

Study stress and exhaustion

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Organized as a part of Nyyti ry:s national campaign on Students' Mental Health Day *#HelpWorthy*

Stress response: fight, flight or freeze



- **Stress**: the body's response to a challenging or threatening situation, where **the demands exceed the available resources**
- Stress activates the **sympathetic nervous system** and the mind and body prepare to fight or flight
- The intention of the stress response is to improve performance momentarily
- The **parasympathetic nervous system** calms the mind and body
- The freeze reaction activates when the brain judges that the threat is too great and that neither fight nor flight will help. The **parasympathetic nervous system** activates and reduces energy
- If the stress response continues for a prolonged period of time, the consequence may be chronic stress or feeling of exhaustion

New and changing threats



Window of tolerance for stress

Hyperaroused state:

Fight or flight



"Window or tolerance":

Optimal level of arousal

Hypoarousal:

Freeze



Window of tolerance for stress

Hyperaroused state

Restlessness in the body and the mind, increased heart rate, shallow breathing, difficulty to concentrate, irritability, having an urge move and keep doing things, difficulty to calm down and relax, disrupted sleep



Optimal level of arousal

Energetic and engaged, motivated, creative, persistent, ability to focus, think clearly and make decisions

Hypoarousal

Difficulties to think clearly, to concentrate and remember things, passivity, emotional numbness, nothing feels interesting, little or no physical movement



Study-related burnout

- 1) Exhaustion
- 2) Cynicism
- 3) Inadequacy

Salmela-Aro, K. 2009

How am I doing?

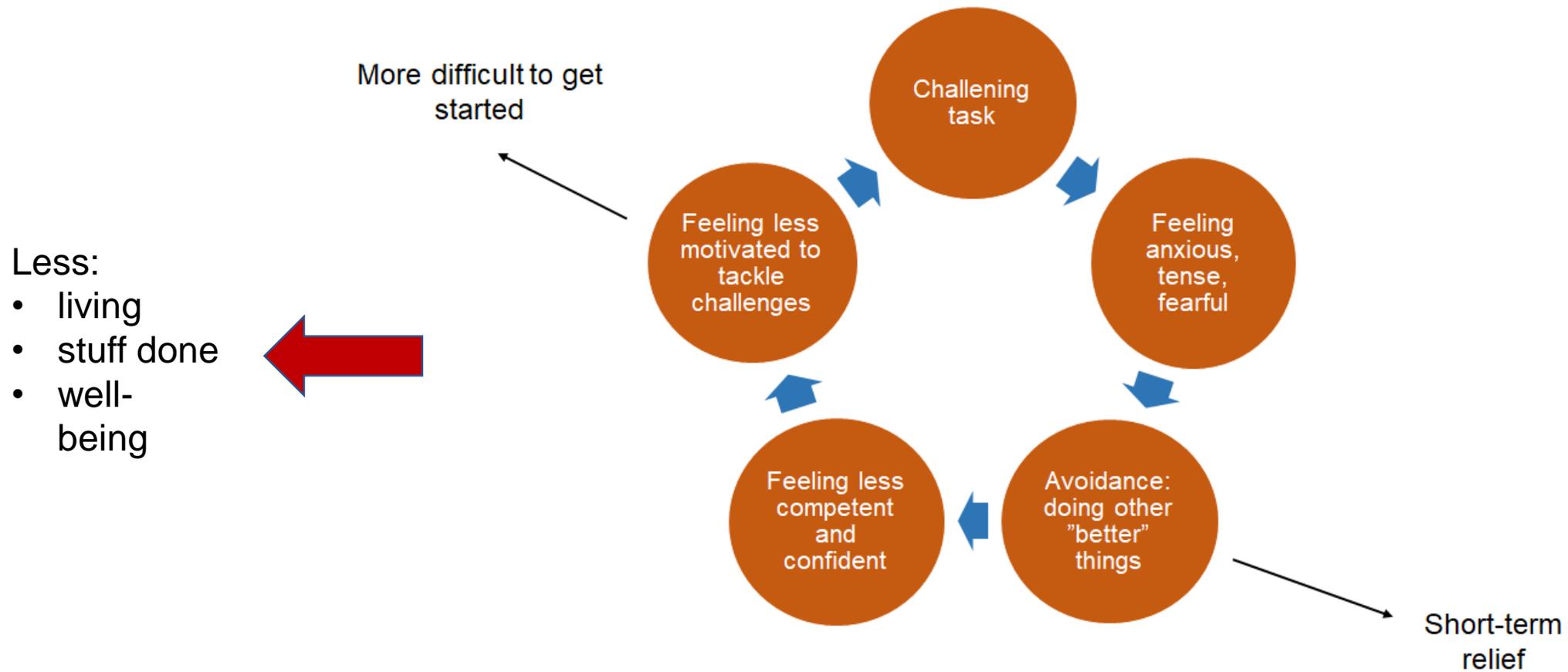
Karolinska Exhaustion Disorder Scale (KEDS):

[Finnish](#) [Swedish](#) [English](#)

What are my stressors?

What exhausts me?

The vicious cycle of avoidance: a perspective on remote studies and stress



**Not always about
avoidance:**

**sometimes
procrastination can be
about *prioritizing***

- In the current life situation, other things are more important than studies
- Having too much to do, and not enough time, energy or financial resources to do everything
- Depression or other conditions that take away resources from studying

Helpful and unhelpful tools to manage stress

Helpful

Time-management
Psychological flexibility
Constructive self-criticism
Self-compassion
Assertiveness and maintaining healthy boundaries
Healthy nutrition
Social support
Physical exercise
Sleeping and getting enough rest
Deep breathing
Humor

Unhelpful

Self-criticism and self-blame
Procrastination
Rumination
Not eating / eating unhealthy nutrition
Substance abuse
Social isolation
Sleep deprivation
Lack of exercise

Towards better stress management

*"Grant me the serenity to **accept** the things I cannot change, **courage** to change the things I can, and **wisdom** to know the difference"*



What can I affect (in my studies)?

Doctoral dissertation by Milla Räisänen: [The interaction between self-regulation and co-regulation of learning and study-related exhaustion in university studies](#)



Setting **S.M.A.R.T** goals

Specific

What is my goal in this task? What do I want to achieve? What would be a concrete step to begin with?

Measurable

What kind of steps are there until I reach the final goal? How can I track my progress?

Achievable

Is my goal achievable and realistic in terms of my resources (e.g. time, health, social support)?

Relevant

In what way is this goal relevant to me? Does finishing this goal benefit me somehow?

Time-bound

Is there a determined time-frame by which time I want to complete the goal? Do I have a schedule that is consistent with my academic calendar, other tasks and responsibilities?

S.M.A.R.T – examples

"Write the essay" → *too vague?*

"I will finish my 10-page essay tonight" → *unrealistic?*

S.M.A.R.T goals:

"I will begin by opening my computer and reading the task description thoroughly"

"I will read the first of three articles I will refer to in my essay, and write notes about it"

"I will write the first draft of the introduction for 25 minutes"

Specific

Measurable

Achievable

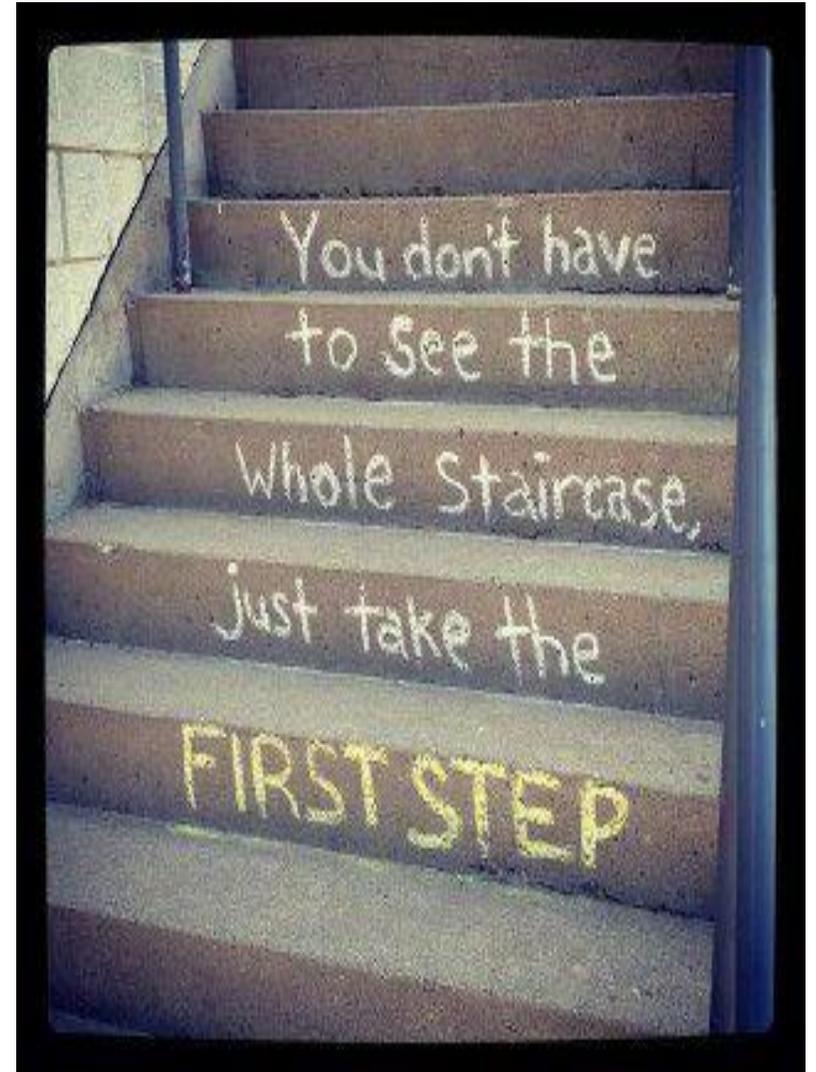
Relevant

Time-bound

Ridiculously small goals

*The more we feel like avoiding a task,
the **smaller** the first step needs to be*

When we break down a larger goal into smaller tasks, the process becomes **less intimidating**, and it allows us to simply focus on the next step



The Pomodoro method: break down longer work periods into small intervals

- 1) Choose a small and concrete task you want to focus on
- 2) Set a timer on 25 minutes
- 3) Work continuously until the timer rings
- 4) If you get distracted, write it down on a separate paper and resume working
- 5) Write down what you could continue working on next
- 6) Take a 5-minute break and repeat



- 7) After 3-4 pomodoro's, take a longer, 15-30 min break

<https://tomato-timer.com/>

Time- management & routines

- Creating clarity about *what to do and when*
- Bigger tasks are broken down into a smaller and more manageable size
- Utilize the calendar, to do-lists, post-it-notes etc.
- Establish routines that work for you

- Allocate time for **studying vs. free-time**
 - Even if you feel you do not have anything special to do in the free-time or if you feel you have not studied "enough"
 - It is important to detach oneself from studies on a daily basis by eg. remembering to take breaks, by having free weekends and by spending holidays

Time- management & routines

How to get back to the
window of tolerance?

Hyperactive, e.g.:

Consciously slow down and lower the demands on oneself, establish boundaries and clear times for studying vs. free-time, having breaks during the day, etc.



Hypoactive, e.g.:

Gently activating oneself by doing things that feel pleasant and meaningful, establishing small routines in the day, creating minimum goals that are possible to achieve during the day, etc.

Unhelpful beliefs, thoughts and feelings

- How do I tolerate frustration, uncertainty and the fact that learning new things often first feels difficult and time-consuming?
- Do I wait for inspiration, the right circumstances or feeling (eg. "not so tired"), before I can start?
- How do I believe I will perform in my tasks?
- Am I sometimes satisfied with my performance? Do I reward myself in some way?



From reactivity to consideration

- Emotions are related to our thinking, the interpretations and assumptions we make and our behavior
- What is my relationship to my feelings? How do I relate to them?
- What are my emotions trying to message me?

When we slow down and consider our emotions, we can gain **valuable information** and **the chance to make conscious decisions and choices**

REACTIVITY (autopilot)

Where does my internal experiences lead me?

How do I typically act in these situations? How do I try to protect myself from my difficult or uncomfortable inner experiences?

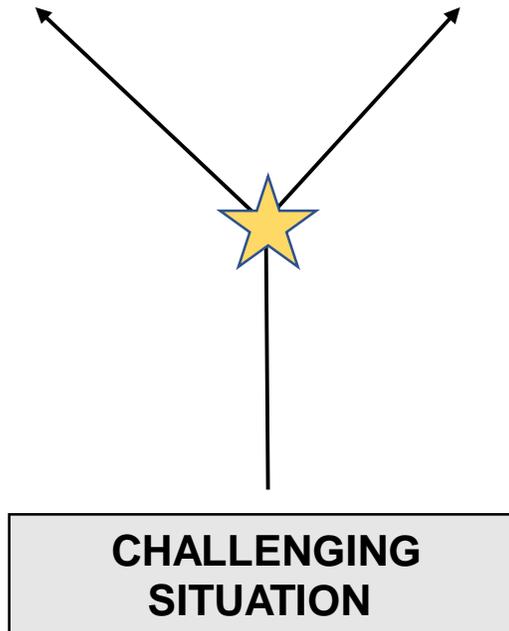
CONSIDERATION (choice)

How would I want to act? What would be more helpful for me? What is important to me?

If I could decide:

- how I would act
- what I would concentrate on
- how I would treat myself and others
- in this situation, what would it look like?

How would I want to act, if my automatic thoughts and feelings did not guide me, and I could choose?





Rely on social support

- Share your worries with study friends or someone else
- Study together ("Study Buddy", study circles)
- Create pressure by telling someone what you are working on (positive social pressure)
- Study at the library when it is possible again
- Participate in the events offered at the Guidance Corner or Well-being Tuesdays
- When needed seek help. Don't try to struggle alone with your worry



Where can I find support for my studies?

- Discussions with the [Personal Study Plan \(PSP\) supervisor](#) (eg. guidance on how to reduce study load)
- Discussion with teachers and negotiation about possibilities to e.g. receive additional time to return assignments
- Study psychologist consultation about [special arrangements](#) if needed

- Discussion with study peers and **sharing information and insights** to the degree programme (eg. through [HYY representatives](#) or by contacting the [degree programme directors](#))
- Giving course feedback and answering questionnaires and surveys about well-being in studies
- How can I participate and make a difference - [further ideas](#)

Support for students' well-being

- [Guidance Corner's](#) events include e.g. study and career related workshops and guided remote study sessions
- [Well-being Tuesday's](#) events for students about remote well-being
- Feeling unsure about where to seek advice regarding your studies? Check out the [Guidance Compass!](#)
- Support services **inside of HU:**
 - [Study Psychologists](#) offer individual counseling, small group counseling, webinars and chats
 - [University chaplains](#) offer individual and group counseling. They can also be reached online via Jodel, Facebook and Instagram @kirkkolakampus
 - [Career counselors](#) offer individual and group guidance in questions relating to e.g. career and future career aspirations
- Support services **outside of HU:**
 - Finnish Student Health Services ([FSHS](#)) offers health care services, including mental health services
 - [Nyyti ry](#) offers a variety of services to support student well-being, including anonymous [chats](#) and [articles](#) concerning life skills. You can also find plenty of information about different [support channels](#) on their website
 - [Helsinki Missio](#) offers low-threshold counseling in different kind of challenges, e.g. feeling of loneliness
 - Crisis Helpline in [Finnish](#), [Swedish](#), [English and Arabic](#) offer anonymous and confidential discussion support e.g. in moments of crisis

Thank you for
watching!

