundation in 2000, we at *Madly Human* have been motivating teenagers and young adults with our prevention programmes in the field of mental health. We turn psychological crises in school, in higher education and at the workplace into something that can be openly discussed. By doing this, we have taken up a highly relevant issue which has not really been given the necessary attention in society yet, although it imposes a massive burden on families and leads to personal misery as well as causing extremely high societal costs. Our programmes' notable effectiveness can be attributed especially to the opportunity students have to meet people who have overcome their own mental health crises. All of our programmes have been evaluated and awarded many times. The German-language version of our programme “Mental? So What! Good mental health at school” has been extremely successful.



## Understanding: Data + facts

### In good company + Out of line + In the prime of life

Here, you see two (world-)famous personalities who were students once—just like you.

**John Forbes Nash**, Nobel Memorial Prize Laureate in Economics. Through the film “A Beautiful Mind”, which won four Academy Awards, he became known to a worldwide audience. John Nash, the genius mathematician, was diagnosed with schizophrenia as a young man. He died in 2015—not of his mental illness, but in a car crash.

**Miriam Meckel**. At the age of 31, she was Germany’s youngest professor. Later, she became Editor-in-Chief of the weekly business news magazine *Wirtschaftswoche*. She was one of the first public figures in Germany to speak openly about suffering from burnout and depression. You can read about this in her moving book *Briefe an mein Leben* (Letters to my life) which has been made into a feature film. Today, she is Director of the Institute for Media and Communication Management at the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland.

Miriam Meckel and John Forbes both strongly voiced their opposition to the stigmatisation, social exclusion and discrimination experienced by people with mental health issues! Their and our message to you:





## Facts about the mental health of students

Researchers have concluded that **1 in 4 students** suffer from extreme stress—women even more so than men!



Signs of this can be **a lack of self-esteem, depressive moods** and **worries**.  
Constant negative stress and tension exacerbate mental health problems.



Judging from the figures provided by health insurance companies, about 1 in every 6 students has mental health issues.

However, international studies indicate that the number of students affected by mental health issues is in fact a lot higher than this since relatively few of them seek help, get support and are diagnosed with a mental health condition.



### The most common conditions

Depression, anxiety disorders, addiction. When someone suffers from a mental illness it influences the whole person: thoughts, emotions, behaviour. The illness exerts an ever greater control over you. This means you are less and less able to deal with your everyday life (studies, education, family) until you reach a point where you cannot cope at all anymore.



## What makes it even harder

Mental health problems are more or less invisible.

Depression in particular has many faces—often quite an ordinary one.

**75 percent of all cases of mental illness begin before the age of 24**, during childhood and adolescence. About one third of students already have mental health issues when they start their studies; they have experienced mental ill health during their time at school and bring it with them into the next stage of their education.

Good to know

**75 %**

of all cases of mental illness  
begin before the age of 24

**8–10 years**

pass by between the symptoms first appear  
and their treatment

Yet often years pass until those affected look for help or find it. This has to do with the burden of stigmatisation, prejudice and fear associated with mental illnesses and facing those affected by them. Unclear healthcare provision structures only make the situation worse. These factors keep many people from speaking openly about their mental health problems and getting help early.

**P.S.** Imagine waking up with heartache! Would you wait that long to talk about it?

## Conclusion

If mental health issues already start as early as childhood and adolescence, prevention and health promotion in schools and higher education institutions need to become a given. This is because preventing mental illnesses and seeking help early can avert permanent unhappiness and can lead to a good and satisfying life!

## The consequences of mental health issues during studies

According to self-assessments by students, of all health-related impairments, those relating to mental health have the greatest impact on academic success.

An above-average number of students with mental health impairments have difficulties with accomplishing tasks within a certain time frame, e.g. the prescribed workload per term or the large number of exams.

The fear of rejection, stigmatisation and negative experiences with speaking openly makes communicating with lecturers, fellow students and administrative staff difficult.

Almost 30 percent of students drop out of colleges and universities each year. Many of them drop out because of mental health problems!



**Watch out:** thoughts of suicide are widespread among students, often in combination with and caused by mental health issues! Less than half of all the students speaking openly about their own experience of suicidal ideation or serious mental illness have ever had professional treatment. This is another reason why “Mental Well-being in Higher Education” exists: we want to give you courage and provide you with information so that you can support each other and know where to get help.

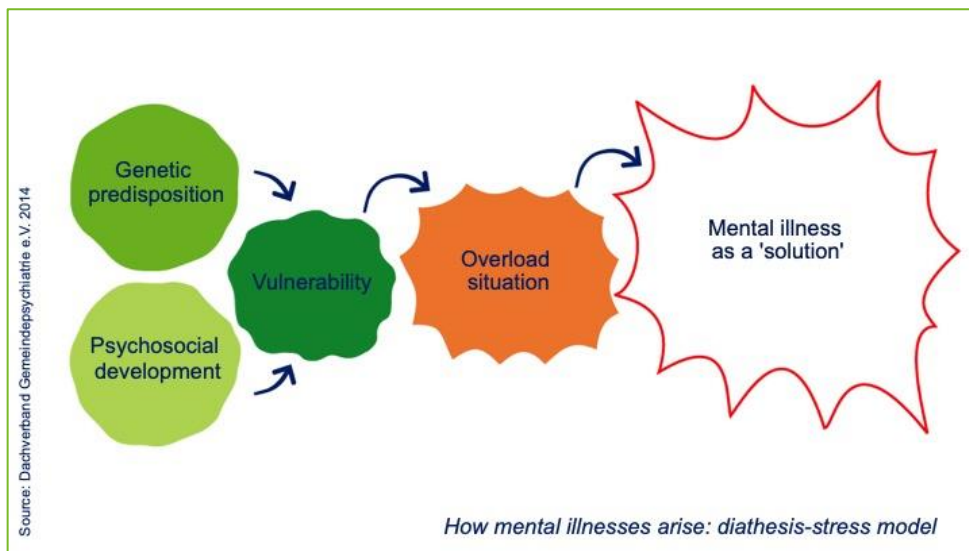
When it comes to answering the question why students suffer from psychological stress, it is important to point out their studies' role in this. But studying per se does not make people ill. Quite a lot of students are already displaying symptoms of mental stress when they start their studies. They wish they had received information on mental crises when they were still in school.

## How mental health issues develop

Many factors play their part in this. There is not one particular reason.

Every person can experience mental health issues. Mental illness has always been a widely observed phenomenon. It is a part of our existence. Depression, addiction and anxiety disorders are widespread diseases today.

Here, you see an explanatory model, the diathesis-stress model:



**Genetic predisposition:** we are predisposed to many diseases. The members of some families are prone to upset stomachs, while other people tend to take everything too much to heart. Yet others are repeatedly afflicted with depression.

**Psychosocial development:** many children grow up experiencing violence, abuse, neglect, lack of support, the early death of their parents, illness, war, forced migration, etc. They have to shoulder grown-up responsibilities from a very early age. This can lead to a lack of confidence in one's own abilities, negative coping mechanisms and overstraining oneself.

**Vulnerability:** some people are more vulnerable than others. Life challenges us: we experience stress time and time again. Stress and how we deal with it affects our health. We can become ill if we experience too much negative stress or distress. We are constantly alert and feel tense. Our motivation decreases, we feel exhausted and have no resilience left.

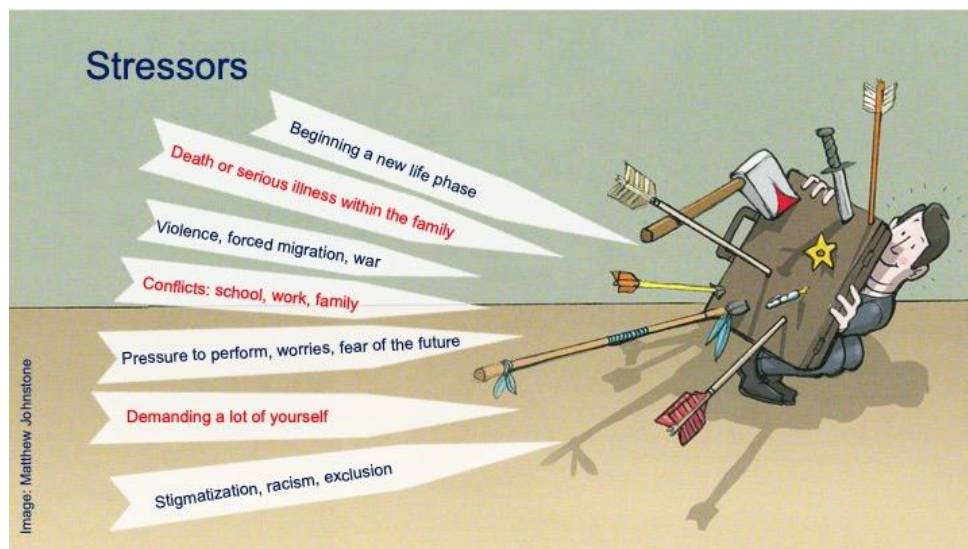
If we are constantly tense and not able to recover, our capacity for hard work decreases further and further. The brain is constantly trying to react to this situation and to restore a balance. During this process, negative coping mechanisms can become permanent. Negative thought spirals are typical of depression.

**All this together can lead to mental overload. Psychological crises and conditions can develop.**

## Another word about stress

Stress is the main trigger for mental health issues. Sure—we need stress; it has a natural function. The body releases energy enabling us to react to challenges.

For us humans, however, it is important to find a healthy balance between tension and relaxation.



## Typical stressors

- Illness or death in the family.
- Constant arguments and unresolved conflicts with fellow students or colleagues. The fear of being excluded from the community!
- Stigmatisation, racism, discrimination. Various factors can cause people to be prejudiced: mental health, sexual orientation, gender, skin colour.

**P.S.** Your studies provide a good testing ground for finding the individual stress management and working methods that suit you. They are important for a worthwhile life and especially for your professional development.



**What triggers negative stress in you and what do you do to restore your balance?**

# Warning signs & coping strategies



- Worries & anxieties
- Hypersensitivity
- Restlessness
- Indecision
- Social withdrawal
- Self-starvation / Emotional eating
- Exhaustion
- Weaker academic or work performance
- Insomnia
- Self medication (alcohol, drugs, online media)
- Suicidal thoughts

## Recognising: Warning signs of a mental crisis

From time to time, everybody experiences rough patches in life. Worries and anxieties are a part of our day-to-day existence. If these warning signs last for several days or even weeks, you should consult a doctor—better early than late.

### Typical coping strategies

#### Self-medication

Many people consume substances like drugs, alcohol or tablets in an attempt to get a grip on negative feelings and difficulties like pain, inner restlessness, tension, insomnia or lack of concentration. Such substances have either a stimulating or a calming effect on the nervous system. Additionally, there are behavioural addictions like addiction to media, sex or work. These solutions come with an extremely high cost: the brain gets damaged, there are other long-term physical and mental health consequences, an addiction develops, families break apart, etc.

**P.S. Do yourself a huge favour—make the most of your life, and avoid drugs.**



## **Happy face**

We humans often try as hard as we can to keep up appearances and to put on a happy face. This costs us a lot of energy which we actually need for our recovery.

## **Self-imposed isolation**

Many people withdraw and hope that their problems will solve themselves with time. However, this can prolong the symptom duration and could worsen the situation.

## **Self-harming**

Self-harming acts as an outlet for unbearable feelings like inner emptiness, inner pressure, tension or inner chaos. Sometimes people hurt themselves because they hate themselves and want to punish themselves, or as a cry for help.

## **Suicidal thoughts**

The main reasons for suicidal ideation are feelings of hopelessness, lack of social support, mental health issues and a personal tendency towards depressive thinking. Other reasons are academic pressure, stress and a compulsion to do well.

**P.S.** There is an urgent need for suicide prevention programmes at educational institutions. If your own college or university doesn't already have one, you could start a campaign.

First step: admitting to yourself that there is a problem.

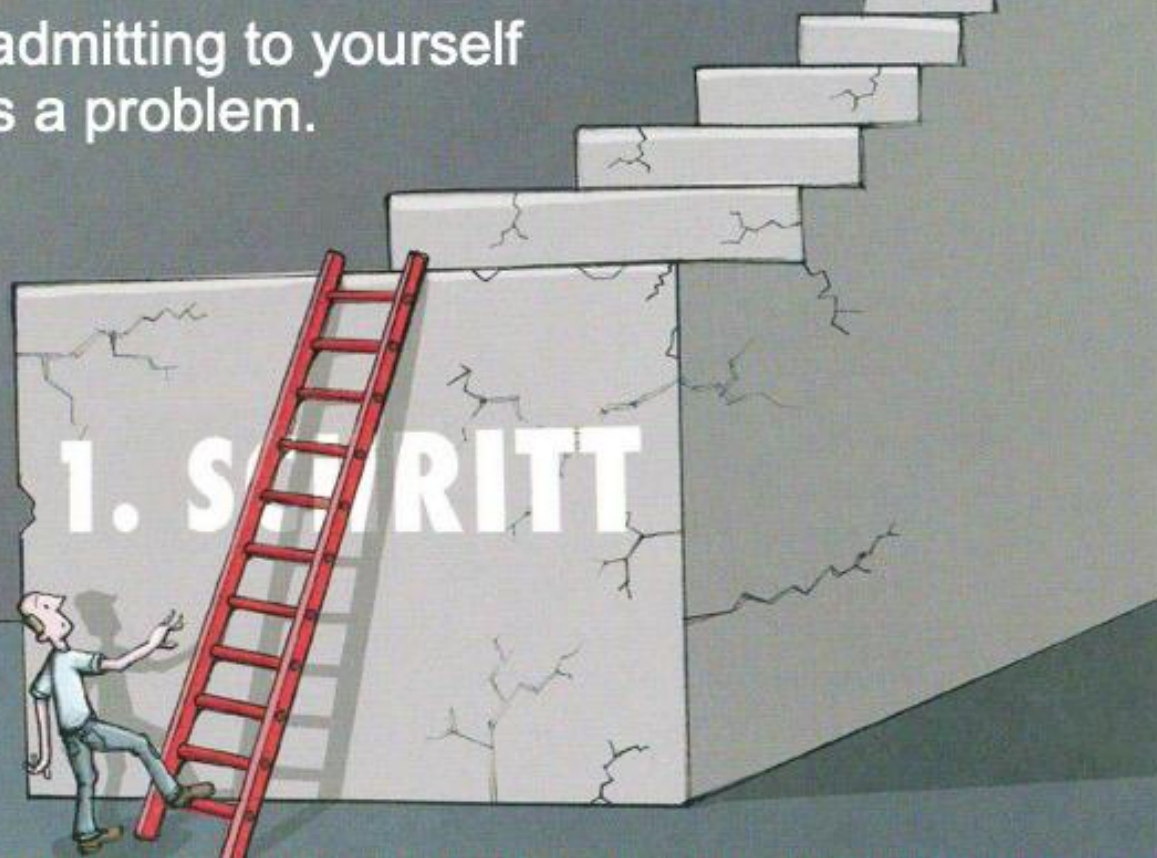


Image: Matthew Johnstone

## Verbalising: Looking for help is difficult

The first step towards help is often the most difficult one. It demands the most from us. This is why it is also the most important one.

We will probably take many smaller steps after that. We might take a step forward and another one back. With patience, persistence, support and intent, we will make progress! Try dividing a problem into small chunks. Many people who have tried this approach say that it even helped them unearth previously unknown resources.

### Why looking for help is so difficult

One of the main reasons for this is the stigma attached both to mental health issues and the people affected by them. When it comes to showing our “happy face”, the face other people see in public, we humans are often brilliant actors. With the energy we put into this we could probably operate power plants!

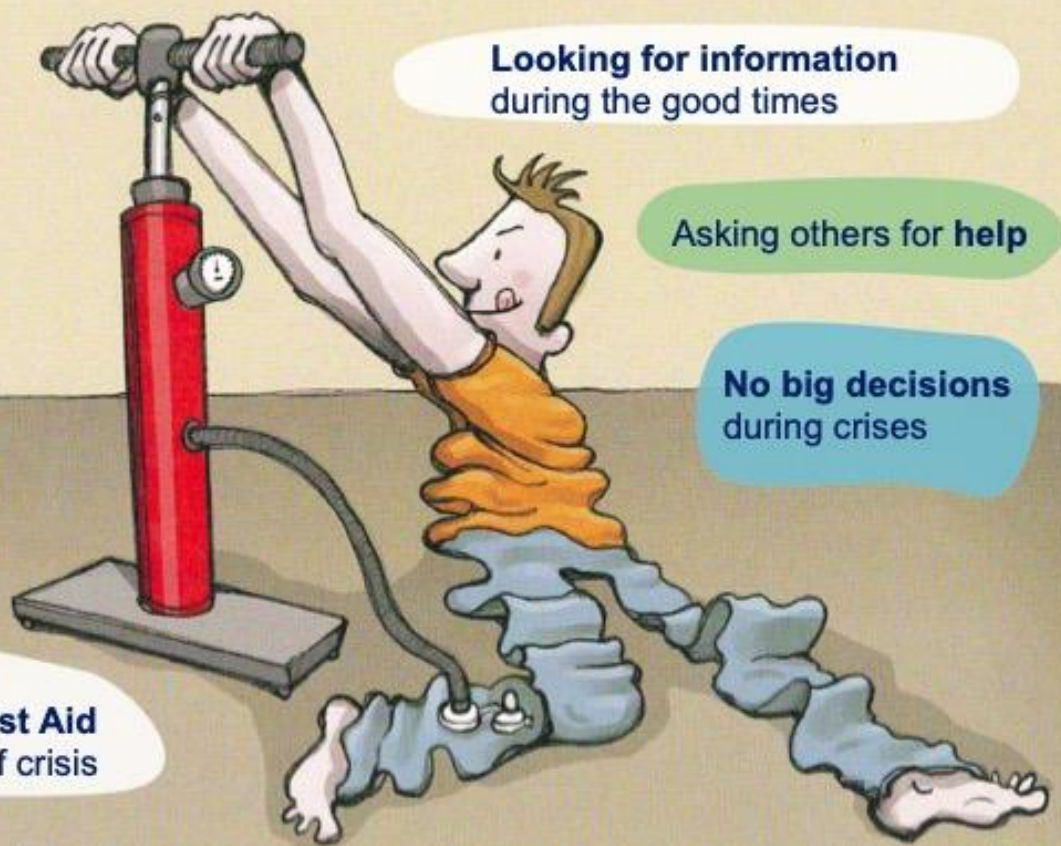


### Why do we behave like this? There are many reasons.

- Because we are ashamed and do not understand ourselves.
- Because we are insecure, because it hurts, because we do not want to be weak and because we do not want to be a burden to anybody.
- Because we live in a meritocracy: for some, the idea of being a 'non-achiever' is unthinkable and causes strong feelings of embarrassment.
- Because we are afraid of perhaps having to live in a psychiatric clinic for the rest of our lives, of being medicated and never recovering again.
- Because many people still think that people with mental health issues are unpredictable, violent, responsible for their illness and incompetent, and that they lack discipline and self-control.
- Because we are afraid that other people will cease to accept, value and love us, and that we will stop playing a useful part in the community.
- **Because we are afraid that we will stop being part of the community and that we will experience isolation!**

### Conclusion

Mental crises and conditions are normal. In most cases, the consequences of mental health issues are worse than the illness itself. But it does not have to be like this! Speak about it, educate others and seek help early enough.



## Preventing: Protective factors

### Making provisions for difficult times during the good times.

During the good times, have a look at the people, things, surroundings and hobbies that do your heart and soul good, make you happy and carry you through hard times. For many people, it is belonging to a good community, it is movement, inspiration, relaxation and a good sleep, and, of course, it is also knowing where to find help. If you practice making provisions during the good times, you will be able to use them in bad times.

- Structure your daily life as a student so that it stays manageable.
- Accept the limits of your ability to cope with stress.
- Speak about this with other students.
- During times of crisis, do not make important decisions about things like dropping out, changing courses, etc.
- Start to feel sympathy with yourself and treat yourself carefully.

**P.S.** Often, we are our own best critics.





## Time to put together your own Mental Health First Aid Kit.

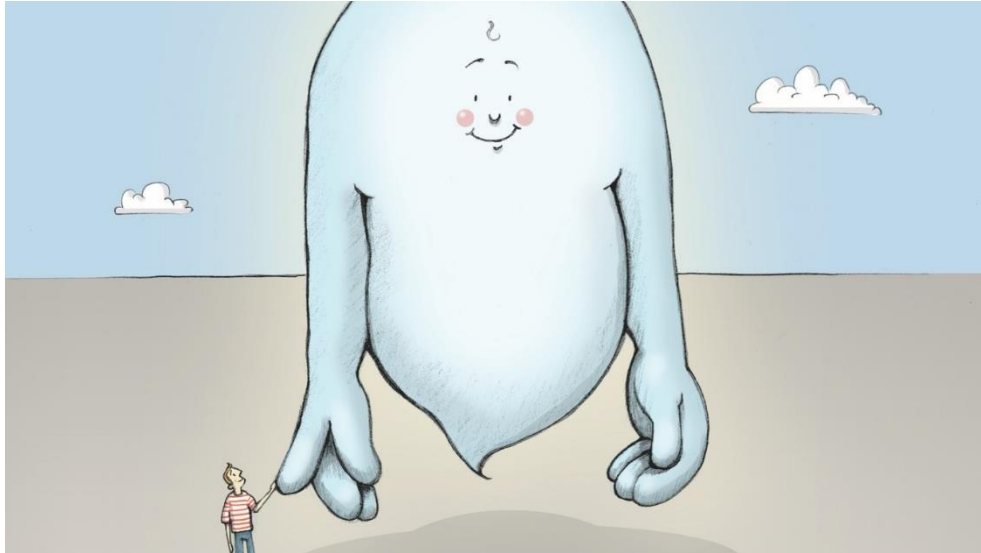
**Think of your time as a student as an opportunity:** no matter what is going on in your life at the moment—we hope we can give you a sense of direction, help you to feel optimistic and possibly make you smile. We also wish you good health, wherever this booklet finds you.



**Keep on moving:** research has shown that getting enough movement, in the open air if possible, is very effective for treating mild and moderate depression or anxiety!



**Get involved:** give time to something that is bigger than yourself—a good cause, a community, the environment, your family, etc. When we give something of ourselves, life gives us something in return. We feel connected and satisfied. Life makes more sense.

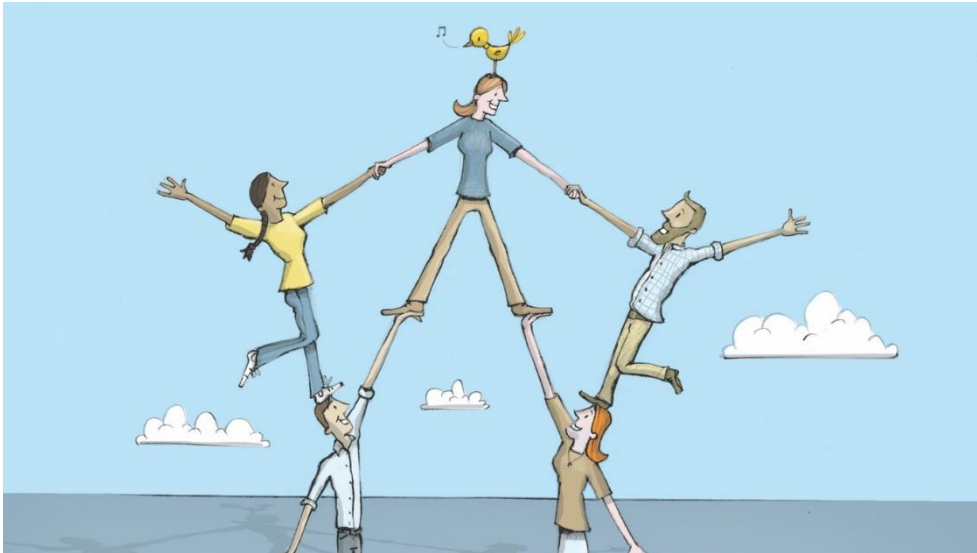


**Relax:** computers and suchlike demonstrate wonderfully how inventive and determined humans can be. Unfortunately, they often keep us from experiencing “real life” and from getting in contact with others. It is a form of stimulation and distraction that can lead to addiction. Technology is awesome, but, in order to really turn on in life, we have to turn off our electronic devices now and again.



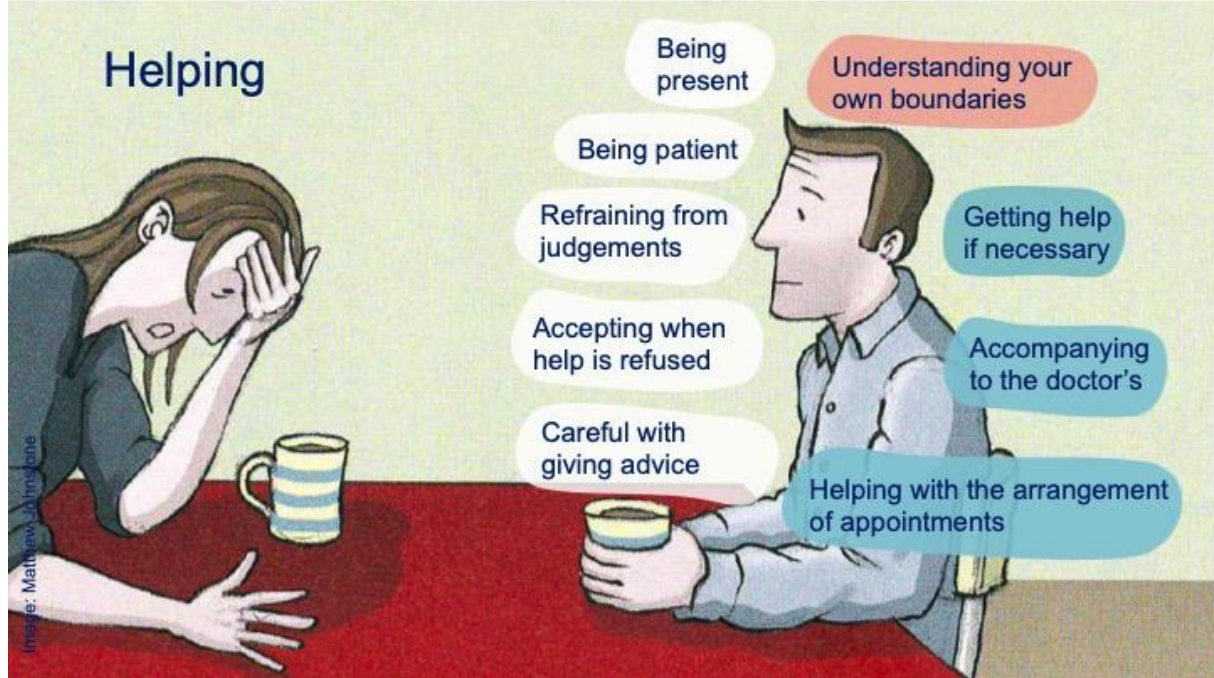


**Keep good company:** we cannot choose our family—but we can choose our friends! People with a solid social network are much less prone to stress-related disorders. By this, we mean a handful of real friends, not 200 Instagram contacts. Friends are there for us and they listen to us when we have issues to deal with. This is a small safety net for bad times.



**Sleep well:** make your bed a nice place. Perform bedtime rituals, do not let the smart phone come with you into your bedroom. And do **not** think of sleep as a means of boosting your capacity to perform well! Sleep should simply be there to let you get some rest.





## Getting help: Contact persons

A mental illness affects the whole person: emotions, thoughts and behaviour. This is why it is so hard for those affected to understand what is wrong with them, to find words for it and to confide in someone. They are in a state of confusion, chaos, fear, isolation. For people who want to help but have never experienced mental health issues themselves, it is difficult to imagine being in this state, which then also makes it difficult to understand what's happening. Many people want to help, but they are understandably afraid of doing something wrong, which leads to them doing nothing at all.

**The good news!** There is not much you can do wrong—apart from doing nothing at all. What people in psychological crises need the most are orientation, structure and relationships. We as helpers are innately very well-equipped for making this happen.

**We have eyes to see, ears to hear, open hands to offer help or comfort with a hug, and a voice to ask: how can I help you? What do you need?**

## First aid in Germany

**Emergency telephone number: 112** in case of acute psychological crisis, such as suicidal behaviour, for instance.

**Crisis hotline:** you can call this number 0800 111 0 111 / 0800 111 0 222

**Counselling centres at your college or university:**

<https://www.studentenwerke.de/de/beratungsangebote>

**In your place of residence:** the website of your local government public health department offers an overview of the support services available for people in psychological crises.

**Find a (foreign language) therapist:**

<https://www.psychosuchsuche.de/pid/search> (“Behandlung in Fremdsprache”)

**Support groups:** <http://www.nakos.de/informationen/basiswissen/selbsthilfegruppen/>

**Peer support:** <https://www.uniklinik-ulm.de/psychiatrie-und-psychotherapie-ii/aktuelles-veranstaltungen/aktuelles/detailansicht/news/upsides-bessere-unterstuetzung-fuer-menschen-mit-schweren-psychischen-erkrankungen-durch-genesungsbeg.html>

**Digital mental health care:** there are now many services on offer. They cannot replace therapy, but they can provide support when, for example, someone has to wait a long time for a therapy placement or when they need help to avoid a relapse after undergoing therapy.

**Multilingual, evidence-based website on depression:** [www.ifightdepression.com](http://www.ifightdepression.com)



Quelle: Matthew Johnstone 2015. Resilienz

## Conclusion

Well, we've reached the end of our journey, we've stopped at all the stations and we've acquired new views and insights.

Stand your ground and do not forget: no matter how old we are, we humans can always develop, change and improve ourselves, support each other and get involved—preferably in good company!

We at **Madly Human** offer you our heartfelt best wishes for an exciting period of study in excellent health.

## Reading suggestions and links

More information about *Madly Human* and “Mental Well-being on Campus”:

<https://www.irrsinnig-menschlich.de/psychisch-fit-studieren/>.

*The Origins of Happiness, The Science of Well-Being over the Life Course*, E.A. Clark et al. (2018). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

*Resilienz: Wie man Krisen übersteht und daran wächst*. Matthew Johnstone (2015). München: Verlag Antje Kunstmann.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3dgaN9M86lg&feature=youtu.be>



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