

# TIPS FOR TAKING CARE OF YOUR PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH

For students in the time of COVID-19



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# WHY THIS BOOKLET?

Psychological health is a state of emotional and social well-being that enables us «to realize our potential, to cope with common life problems, to work successfully and productively, and to be able to contribute to the community”.

The COVID 19 pandemic is a stressor that negatively impacts our psychological health.

Scientific studies<sup>1</sup> show that the COVID-19 pandemic causes significant psychological distress in the population with high levels of anxiety, depression and stress symptoms. This distress is more prevalent among women and young people between the ages of 18 and 30.

This booklet offers you a set of tips and solutions to help you take care of your psychological health.

## CONTACT

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1. Xiong, J., Lipsitz, O., Nasri, F., Lui, L. M. W., Gill, H., Phan, L., ... & McIntyre, R. S. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on mental health in the general population: A systematic review. *Journal of affective disorders*, 277, 55-64

# ASK FOR HELP

The coronavirus disease itself is a source of anxiety and prevention measures lead to changes in daily life that can be stressful and distressing. Everyone reacts differently to the epidemic and the changes it produces. You may feel :

- **Anxiety, worry or fear** related to your own health status or the health status of others; resentment that your friends and family may feel if they need to go into quarantine as a result of contact with you; the experience of monitoring yourself or being monitored by others for signs and symptoms of the disease; uncertainty about the future.
- **Frustration** because you can no longer perform some or all of your daily activities in the same way and about how long you will need to remain in this situation.
- **Anger** if you think you were exposed to the disease because of others' negligence or because you do not understand the measures taken by the government.
- **Loneliness** associated with physical distancing and limited social contact.
- A desire to **use alcohol or other substances** to cope with the situation.
- **Symptoms of depression** such as feelings of hopelessness, changes in appetite, or sleeping habits.

**It is important to be aware of one's psychological health and to be alert to changes in one's emotional state and the appearance of symptoms of distress.**

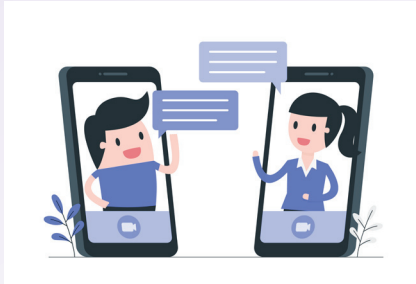


If you feel overwhelmed by emotions such as sadness, loneliness, anxiety, or experience symptoms of extreme stress -such as trouble sleeping, problems with eating too much or too little, or using alcohol or other substances to cope- talking to someone you trust and to a healthcare provider may help.

**There are many support services dedicated and exclusive for students.**

# CONNECT WITH OTHERS

This health crisis and preventive measures impose a physical distance and a limitation of social contacts in terms of number (restriction of recreational activities and meetings in the public space), quality (relations by video or phone) and diversity (avoiding meetings with people outside one's circle).



Social well-being is an important aspect of psychological health<sup>2</sup>. To improve and maintain it, it is important to develop new ways to stay socially connected.

Here are a few examples to stay socially connected :

- **Throw a Zoom party with friends or family.**
- **Connecting with friends can be as simple as enjoying music together. With a Spotify collaborative playlist, you and your friends can add and listen to all your favourite songs anytime, anywhere.**
- **By synchronizing video playback and providing a group chat feature, Netflix Party makes watching movies and TV with your friends easy and fun.**
- **Visit a museum online with a friend : Musée d'Orsay, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Le Louvre**
- **Be active outside with your friends and achieve the perfect combo by cumulating the beneficial effects of social relationships, physical activity and nature<sup>3</sup> on your psychological health!**
- **Get involved in community activities<sup>4</sup>**

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4. Curry, O. S., Rowland, L. A., Van Lissa, C. J., Zlotowitz, S., McAlaney, J., & Whitehouse, H. (2018). Happy to help? A systematic review and meta-analysis of the effects of performing acts of kindness on the well-being of the actor. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 76, 320-329.

# LIMIT YOUR MEDIA EXPOSURE



Media and social network content focused on the health crisis increases the risk of anxiety or depression<sup>5</sup>. Limit social media exposure when content focused on the health crisis.

Be aware that not everything you hear about the coronavirus is true.

Be your own advocate looking to credible sources for information such as WHO. Focus on a few sources of reliable outbreak-related information.

- Find official, useful and up-to-date information on the outbreak
- Key figures, expert interviews, Q&A on Coronavirus in France and worldwide
- Finding reliable indicators to distinguish fake news from real advice
- Check whether information read on social networks or the internet is a rumor
- Reliable information on medication and test for Covid-19

If you want to share information, share fun videos or community activities instead. Sharing all the positive emotions is good for you and allows you to connect and take a step back.

5. Xiong, J., Lipsitz, O., Nasri, F., Lui, L. M. W., Gill, H., Phan, L., ... & McIntyre, R. S. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on mental health in the general population: A systematic review. *Journal of affective disorders*, 277, 55-64

# USE PRACTICAL WAYS TO COPE AND RELAX

It is completely normal to feel stressed during a crisis. There are many effective techniques to reduce stress. We have selected 3 techniques for you. Experience them and decide which one is best for you. Try to practice the technique of your choice 3 times a day.

## PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

### Why ?



One of the ways the body reacts to stress is through muscle tension. Muscle tension can increase stress levels, cause muscle soreness, and make you feel exhausted because contracting muscles consumes a lot of energy. Most of the time, we don't even realize that our muscles are tense, and it's only when we pay attention to certain muscles that we notice tension or discomfort. The jaw, shoulders, back and legs are parts of the body that are often in tension.

Progressive muscle relaxation is a relaxation technique in which you tense specific muscles and then consciously relax them, releasing muscle tension. Therefore, progressive muscle relaxation can be a valuable tool that teaches you to identify and release tension in your body. With this technique you will teach your body and your brain to respond to stress in a more appropriate way<sup>6</sup>.

### How to ?

Sit comfortably and tense different muscles, progressing from the top to the bottom of the body (i.e., starting with the face, then moving up through the neck, shoulders, arms, hands, legs and feet). For each muscle group, tense the muscles hard (e.g., frown as much as possible to tense the forehead muscles) for about five seconds, then release.

6. Gangadharan, P., & Madani, A. H. (2018). Effectiveness of Progressive Muscle Relaxation Techniques on Depression, Anxiety and Stress among Undergraduate Nursing Students. *International Journal of Health Sciences and Research*, 8(2), 155-163.

# DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING

## Why ?

When we become stressed or anxious, our breathing rhythm changes as part of the biological stress response. When this happens we generally take short and shallow breaths from high up in our chest, rather than using our diaphragm. This rapid and shallow breathing that is part of the biological stress response can trigger and help maintain this stress response by warning us that we may be under threat.

Fortunately, we can control our breathing. Taking control of our breathing reduces the effects of the stress response by promoting the relaxation response. Once relaxed, we breathe through our nose in a slow and even manner. Research suggests that by taking control of your breathing, you reduce the likelihood of the stress response starting.

Deliberately breathing in this manner calms the nervous system, which controls our body's functions such as the stress (fight-flight) response. By breathing in this way you use your brain and your breath to communicate to your body that it can relax. This helps you manage stress and anxiety<sup>7</sup>.

## How to ?

Sit on a chair, with your back straight, feet on the ground, hands on your knees. Focus your attention on your breathing by placing one hand on your abdomen and closing your eyes so your mind does not wander.

Breathe in and breathe out slowly. Breathe in on the count of 4, breathe out on the count of 6. You can help yourself by drawing a wave on a piece of paper as you breathe (you move the wave up as you breathe in and down as you breathe out).

Do the exercise for three minutes. If the exercise is too hard at first, reduce the breathe in and out times.

7. Perciavalle, V., Blandini, M., Fecarotta, P., Buscemi, A., Di Corrado, D., Bertolo, L., ... & Coco, M. (2017). The role of deep breathing on stress. *Neurological Sciences*, 38(3), 451-458.



# MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

## Why ?

Mindfulness meditation trains our ability to pay attention and perceive what is present in the moment (our thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, but also the environment and relationships) with a non-judgmental and kind attitude.

During mindfulness meditation, you learn to observe your thoughts, emotions, and body sensations without judging them, which will help you to better understand them. Learning to meditate is like learning any other skill. Think of meditation as if you were working a muscle that you have never really worked before. You need to practice regularly to feel comfortable.

Several studies showed that mindfulness meditation can have a positive impact on physical and mental health. Research shows that mindfulness meditation is effective in reducing stress<sup>8</sup> and anxiety, as well as improving sleep<sup>9</sup>.

## How to ?

You can try mindfulness meditation with Smiling Mind or Headspace.

8. Chiesa, A., & Serretti, A. (2009). Mindfulness-based stress reduction for stress management in healthy people: a review and meta-analysis. *The journal of alternative and complementary medicine*, 15(5), 593-600.

9. Rusch, H. L., Rosario, M., Levison, L. M., Olivera, A., Livingston, W. S., Wu, T., & Gill, J. M. (2019). The effect of mindfulness meditation on sleep quality: a systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1445(1), 5.



# KEEP A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

A good night's sleep, a healthy diet and regular physical activity are essential to maintain and improve your psychological health.



Being physically active on a regular basis is one of the healthiest things we can actually do and integrate into our lives. It improves psychological health<sup>10</sup>, improves sleep, and reduces anxiety and depression.



Like physical activity, a healthy diet not only improves physical health, but is also associated with better psychological health. Several studies show a link between our diet and anxiety and depression. For example, according to one study, a diet based on processed foods (hamburgers, soft drinks, for example) is associated with a higher likelihood of depressive and anxiety symptoms. On the contrary, a diet rich in vegetables, fruit, oily fish and whole grains would reduce the risk of depression by 33%<sup>11</sup> and is associated with a lower risk of anxiety disorders.



Sleep is a basic human need and an essential component of our psychological well-being<sup>12</sup>.

10. Mikkelsen, K., Stojanovska, L., Polenakovic, M., Bosevski, M., & Apostolopoulos, V. (2017). Exercise and mental health. *Maturitas*, 106, 48-56.

11. Jacka, F. N., Pasco, J. A., Mykletun, A., Williams, L. J., Hodge, A. M., O'Reilly, S. L., ... & Berk, M. (2010). Association of Western and traditional diets with depression and anxiety in women. *American journal of psychiatry*, 167(3), 305-311.

12. Lassale, C., Batty, G. D., Baghdadli, A., Jacka, F., Sánchez-Villegas, A., Kivimäki, M., & Akbaraly, T. (2019). Healthy dietary indices and risk of depressive outcomes: a systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies. *Molecular psychiatry*, 24(7), 965-986.

# HERE ARE OUR 3 TIPS TO HELP YOU SLEEP WELL

## #1. PREFER A DIET AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY THAT PROMOTES SLEEP

- **Avoid stimulants after 3pm** (i.e., coffee, energy drinks, other caffeinated drink). Stimulants increase delay to fall asleep and the risk of waking up at night.
- **Avoid alcohol and tobacco close to bed time** : Cigarettes contain nicotine which is a stimulant. If you smoke, you may have difficulty falling asleep, deal with an increased risk of waking up at night and poor sleep quality. Many people drink alcohol in the evening as they believe that it aids sleep. Alcohol may help you get off to sleep, however it can actually disrupt the sleep cycle and leads to poor sleep.
- **Engage in regular exercise** : The practice of daily physical activity improves the quality of sleep. However avoid exercising too close to bedtime.

## # 2. ASSOCIATE YOUR BED WITH SLEEP

- **Establish a sleep routine where you go to bed and get up at the same time each day** : It is very important that you get up and go to bed at the same time each and every day, including weekends, because it has a synchronizing effect on the sleep/wake rhythm.
- **Learn to “catch the wave of sleepiness”**: This means waiting until you start to feel very tired and sleepy before hopping into bed. Yawning, heavy eyelids, stinging eyes, blinking eyes: once you feel these signals, you should not delay going to bed because they indicate the need for sleep. As sleepiness typically comes in waves of 60-90 minutes, going to bed when you are sleepy is better because if you stay awake, it may take some time before you are sleepy again.
- **Don't lie in bed awake** : If you can't get to sleep within 20 minutes - leave your bed and go to another room. Anxiety about being unable to fall asleep will worsen the insomnia. Instead get up and do something relaxing but not stimulating, such as reading or listening to music in dim light. Return to bed only when you feel sleepy and less tense. Try to 'let go' and allow sleep to happen rather than willing it to. Repeat this step as often as necessary during the night. With persistence, this will let your sleep get back to a better pattern and the bed will become a place where you feel comfortable and are sleeping rather than a place of tossing, turning and worrying.

### #3. AVOID MENTAL STIMULATION

- **Avoid pre-bed mental stimulation** : mentally stimulating activities make you feel alert and aroused and cause difficulty falling asleep. Keep in mind that watching television is stimulating because it has both audio and visual information. Additionally, computers and smart phones can delay sleep because the screen light gets interpreted by your body clock as daylight, which delays the release of sleep hormones. At least 30 minutes before going to bed, promote activities that are calm, screen-free and non-stimulating for your senses.
- **Use relaxation strategies before going to bed** : Have you ever noticed that when you put your head on the pillow, all of a sudden, all the things that stress or worry you come to mind? When we disconnect from our activities, our thoughts may focus on all the things we haven't finished or the things that stress us. So to sleep well, we need to fight this cognitive hyperactivity. Techniques such as mindfulness meditation or diaphragmatic breathing are effective ways to relax.

# CHANGE YOUR PERSPECTIVE



The human being is more affected by negative experiences than by positive ones and takes into account negative information more than positive ones. This negativity bias was useful for the survival of our hunter-gatherer ancestors but serves us badly today. The health crisis can increase this negativity bias. The situation can lead you to focus on the things that are going wrong in your life and forget to appreciate all the positive things.

To reorient your attention to the positive, you can :

- Become aware of your strengths<sup>13</sup> and how your strengths can help you cope and help your friends during this crisis.

To help you become aware of your strengths, you can take the VIA test.

After taking the test, ask yourself the following questions:

*What are your top 5 character strengths?*

*How can you use your strengths to stay engaged during distance learning?*

*How can you use your strengths to address the health crisis?*

*How can you use your strengths to help your friends during this crisis?*

- Keep a journal<sup>14</sup> in which you record three positive things that happened to you each day and an explanation of how you contributed to these positive things. To help you fill out your journal, you may want to consider the following:
  - «Think of a time when you did something nice for someone or someone did something nice for you».
  - «Think about what you did your best today.»
  - «Think of something you've done that made you feel really good about yourself.»
  - «Think of a difficult situation that ended well in the end.»

13. Smith, B. W., Ford, C. G., Erickson, K., & Guzman, A. (2020). The Effects of a Character Strength Focused Positive Psychology Course on Undergraduate Happiness and Well-Being. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 1-20

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