



Taking care of your brain

ARIANA [PREMED, TORONTO]

Like physical health, mental health is on a continuum. As university students, we all have experienced stress, anxiety, sadness, or feeling overwhelmed. However, like physical health, mental health can suffer - so it is important to take preventative measures. A 2020 survey (<https://www.ama-assn.org/practice-management/physician-health/physician-burnout-which-medical-specialties-feel-most-stress>) found that on average, 42% of physicians experience burnout; in some specialties, the rate is around 50%. There are three characteristics of burnout: exhaustion, depersonalization (i.e. “compassion fatigue”), and lack of efficacy (i.e. doubting the impact of your work) (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4911781/>). While burnout is undoubtedly complex, maintaining and caring for your mental health now will undoubtedly be helpful. Here are a few “tips” for taking care of your mental health that I wish I learned in first year. (Disclaimer: if you feel like you may be dealing with a mental illness, please seek professional help.)

Tip 1: Take care of physical health

Physical and mental health are related. As Olympic runner Alexi Pappas says, your brain is a body part. Sounds really cliché, but it is important. Think of sleep, for instance - you may find that you are happier or a nicer person to be around when you feel adequately rested. Here are some aspects of physical health to consider:

- **Physical activity** - Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines state that those over 18 should perform 150 minutes a week of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity. The most valuable piece of advice I’ve received is: do something you **like**. If you hate running but love Youtube fitness videos, do the videos. Additionally, it doesn't have to leave you exhausted and nauseous. If you are starting out, build up to a consistent routine (bonus: it helps prevent injury too). Find something that doesn't feel like a chore to do.
- **Sleep** - Canadian guidelines state that those 18-65 should be getting 7-9 hours of sleep per night (<https://csepguidelines.ca/>). If you have trouble sleeping (and it is not due to caffeine intake, screen time, etc), consider talking to your family doctor. It may be anything from sub-optimal sleep hygiene to a nutrient deficiency.
- **Nutrition** - Canada’s Food Guide is a great place to start for learning how to eat a more balanced diet (<https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/>). Essentially: prioritize fruit and vegetables, and everything in moderation. A really helpful way to think about food, (generally), is “do I like this food, and does it make me feel good?” For example, if you love brownies but they give you a stomachache, it is not a good idea to eat them *regularly*. Conversely, if you hate broccoli or kale, you don’t *have* to eat them - find another vegetable that you like! On a slight tangent: You don't have to cut something out unless you are allergic, you hate it, or it makes you feel sick. There is a lot of nutrition misinformation out there - but for solid nutrition content on Instagram, I recommend the accounts @biolayne and @bdccarpenter



Tip 2: Professional and personal support

Even the most introverted person will benefit from interpersonal support. This can include support from your friends, family, club members, and more. You can note down the things that make you feel supported by others. For example, when stressed, do you like being sent funny dog videos, or do you want to talk it out with someone? Knowing what makes you feel supported can help prevent misunderstandings, too. Don't be afraid to ask for *specific* support (e.g. "I'm stressed, do you have a funny dog video?") when you need it - of course, within reason.

On a final note: it is never a bad idea to seek help from a therapist, especially if you're going through an especially stressful or difficult time. We go to doctors if we're feeling under the weather to ask for help - therapists are there for when our minds are feeling "under the weather". Universities generally offer counselors and therapists, but with the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a surge in online services. Some resources include: (will find accredited and reliable ones)

Tip 3: Reframe/challenge your thoughts

Cognitive reframing and challenging are techniques used in cognitive behavioral therapy. Essentially, both techniques involve taking different perspectives (for those of you who just took CASPer, I'd imagine you already rock at this) and can help prevent spiraling. To explain it better, here is a simple example you may be familiar with:

Example: "I feel unprepared for and really nervous/anxious about an exam." Let's break it down into parts:

- Feeling unprepared : Have you done your part to study for this exam? Have you felt unprepared for an exam before, and how did it turn out?
 - If you've studied and done your part, you've prepared the best you can.
 - If you've felt unprepared before and the exam didn't turn out great, are things different now? Perhaps you've changed your study technique or have gotten better at test-taking. If things are different now, then this past situation is no longer representative of who you are, or how your exams will be.
 - If you feel unprepared despite adequate preparation, it may be your own brain trying to protect you - if the test doesn't turn out well, it is easier to think "I wasn't prepared for it anyway", than "I prepared and didn't do well". Know that the latter can happen, and it does **not** mean you are a bad student.
- Feeling nervous/anxious: Think about what *your* nervousness means.
 - Physical sensations like a racing heart, sweating, and an upset stomach often define the feeling of anxiety. Sometimes, thoughts can trigger these - other times, it is the opposite (remember the theories of emotion processing?). When you feel physical symptoms of anxiety, remember that they cannot hurt you, and they will pass.
 - Maybe you're nervous because you care deeply - you've worked hard at this course, and a good outcome is important to you and your future goals. Being uncertain about the outcome (or fearing a bad one) can also lead to feeling anxious.
 - Remember again that you cannot predict the future with 100% certainty - what if you do well and get a good grade instead? Can you think of a time when you were pleasantly surprised that something turned out better than anticipated?



This is one example, but perhaps you have, or will, eventually develop your own ways of challenging and reframing these thoughts. One thing I would like to add is that this is no “cure” for a mental illness, and even the best reframers/challengers may still feel anxiety. Mindset matters, but it doesn’t mean “think nice thoughts and everything will be okay!” So don’t be discouraged if this does not make you feel better - there are many techniques and skills out there. What may work for one person may not work for another. Be patient and kind to yourself, and if you feel like you need extra help, reach out to a professional.

This is an article in an ongoing series about wellness. The MMC aims to compile these wellness-related articles into a mini booklet geared at undergraduate students, to empower them to take care of their health by providing information and advice. If you have your own strategies for an aspect of physical/mental wellness you’d like to write about, or would like to write an educational article, contact Rahul Sharma on slack and fill in the following form <https://forms.gle/ttfDMC3RYff34yjx9>.

