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Mental health concerns due to COVID-19 measures

(How to stay emotionally healthy during restrictions)

When life is disrupted due to unexpected health restrictions imposed on us (although we may not feel particularly nervous in the beginning) our mind is challenged to slowly shift into altered state as it struggles to adjust to the new situation. Soon we may notice mild or moderate mood changes, such as becoming sad, agitated or frustrated as usual daily activities are disrupted (restricted) one way or another. We are very habitual beings so when cannot go on with life as usual (e.g.: attending classes, carry on with regular social activities) we do adjust eventually, but not without resistance.

Factors potentially effecting general mood may include:

- » Fear of uncertainty
- » Intensifying homesickness
- » Worry about personal health and safety if contracting the virus
- » Feeling of loneliness and isolation
- » Frustration about not being in control of free movements/actions/planning
- » Fear of loved ones getting sick and not being there for them
- » Disorientation/confusion (about student roles or purpose or short-term goals)
- » Worries about potential disruption of academic plan/advancement
- » Frustration about daily functioning in a confined space (particularly when living with flatmates)
- » Adjustment difficulties to online-learning platforms
- » Grief of loved ones we lost due to illness
- » Potential financial consequences of the restrictions
- » Preexisting mental conditions could intensify
- » Loosing interest in things we enjoyed earlier, experiencing indifference
- » Procrastination tendencies become stronger

As you can see such factors tend to cause discomfort simultaneously which naturally leads to feeling edgy, frustrated or even anxious when restrictions are in

place on the long run. Adjusting to such unusual way of living mostly unconsciously consumes a lot of emotional energy. So proper coping mechanisms are necessary in order to stay mentally and emotionally healthy and flexible. However, it all begins with being insightful and more attentive of our personal stress responses.

What you need to be aware of:

- ✓ Experiencing crisis in a foreign country tends to be even more stressful (energy consuming) than going through similar situations in your home country.
- ✓ Do not think you are on vacation even if it feels that way now! Remind yourself: you are not attending classes solely due to a worldwide epidemic.
- ✓ Comply with the law – usually there are serious consequences when emergency restrictions are broken – such as monetary fine, legal prosecution or even deportation which could seriously interfere with your local academic career.
- ✓ Be aware that others around you are also stretched out of their comfort zone so they could behave irrationally or impulsively, but you do not need to follow suit.

Things we can do to preserve mental/emotional health!

- **Set up a concrete schedule/plan** for a foreseeable period (e.g.: for 2 weeks) for yourself. Dedicate larger blocks of time for studying on your own (Do not assume automatically that exams can be completed without proper knowledge just because of the epidemic.)
- **Integrate regular physical exercise** in your weekly calendar (preferably cardio workout at least twice a week.)
- **Avoid buying into horror stories** (including fake news, or rumors circulating around the university that are not officially confirmed.) When we are deprived of information, we fall for such traps thinking “any news is better than none.”
- **Surf your urges** – separate what you really need (that is necessary for your wellbeing) from what you would wish or want to – be mindful of your impulses.



- **Form or participate in study-groups** and study buddy relationships to enjoy a company and be productive in the same time.
- **Create choices for yourself while quarantined.** When we feel we are deprived of something (subjectively) important, we often fix our focus on the given object we lack, which tends to further our frustration. Therefore, it is more adaptive to shift focus to those things you could have a choice about or have control over.
- **Be mindful of your feelings, acknowledge them** – you don't need to react to them immediately. Practice emotional control.
- **Pay attention to eating healthy and getting enough sleep (7-9 hours.)** In crisis our mind switches over to a kind of survival mode. In order to function well, these two components need to be taken seriously to be more resilient.
- **Make effort to keep in touch with your social support group from home.** They are a valuable source of continuous support for you. Utilize technology to remain part of your support network. Share your concerns and how you are feeling with a friend or family member. Maintain healthy relationships. Maintain a sense of hope and positive thinking.
- **Avoid excessive exposure to media coverage of COVID-19.** Make time to unwind and remind yourself that strong feelings will fade. Take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories. It can be upsetting to hear about the crisis and see images repeatedly. Try to do some other activities you enjoy to return to your normal life.

Another important recognition in life that this virus reminds us of, is that life is not static at all; it is rather dynamic. No matter what stage of our lives we are in and no matter what we may have in common with others, change is always constant. Even more important is the fact that change is inevitable so accepting it will tickle the cooperation side of our psyche.

Self-Defeating Thought Patterns

So being mindful (self-observant) means that we monitor our thoughts. Thoughts trigger feelings and feelings can trigger thoughts. Thus, engaging in assumptions could leave us vulnerable to the following self-defeating thought patterns:

- **All or nothing thinking.** “I am a total failure when my performance is not perfect.”

- **Seeing only dark clouds.** Disaster lurks around every corner and comes to be expected. For example, a single negative detail, piece of criticism, or passing comment darkens all reality. “I got a C on one chem test, now I'll never get into a good PhD program.”
- **Magnification of negative/minimization of positive.** Good things don't count nearly as much as bad ones. “I know I won five chess games in a row but losing this one makes me feel terrible about myself.”
- **Uncritical acceptance of emotions as truth.** “I feel ugly so it must be true.”
- **Overemphasis on “should” statements.** “Should” statements are often perfect-ionistic and reflective of others' expectations rather than expressive of your own wants and desires. “Everyone should have a career plan when they come to college. I don't so there must be something wrong with me.”
- **Labeling.** Labeling is a simplistic process and often conveys a sense of blame. “I am a loser and it's my fault.”

In order to be more aware of your thoughts we recommend you to try out some mental health apps that keep your focus on the things you can influence, namely what you do in the next few hours/days, or what you need in order to progress with your studies right now.

1. **What's Up** is an amazing free app that uses Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) methods to help you cope with Depression, Anxiety, Stress, and more.
2. **SAM APP** - a self-help anxiety app to help you manage anxiety www.uwe.ac.uk/anxiety
3. **Headspace** - Program of mindfulness delivered in 10-minute sessions. Free basic version with further subscription options. <https://www.headspace.com/>

Available on-campus services for you

If you feel that you have additional questions regarding this topic or you struggle with a specific personal problem feel free to contact the Mental Health Counseling Service, which is a confidential (outsourced) on-campus service for students available in online counseling format while the campus is closed. Feel free to set up an appointment via e-mail: hs@human-service.hu or through the online student portal & booking system at: www.mentalhub.hu.