

VOLUNTEERS & STRESS

European Solidarity Corps programme



Dear volunteer,

First of all, thank you for all your efforts in making our local communities a better place for everyone. I hope you are enjoying your volunteering experience and that it has brought about the positive changes you sought in your life. I also hope you are staying connected with yourself and are aware of how this experience is impacting you.

While mental health hasn't always been a focus in the context of volunteering, it has become a crucial topic and may be present in various aspects of your volunteering activity.



Community Challenges: Is mental health one of the issues faced by the communities you support? For example, do young people in youth centres struggle with anxiety or depression?

Impact on professionals: Are mental health concerns affecting the professionals in the organisation where you're volunteering? They might experience signs of burnout, such as psychosomatic symptoms, or feelings of pessimism about their work's impact.

Volunteer Well-being: Do you or your fellow volunteers find it challenging to maintain good mental health in this new environment? This could manifest as homesickness, isolation, difficulty adjusting or some older mental health issues can reemerge such as substance abuse, eating disorders, panic, self-harm.

As part of the European Solidarity Corps program, which aims to improve competences for your future, mental health becomes an even more essential topic. Among the many competences you will improve and develop, you also have the chance to practice mental health skills that will help you navigate both personal and professional challenges more healthily and competently in the future.

This booklet consists of sections focused on both learning and self-reflection, and it should help you identify your coping strategies and plan for preserving your mental health. I suggest reading one section at a time, allowing yourself some space to reflect on how it applies to your personal and professional life. Afterward, consider writing down your thoughts on stressors, current coping mechanisms, and any ideas you have for strengthening your mental health. While writing or drawing isn't necessary, it can help you become more aware of your feelings, process them, and release them, which in itself can have a therapeutic effect. But, as always, use this resource in whatever way suits you best.

Lastly, if you find yourself feeling upset or unwell while reading this, please don't hesitate to reach out to your mentor, supervisor, or anyone in the organisation for support. You are not alone—there are people whose job it is to help, and they genuinely care about your well-being.

I wish you a safe and fulfilling journey toward self-discovery.

Kind regards,
Suncana



Stressor

A stressor can be anything we perceive as threatening or something we feel unable to cope with. For example, it could be moving to a new country for volunteering, finishing a volunteering activity without knowing what will we do next, or getting sick during volunteering and lacking the support that family would typically provide. Even situations we look forward to, like meeting a partner's parents, giving a speech, or getting married, can be stressors.

One of the first things we need to understand about stressors (causes of stress) is that they affect people in different ways. For some, moving to another country and living independently may be easy, while for others, it could be very stressful. According to Lazarus and Folkman, several factors determine whether a certain stressor will cause stress and can be a starting point for coping strategies (L. Arambašić (1996.) Stress in Stress, trauma, recovery)

1

Personality traits

(e.g., perfectionism, low self-esteem, being shy or introverted)

2

Characteristics of the situation

(e.g., is it public or private? How is the room temperature? Who is present?)

3

How we perceive the importance and significance of the situation

(Am I in trouble? If so, what kind of trouble? Do I perceive situation as a challenge or as a treat)

4

How we perceive our ability to influence the situation

(Can anything be done? If so, what?)

For example, if we are late for a meeting that we view as crucial for our future, and we are typically very punctual, we might feel stressed if we believe we can't influence the traffic or reschedule the meeting. On the other hand, if we are comfortable with being late, if the meeting is just one of many or we believe we can easily postpone it, the situation (the stressor) may not cause a stressful reaction within us.

Perceiving a situation as a threat can cause more stress than viewing it as a challenge that we can manage.

For example, if we look at this from the perspective of coping strategies, we can realise that our self-esteem can make many situations feel very stressful. In response, we might decide to invest time in changing that. If the characteristics of certain situations are causing us stress, we can consider how to change them to work in our favor.



What stressors are you experiencing during your life as a volunteer? Have you experienced culture shock? And remember, there is no need to be ashamed if some situation is stressful for you even if it is not stressful for your peers.

Stress

When we perceive an event (stressor) as dangerous, disturbing, or placing demands on us that we cannot meet we can expect to feel stress, set of emotional, physical, physiological, and/or behavioral reactions (Z. Subotic (1996.) Stress in Stress, trauma, recovery). Bare in mind that they are often not immediately visible and easy to identify.



Behavioural changes

(excessive dependence on others, defensive or aggressive behaviour, avoidance of social contact, inability to work efficiently, difficulty coping with even small problems, loss of appetite or overeating, sleep disturbances, losing things, excessive consumption of coffee, alcohol, cigarettes, etc.)



Emotional reactions

(anxiety, anger, restlessness, frustration, fear, resentment, impatience, irritability, guilt, apathy, oversensitivity, mood swings, etc.)



Cognitive problems

(difficulty remembering things and concentrating, confusion, indecisiveness, changes in outlook towards the future, catastrophic expectations, etc.)



Physical reactions

(changes in weight, headaches, indigestion, ulcers, high blood pressure, asthma, allergies, changes in menstrual cycles, minor aches, etc.)

Did you notice some of these reactions last time when you were in a stressful situation? What reactions do you usually notice? Are there some reactions that you did not connect with stress until now?

As mentioned earlier, stressors can be diverse and affect us in various ways. Some stressors fall into the category of **everyday stress** (e.g., conflict with a roommate, project deadlines), while others are **major life stressors** that we all face at some point in life (e.g., a serious illness of a loved one, loss). Additionally, some stressors are fall into category of **traumatic life stress**.

A traumatic event is outside the realm of ordinary human experience, and not everyone will encounter it in their lifetime. It involves the threat or actual experience of loss — whether of people, possessions, or values (e.g., a roommate threatens suicide; we witness a burglar threatening a cashier with a knife; we fear for our lives during war; we experience abuse from parents or a partner; or someone breaks into our home and robs us) (L. Arambašić (1996.) Stress in Stress, trauma, recovery).

The same stressor may be experienced as stressful by one person while another might not perceive it in the same way. However, when we talk about traumatic life stress, nearly everyone exhibits some reactions. These reactions typically appear immediately after the event and may last for a long time. It's important to note that a stress response can occur even if, in the end, no one was harmed. Please do not hesitate to ask for support when this kind of events happen.



Work-related stress

During your volunteering activity, you may also encounter work-related stress. Work-related stress is the response people have when they face demands and pressures that exceed their knowledge and abilities, challenging their capacity to cope.

For instance, the pace of work in the organization might be highly stressful, relationships with supervisors or other volunteers may become complicated, or the tasks you're expected to complete could be sensitive, complex, and require skills you have yet to develop. All of this can be quite stressful, and if not managed properly, it may put you at risk of burnout.

Sources of work-related stress can be both internal and external:

(Ajduković and Ajduković (1994.) Assistance and Self-help in the Care of Mental Health Helpers)

INTERNAL FACTORS

depend on personal traits, past experiences, working style, values, and self-image

(e.g., unrealistic expectations from volunteering, over-identification with the people you're trying to help, the need to control every situation, excessive persistence, avoidance of delegating tasks, lack of prioritization, feeling inadequate).

EXTERNAL FACTORS

depend on circumstances outside of yourself, such as:

- **Working conditions and types of tasks** (e.g., unsuitable workspace or materials; lack of privacy; danger of physical injury/attack; working with people facing persistent and intense difficulties that are challenging or impossible for a volunteer to resolve).
- **Work organisation** (e.g., unclear roles, tasks, expectations, or responsibilities; heavy workloads; constant time pressure; unclear rules regarding benefits or free days; lack of time for reflection and experience exchange; no rest during volunteering days; or lack of work altogether).
- **Social relations** (e.g., competition among volunteers or between volunteers and employees; lack of trust; insufficient feedback; lack of a formal support system; absence of team spirit).



What are the stressors in your volunteering environment? Which ones are internal and come from your personality, values, past volunteering/working experiences? Which ones are external? Can you do something about them? Are some of them influenced by (organisational) culture?

Burnout

Burnout syndrome is a cumulative process that takes time to fully develop, often longer than the duration of your volunteering activity. Initially, we notice small warning signs, and if we don't take them seriously and prioritise our mental health, these signs can progress into chronic exhaustion and dissatisfaction.

Burnout often affects the most enthusiastic individuals—those with high expectations who aim to achieve many things and initially deliver great results. Volunteers, in particular, might fit this description. Some volunteers may lead very busy lives before starting their service, and even small volunteering-related stressors can become the "last straw." Others engage in numerous activities to maximise the opportunity, while some take on additional responsibilities to help the organisation, continuing this pattern when they enter the workforce.

Being in tune with oneself and recognizing early signs of burnout is crucial. It's much easier to help ourselves in the early stages than when we've reached the later stages of burnout. The path toward burnout typically involves several stages, beginning with excessive work enthusiasm. This is followed by stagnation, then emotional withdrawal and isolation, and finally, a stage characterised by apathy and a loss of interest in life. The most common signs of professional burnout (Ajduković and Ajduković (1994.) Assistance and Self-help in the Care of Mental Health Helpers):

- Feeling of physical and emotional exhaustion
- Loss of sense of personal worth
- Negativism, both towards oneself and towards the goals of the job or the organisation in which one works
- Loss of interest in work, cynicism, and insensitivity to the needs of others
- Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, often accompanied by the phrase: "Nothing can be done about it anyway"
- Irritability and low tolerance for frustration, anger as a common emotion, intolerance, suspicion

- Rigidity and inflexibility
- Withdrawal in social relationships
- More frequent conflicts and aggressive outbursts
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, stimulants, and medications
- Feeling of general weakness
- Frequent illness and absence from work
- Hypersensitivity to stimuli (sounds, smells, heat, etc.)
- Loss of sexual interest, sexual problems
- Physical symptoms - headaches, back pain, difficulty breathing, sleeping, and eating, gastrointestinal symptoms

Am I more nervous lately?

Does volunteering make me feel frustrated and tense?

Do I feel more tired than usual after volunteering?

Do my family and friends tell me that I should work less?

Can I relax and rest in my free time?

Do I notice psychosomatic problems more than before?

Is volunteering still a source of satisfaction and challenge?



What to do?

KeKelly McGonigal, in her TED talk "[How to Make Stress Your Friend](#)," emphasised that it's time to stop demonising stress and to view it as our body's way of helping us overcome a challenge. She closed the TED Talk by saying:

"When you choose to view your stress response as helpful, you create the biology of courage. And when you choose to connect with others under stress, you can create resilience. You're saying that you can trust yourself to handle life's challenges. And you're remembering that you don't have to face them alone."

She also emphasised the importance of caring for others, which is at the core of every volunteering experience—something you already have covered. In the following pages, we will explore what you can do to make your stress response healthier. But before we go to thinking about the response it is crucial to make these steps when stressor appears. That will allow us not to just react but to choose how to act.

- 1 Stop and pause for a moment** to connect with what is happening within you physically, emotionally, and cognitively. Then ask yourself what you need. This practice helps us understand ourselves better and provides us with what we need in the moment.
 - For example, if you come home and see that your roommate didn't clean the dishes again and has left a big mess in the living room, you might feel a burst of energy, tension and anger. In this case, it's essential to recognise that energy and apply coping strategies that will first help you release it (e.g. running, punching a boxing bag, or any other physical activity). After that you might want apply some problem focused coping strategies.
 - Conversely, if you had an emotional conversation with a family member and feel lack of energy (e.g. drained), you'll want to choose strategies that evoke energy, such as going for a walk and talking with a friend, taking a relaxing bubble bath, or having a nap.
- 2 Estimate your distress level on a scale from 1 to 5.** This helps you estimate the intensity of your reaction. Are you just beginning to feel stressed, or has it become severe enough that you're struggling to maintain control?
 - For instance, if you're about to present an idea to your supervisor and the president of your organisation, you might feel a bit tense and at the same time feel confident and able to do this. In this case, it may be enough to pause, open a window, take a few deep breaths, and then make a presentation.
 - However, if they start asking challenging questions or making comments that leave you feeling insecure and overwhelmed, you may need different mechanisms, like asking for a short break, taking a quick walk up the stairs, phoning a friend, calming your thoughts, or writing notes on how you want to respond.
- 3 Identify the cause or trigger** by considering what you were doing, what someone may have said to you, or any particular thoughts that came up. This awareness can help you understand your triggers and better prepare for similar situations in the future.
 - For example, you may feel upset and nervous all day without understanding why, leading you to overreact in situations that wouldn't usually bother you. Reflecting on what initially triggered these feelings might reveal that you're anxious about something else (e.g. your volunteer position is about to end, and you're struggling with uncertainty and feelings of loss).

What to do?

in stressful situation

After we pause and get in touch with ourselves, assess the level of stress, and identify the trigger, we can begin thinking about coping strategies. Have in mind that we are all different, and what works for one person may not work for another.

What stressors can you control? Do you find yourself obsessing over those you can't control? Remember, if something is beyond your control, the only thing you can do is accept it and focus on managing your reactions.

Problem-Focused Coping Strategies

These strategies are aimed at influencing stressors that are under our control and are especially useful in later coping stages or for managing chronic stress.

Emotion-Focused Coping Strategies

These strategies are aimed at influencing our emotional response to a stressor and are particularly useful at the beginning of a stressful event or when the stressor is beyond our control.



FUNDAMENTAL RULES

(by Lazarus and Folkman)

to bear in mind when assessing the effectiveness of coping:

1. No coping mechanism is inherently "bad" or "good."
2. The success of coping only makes sense when evaluated in relation to the specific situation
3. It is essential to consider how well a particular coping strategy is adapted to both the individual and the situation simultaneously (personal values, culture, is it a one time coping mechanism or a pattern...).

Problem-Focused Coping Strategies

Interventions directed towards influencing the stressor

For example:

- Create a realistic, detailed **"to do list"** with priorities.
- Apply **problem-solving steps** to resolve issues.
- **Communicate** openly about the problem.
- **Confront** a person.
- **Negotiate** with a person.
- Ask a mentor for **advice** on resolving a particular issue.
- **Re-evaluate the importance** or meaning of particular stressor in your life.

Interventions directing towards avoiding the stressor

For example:

- **Distance** yourself from a stressor (e.g. from volunteer who bullies you).
- **Temporarily let go** (e.g. let go of requests for different food arrangements).
- Set **boundaries** (e.g. regarding the amount of volunteer tasks and hours).
- **Delegate** difficult tasks

What to do?

in stressful situation

Emotion-Focused Coping Strategies



Interventions directed towards own emotions

For example:

- **Isolate** yourself to process the situation
- **Connect** and talk to a friend.
- **Engage in various activities** to avoid dealing with emotions at this point.
- Engage in **recreation**, relaxation, or walking.
- **Visualise** your desired behaviour/goal (e.g. how you assertively request different accommodation).
- **Observe your inner dialogue** and practice self-encouragement with affirmations (e.g. saying yourself "you are prepared and will manage" before and during a complex workshop).
- Ask for **emotional support** and/or professional support.
- Practice deep **breathing exercises**.
- Explore **creative expressions** like dancing, drawing, or writing.
- **Activate your senses** with a warm bath, massage, aromatic candles or scents, music, natural sounds, or tasty food.



Grounding exercise

This grounding exercise is designed to manage acute stress and reduce anxiety.

Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths, open your eyes, and look around the room and acknowledge:



5
things
you can
see



4
things
you can
feel



3
things
you can
hear



2
things
you
can
smell



1
thing
you
can
taste

The window of tolerance is the zone where intense situation (stressor) can be processed in a healthy way, allowing us to function, react effectively and to self-soothe and self-regulate our emotional state. Our mind is balanced and calm, we feel relaxed and in control, we are able to function most effectively and we are able to take on any challenge life throws at us. In that state of mind we are not just reacting but we are choosing to how to act. To remain in this optimal state, it is essential to:

Widen Our Window of Tolerance

Expanding our window of tolerance helps us stay in the optimal zone longer, making us less likely to become dysregulated when experiencing stress.

We can achieve this by practicing regular self-care on a day-to-day basis.



Self-Regulate

Self-regulation helps us process stress and return to our window of tolerance so we can handle life's demands. We focus on diverse coping mechanisms when stressor has appeared.

What to do?

in stressful situation

How do you support yourself in stressful situations? What helps you regain a sense of safety, love, and security? What coping skills do you currently practice, and which new ones would you like to explore?

COPING SKILLS



I STOP AND LISTEN TO MYSELF

- I go jogging or walking
- I do my favourite sports
- I relax and recover
- I eat well
- I sleep



- I search for more information
- I make plans
- I write things down
- I solve problems
- I make lists



- I seek hope from values, ideas or religion
- I think about the meaning of life
- I quiet down, meditate, pray
- I am present



- I try new ways of working
- I use my imagination
- I think positively
- I listen to myself
- I do cooking, drawing, handicrafting, writing, filming, podcasting, tik tokking

I LOOK FOR DIFFERENT WAYS TO RECOVER



- I show my emotions; I laugh, I cry
- I talk about my feelings
- I express my emotions in different ways; dancing, playing music, writing, painting



- I spend time with my friends
- I support others and accept support from others
- I turn to others for help
- I share my experiences with others

I TRY NEW WAYS OF COPING

What to do?

every day

There is so much we can do every day to strengthen our mental health, develop our resilience and widen our window of tolerance. The Hand of mental health provides us with important insights into different aspects of life that we need to care about to maintain our mental health.

How do you currently take care of yourself? What could you do differently to better support your mental health? What are three small actions you want to integrate into your life to build resilience?

HAND OF MENTAL HEALTH

How do everyday choices affect your mental health?

FOOD AND EATING HABITS

- What did you eat today??
- Did you remember to eat regularly?
- Who did you eat with?
- Did you enjoy your meal?
- Did you take time to eat?

RELATIONSHIPS AND EMOTIONS

- How was your mood today?
- Who did you spend your time with and how?
- Did you listen to a friend?
- What made you happy or sad?
- Did you share your feelings with anyone?

EXERCISE AND MINDFULNESS

- How did you move during the day?
- Did smart phone affect your activity level?
- What kind of activities gives you a spark?
- What does a relaxed body feel like?

SLEEP AND REST

- Did you wake up feeling energised?
- Did you have time to relax and chill out?
- Did you fall asleep easily?
- What time did you turn off the smart phone?
- Did you scroll through social media late into the night?

CREATIVITY AND PLEASURE

- What makes you laugh?
- How do you get into the flow?
- What is beautiful?
- What did you do for fun on the internet today?

DAILY RHYTHM

- Studies, work
- Home work
- Chores
- Me time
- Hobbies
- Media

VALUES AND DAILY CHOICES

- Do your actions reflect your values?
- What do you value in life?
- What is important to you in life?
- What kinds of "acts of kindness" did you do today?

Finger Labels:

- Thumb: I sleep
- Index: I eat
- Middle: I talk
- Ring: I move
- Pinky: I relax

mieli

Have in mind!

Embrace Vulnerability

When people ask us how we are, we tend to automatically answer, “I’m fine” or “okay.” Of course, it’s okay if we sometimes don’t want to explain to everyone how we really feel. But the problem is if we rarely, if ever, share how we truly are. Many of us have been taught that we shouldn’t make a fuss, cry, or show sadness—that we should always be strong. But that isn’t true. This mindset only leaves us feeling alone because others don’t recognize that we need or want their support. It’s important to remember that it’s okay to feel sad, homesick, to miss family, to feel scared, to cry, to feel powerless, to feel weak, to worry about family back home, to be angry at the world and to share it all with someone. Vulnerability may not be something we would necessarily choose, but it is part of life. All we can do is embrace our vulnerability and let it become a common ground for connecting with others.

If you are interested in power of vulnerability and guideposts for wholehearted living explore books and video of Brené Brown: [The power of vulnerability.](#)

Do you have someone to talk to during your volunteering who can understand and support you?

Find Your Own “Tribe”

You probably have a support system back home that you can lean on. Are they the ones you turn to during your volunteering? Sometimes we don’t share everything with our parents or friends because we don’t want them to worry too much.

Can your friends back home truly understand what you’re experiencing now? Many volunteers say it’s nice to talk to other volunteers because they share specific experiences that only fellow volunteers can fully understand.

We all need someone who cares about us and asks how we are doing. We need a person we can honestly share our feelings with, and who can also help us with practical matters—like driving us to the store, sharing food, or giving advice.

If you don’t have that person in this country, try to find one. It could be your mentor, supervisor, another volunteer, or even a neighbor. Having a “tribe” who is there for you and with whom you can be vulnerable is one of the most important elements of building our resilience.



Have in mind!

Let Go Of Control

Events like COVID-19, earthquakes, wars, floods, and economic crises over the last decade have reminded us of something we would rather forget: "We do not have complete control over our lives!" Of course, we can make the right choices, think positively, and put in the effort to reach our goals, but situations like these remind us that we are not all-mighty. There are things we cannot influence or wish away. Life is filled with magical moments as well as terrible and terrifying aspects. Living with the awareness that bad things can happen at any moment and that we do not have complete control can be challenging. This is why we tend to forget that and try to exert control over everything. When we start to lose control—and we inevitably will—we begin to feel stress as well. Finding a way to be ok even when we do not have a control is important for our mental health.

How are you coping with uncertainty, insecurity, ambiguity, and helplessness? What helps you when you feel like that?

Practice Self-compassion

If we find ourselves in distressing situations that lasts for a long time and especially if it is beyond our control, it is crucial that we do not forget to be patient and kind to ourselves. That is not time for blame, guilt, shame and putting oneself down because we do not cope as good as we would like to or we made a mistake. Be kind and patient with yourself while you figure out what helps you cope and what brings back a sense of peace, meaning, and hope to your life.

How do you practice self-compassion? What do you say to yourself when you're not managing as well as you'd like? Would you say those same things to a friend?



Have in mind!

There Are No Negative Emotions

Another important point to highlight: "None of our emotions are negative!" They may be uncomfortable to experience (like anger or sadness), but they serve valuable functions. When we experience a strong emotion, especially stress-related emotions like fear, anger, or excitement, the brain's limbic system interprets this and signals the adrenal glands to release adrenaline. This is part of the "fight-or-flight" response, where adrenaline prepares our body to act by increasing heart rate, dilating pupils, and boosting blood flow to muscles. All that is preparing us to face situations (such as running outside or finding cover during an earthquake), activate our bodies, heighten our awareness. Sadness makes us cry and relieve tension or seek support from others. Anger may prompt us to set boundaries. In essence, emotions help us meet life's challenges. Ignoring or suppressing our emotions doesn't make them disappear; instead, they may surface in other ways, like through nightmares or physical symptoms such as headaches, allergies, or stomach aches. Recognising our emotions and expressing them is important part of our emotional competence.

Do you allow yourself to fully experience your emotions, and are you comfortable expressing them? Which emotions do you permit yourself to feel, and which ones do you tend to hold back?

Asking for Help

Showing that we're not okay and asking for support is not a sign of weakness—it's a sign of strength. It reflects a person who knows themselves, is unafraid to show vulnerability, and will ask for help when needed. It's time we start talking about mental health openly and take responsibility for our own well-being. Remember, your supervisors and mentors are there to support you, and they should assist you in getting professional help if you need it.

What support systems are available to you in the organization where you volunteer (such as a mentor or supervisor)? Is there anything holding you back from utilizing these resources? Do you feel a need for psychotherapy?

Remember that, in certain situations, insurance you have as a volunteer may cover psychotherapy costs if it is prescribed by a doctor. And keep in mind, even if you don't have significant concerns, staying in touch with how you're feeling and expressing it is a key aspect of maintaining mental health.



Have in mind!

Put Your Protective Suit on

In times of crisis, it's easy to become so focused on the needs of others that we forget about our own. We may skip meals, ignore the need to take breaks, volunteer long hours on minimal sleep, or sacrifice time with friends. For those in helping professions—or for anyone who naturally enjoys helping others—there's a real risk of placing ourselves and our needs last. But that's not a smart or thing to do.

If we don't take care of ourselves, we can't effectively help others. That's why firefighters never leave their facilities without protective suit, and it's the same for us. We shouldn't go out helping others without our own "protective suits" on. It's up to each of us to determine what makes up our suit. Perhaps it's a layer of running in nature, a layer of conversations with peers, a layer of psychotherapy, or a layer of good sleep.

Are you taking care of your physical and psychological health as much as you take care of others? What is your "protective suit" made of? Remember, as volunteers, your role is to help others, but that should never mean jeopardising your own health or well-being. Prioritising yourself isn't selfish—it's a responsible choice.



A psychologist walked around a room while teaching stress management to an audience. As she raised a glass of water, everyone expected they'd be asked the "half empty or half full" question. Instead, with a smile on her face, she enquired: "How heavy is this glass of water?"

Answers called out ranged from 8 oz. to 20 oz.

She replied, "The absolute weight doesn't matter. It depends on how long I hold it. If I hold it for a minute, it's not a problem. If I hold it for an hour, I'll have an ache in my arm. If I hold it for a day, my arm will feel numb and paralysed. In each case, the weight of the glass doesn't change, but the longer I hold it, the heavier it becomes."

She continued, "The stresses and worries in life are like that glass of water. Think about them for a while and nothing happens. Think about them a bit longer and they begin to hurt. And if you think about them all day long, you will feel paralysed – incapable of doing anything."

Unknown autor

Time to act!

Now that you have all this information, it's time to take action to protect your mental health. Here are some steps you, as a volunteer, can take to create your own "personal protective suit":



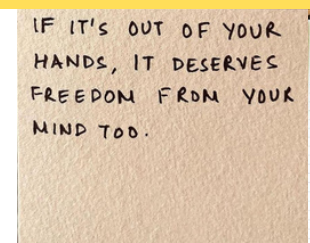
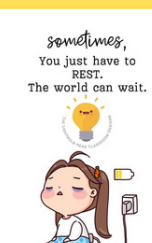
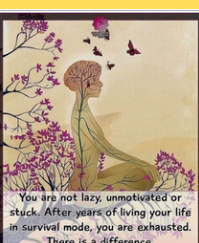
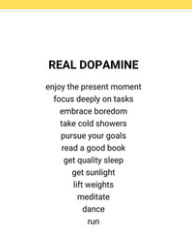
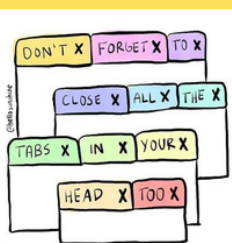
- 1 Reflect on Stressors:** Identify the sources of stress in your life and in the organization where you volunteer.
- 2 Influence What You Can:** Identify specific stressors within your control, and brainstorm ways to address them. For instance, if you need more task-related support, consider requesting regular meetings with your supervisor for guidance and feedback. If there are too many tasks, create a "to-do" list, discuss priorities with your supervisor and express your boundaries..

3 Accept What You Can't Change: For stressors beyond your control, develop coping strategies. For instance, you could practice relaxation exercises before each workshop to ease anxiety, or if you need emotional support for dealing with conflict or culture shock, reach out to someone you trust to share your concerns.

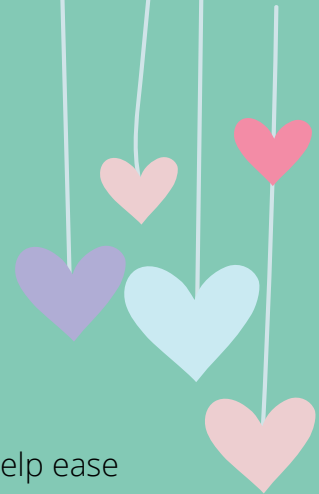
4 Enhance Your Self-Care Routine: Identify self-care practices you currently engage in, and consider adding new ones to your daily or weekly routine. Examples include starting your day with a short meditation, going for a run or walk in nature, journaling, or improving your eating and sleeping habits.

5 Communicate with Your Mentor: Make it a habit to talk regularly with your mentor about how you are, stress and your mental health.

6 Seek Help When Needed: If mental health issues arise or resurface, don't hesitate to ask for psychological support.



Do you want to know more?



On this page, you'll find various videos with suggestions for daily practices that can help ease everyday recovery from stress, all based on the latest research. Feel free to explore them further.

Strengthening Your Body Against Stress

with Elissa Epel, Ph.D. and Rick Hanson, Ph.D.

- First and last 30 minutes of the day are crucial in caring for our telomeres that are damaged by chronic stress. Start your day with optimism and positive outlook and end it with claiming one self and preparing for sleep, breathing, practicing gratitude.
- By inviting feelings of safety, love, and security when we're stressed, we send our cells a message that everything is okay and they can relax—no need for adrenaline or activation. This shift changes the chemistry in our cells, promoting restoration and growth.
- Taking a walk in nature has a powerful impact on recovering from stress.

Finding Strength in Relationships

with Shawn Achor, M.A. and Rick Hanson, Ph.D.

"Don't try to pursue happiness and success alone. When life is hardest, make time to connect with other people – even by just writing a 2-minute positive email to someone."

Burnout

with Dr. Christina Maslach

Burnout is rarely caused by a single factor. Research by Christina Maslach identifies six common drivers of burnout: Workload, Control, Reward, Community, Fairness, and Values.

Mindfulness and Self-Compassion

with Kristin Neff, Ph.D. and Rick Hanson, Ph.D.

www.selfcompassion.org

- Practice both aspects of self-compassion: Be kind to yourself (comforting and soothing), while also taking action by setting boundaries and saying no when needed.
- Be present with whatever is going on within you, without judgment: Acknowledge your feelings, even if they're difficult (like saying, "This is hard" or "This is sad").
- Remind yourself of our common humanity: Suffering is a part of life, and you're not alone in what you're experiencing. This is also what it means to be human.
- Use self-touch and gestures of kindness: Place a hand on your heart or hold your own hand as a way of offering comfort to yourself.
- Think about words of comfort you'd give to a close friend: Apply these words to yourself, and find your own language that resonates with you.
- Practice pausing and asking yourself what you need right now: If things are going well, enjoy it fully and be grateful. If they're difficult, use self-compassion to navigate through them.

Addressing Childhood Adversity

with Nadine Burke Harris, M.D. and Rick Hanson, Ph.D.

www.centreforyouthwellness.com

Experiencing childhood adversity—such as abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction—can impact the development of our stress response systems. However, by practicing these strategies, it's possible to help modify and improve our stress responses:

- Self-nurture
- Cultivate safe, stable, and nurturing relationships
- Engage in regular exercise
- Prioritize consistent, quality sleep
- Practice meditation and mindfulness
- Take time to rest and recharge
- Maintain a balanced, nutritious diet
- Seek mental health support when needed
- Caring for others.

This publication was created by Suncana Kusturin to support the learning of volunteers during on-arrival and mid-term trainings.