

Coping While Far From Home

Practical Support for Students Affected by War and Armed Conflict

Being a university student can be challenging even in stable times. When your home country is affected by war or armed conflict, the emotional burden can become significantly heavier. Worrying about the safety of loved ones, exposure to distressing news, uncertainty about the future, and feelings of helplessness are common experiences.

The reactions you may be experiencing are normal responses to an abnormal and highly stressful situation.

This brochure offers practical guidance to help you stabilize your emotional well-being, manage stress more effectively, and maintain focus on your studies while being far from home. It does not aim to eliminate your pain, but to help you relate to it in ways that reduce unnecessary suffering and strengthen psychological resilience.

Common Emotional Reactions

When people are exposed to prolonged uncertainty or threat, the body's stress system becomes activated. This system is sometimes referred to as the **"fight-flight-freeze" response**. It prepares the body to respond to danger by increasing alertness, heart rate, and stress hormone levels.

When this system remains active for extended periods, it can lead to emotional and physical symptoms such as fatigue, difficulty concentrating, sleep disturbances, and heightened anxiety.

Students affected by war-related stress commonly report:

- Persistent worry about family members and friends
- Overthinking and mental rumination
- Difficulty concentrating on studies
- Sleep disturbances and fatigue
- Emotional numbness or emotional overload
- Increased anxiety after consuming news or social m.

Some individuals may also experience reactions related to traumatic stress, such as:

- intrusive or repetitive distressing thoughts
- heightened alertness or feeling "on edge"
- exaggerated startle responses
- emotional detachment or numbness
- sudden waves of sadness, fear, or anger

These responses are not signs of weakness. They are natural reactions of the nervous system when facing prolonged uncertainty and perceived threat.

Survivor's Guilt

Some students may experience feelings of guilt for being safe while loved ones remain in danger. This experience is sometimes referred to as *survivor's guilt*. It may include thoughts such as:

- "I should be there with them."
- "Why am I safe while others are suffering?"

These thoughts are common during crisis situations. Feeling safe does not mean you have abandoned others. Taking care of your own well-being allows you to remain emotionally available and capable of supporting those you care about.

Reducing Overthinking and Excessive Worry

Overthinking is often the mind's attempt to gain control over an uncontrollable situation. While understandable,

constant rumination can increase distress rather than reduce it.

Helpful strategies include:

Name the process: Gently remind yourself: *"This is worry, not reality."* Labelling the mental process helps reduce its intensity.

Set boundaries for worry: Choose a specific 15–20 minute "worry period" each day. If worries arise outside this time, write them down and return to them later.

Shift from "What if?" to "What now?": Focus on what is realistically within your control today.

Managing Exposure to News and Social Media

Constant exposure to dramatic or graphic news can significantly increase anxiety and feelings of helplessness.

Consider the following strategies:

- Limit news consumption to specific times of the day (e.g.: once in the morning and once in the evening)
- Avoid checking news immediately before sleep
- Choose reliable news sources rather than continuous social media scrolling

Staying informed is important, but **constant exposure is not necessary and can increase psychological stress.**

Calming Your Nervous System

When the stress system becomes overactivated, simple physiological techniques can help the body return to a calmer state.

Slow breathing

Slow breathing helps activate the body's calming system.

Try the following exercise:

- inhale slowly for 4 seconds
- exhale slowly for 6 seconds
- repeat for several minutes

Longer exhalations signal safety to the nervous system and help reduce physiological arousal.

Grounding Exercise (5-4-3-2-1 Technique)

Grounding exercises help bring attention back to the present moment when the mind becomes overwhelmed. Take a slow breath and notice:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can physically feel
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste

This exercise can help reduce anxiety and interrupt cycles of overthinking.

Strengthening Self-Awareness and Emotional Regulation

Self-awareness helps you respond to stress rather than becoming overwhelmed by it.

You may find it helpful to:

- Ask yourself regularly: *What am I feeling right now? Where do I feel it in my body? What do I need right now?*
- Keep a brief journal to externalize thoughts instead of holding them inside.
- Accept emotional fluctuations. Feeling okay one moment and distressed the next is a normal pattern under prolonged stress.

Some individuals may occasionally experience moments of feeling emotionally detached or as if the world feels unreal. These reactions can occur when the mind becomes overwhelmed and usually decrease as safety

and stability increase.

Supporting Your Well-Being

Small daily habits can help stabilize mental health during stressful periods:

- Maintain regular sleep routines
- Engage in physical activity or movement
- Eat balanced meals
- Limit caffeine and alcohol
- Stay connected with supportive people
- Set realistic study expectations during difficult times

Sleep difficulties are common during periods of high stress. Maintaining a consistent bedtime routine and reducing screen exposure before sleep can help support better rest.

Staying Connected While Feeling Disconnected

When communication with loved ones becomes limited or uncertain:

- acknowledge the emotional pain of separation
- maintain symbolic connections (writing messages, keeping meaningful objects, personal rituals)
- allow yourself to build supportive relationships locally without guilt

Taking care of yourself does not mean you care less about those at home.

When to Seek Additional Support

Professional support may be helpful if you experience:

- persistent anxiety or low mood lasting several weeks
- severe sleep disturbance
- frequent panic symptoms

- emotional numbness or hopelessness
- difficulty functioning academically or socially

Seeking help is a sign of strength and self-respect.

When Immediate Help May Be Needed

Please seek urgent professional help if you experience:

- thoughts about harming yourself
- inability to care for your basic needs
- overwhelming panic or loss of emotional control
- feeling disconnected from reality

In these situations, professional assistance can provide important support and stabilization.

Available Support Services

The Mental Health Counseling Service is a confidential on-campus service available to students.

You may book an appointment during counseling hours through the following website:

<https://univet.hu/en/student-support-services-at-univet-budapest/counseling-services/>

Students are entitled to six free counseling sessions with a professional mental health counselor.

A Final Thought

You are living through circumstances that would challenge anyone. Taking care of your mental health is not selfish. It is a necessary part of remaining stable, resilient, and capable of continuing your studies and daily life. Even during uncertainty, small acts of self-care, awareness, and connection can help restore a sense of inner stability.

Remember: you are not alone, and support is available.