



UNIVERSITY
OF WARSAW



Guide

Your mind

Your strength

Introduction

We would like to present you with this guide that can help you proactively improve the quality of your life.

Many publications have already been written about mental health, but it is rare for readers to clearly see the real connection between small actions and the tangible effects of genuinely better functioning in everyday life. This guide aims to change that. We want to show you how small changes can bring about great results.

To do this, let us first explain what mental health is, and why caring for it is of such crucial importance for how we cope with challenges, what kind of relationships we build, whether we set goals for ourselves, and ultimately – whether our life feels fulfilling.

What Mental Health Is – and What It Is Not?

Mental health is not merely the absence of illness or disorder. Above all, it is a state in which we are able to function effectively – both at work and in one's personal life – by building relationships, coping with daily challenges, and experiencing satisfaction and a sense of purpose.

This does not mean living a life free of stress, difficult emotions, or moments of crisis, which are all natural parts of the human experience. Mental health does not mean being constantly 'happy'. This is a myth that can lead to unnecessary pressure and unrealistic expectations.

*Small changes
can bring about
great results.*



What Is Psychological Resilience

Psychological resilience (also known as resilience) is the ability to adapt in the face of challenges, respond flexibly to change, and return to balance after difficult experiences. Being resilient does not mean being 'tough', denying difficulties, or suppressing emotions – quite the opposite. It involves accepting what is difficult, practicing self-regulation, and coping with challenges in a constructive way.

Although psychological resilience has some biological foundations, it is a skill that can be developed and strengthened at any stage of life – regardless of age, social or professional situations, or past experiences.

Why It Is Worth Taking Care of Your Mental Health and Well-being Every Day

Self-care is the foundation of building psychological resilience. How we sleep, what we eat, how we rest, the ways we seek and offer support, and how we recognize our own needs, all have a real impact on our ability to cope with difficulties.

Now, let us take a closer look at the natural sources of stress that can lead us to crisis situations.

We have divided them into the following categories:

Developmental Crises

These are natural, transitional stages in every person's life that involve **biological, psychological, and social changes**. They are not illnesses or pathologies but rather essential stages for proper development. These are moments when the ways we have previously dealt with reality become insufficient in the face of new challenges, such as:

- starting a new job
- becoming a parent
- getting married or entering a long-term relationship
- taking care of an elderly or sick family member
- retirement

Developmental crises are characterized by:

their **natural and universal nature** – they occur in everyone, though their course may differ; they are predictable and typical for particular stages of life;

their **temporary nature** – they are time-limited, lasting from several weeks to several months;

the fact that they are both a **challenge and an opportunity** – while they bring tension and disorganization, they also foster growth, as they require adaptation to new circumstances and the development of new skills.

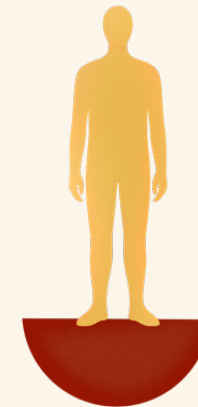
Losses and Life Changes

Other natural processes that we experience as humans are various changes and sudden losses, such as:

- the death of a loved one
- the end of a relationship
- an accident
- illness
- job loss

Most of us experience such events, and they are accompanied by:

- strong emotions (sadness, fear, frustration, helplessness)
- loss of a sense of security
- the feeling of losing control over one's life
- surprise (these are often unexpected events)
- the necessity to adapt to a new situation.



Restoring balance after such experiences requires time and self-compassion.

Social support plays a crucial role in coping with these situations. It is therefore worth seeking help – both from loved ones and from institutions established for this purpose.

Sources of stress resulting from civilizational changes

The modern world presents us with additional challenges that significantly affect our mental well-being. Many people experience pressure and stress as they struggle with issues that were not as widespread in previous generations.

Overstimulation and Excess of Information

One of the most distinctive aspects of contemporary life is overstimulation. Every day we are surrounded by an excessive number of stimuli and an overload of information.

Each day, the human brain processes about 74 gigabytes of data — the equivalent of 100,000 words a day. Just a few centuries ago, this amount of information would have absorbed by a person over an entire lifetime!

Let's take a look at children: an excess of toys, colors, and sounds can make them irritable, tearful, and restless, leading to difficulties in relaxation and falling asleep. Adults experience similar effects. Even though our nervous systems are more mature, they are still unable to process such a vast amount of input. Constant notifications, updates, and messages from various digital platforms keep our brains in a state of continuous alertness. Constant exposure to advertisements, colorful billboards, and promotional messages overstimulates our senses; sounds, images, and marketing slogans all compete for our attention, which in turn, increase cognitive load. The social pressure to stay up to date with current events, the achievements of others, and the latest trends leads to compulsive scrolling through news feeds and social media. This behavior creates an illusion of control, while in reality, it deepens internal chaos and restlessness.

This leads to:

difficulty concentrating

– our brains, constantly switching between stimuli, and a consequence, lose the ability to stay focused on a single task for an extended period of time;

increased anxiety

– the constant access to vast amounts of information without the ability to process it all creates a persistent sense of missing out (FOMO – Fear of Missing Out);

decision-making difficulties

– the overflow of information makes it hard to distinguish what is important, to set priorities, and to act;

sleep disturbances

– blue light emitted by screens and mental stimulation before bedtime disrupt the circadian rhythm, leading to problems with falling asleep and reduced sleep quality.

Remember — you have  influence over this!



How you can take care of yourself:

introduce ,technology-free zones'

– decide that, for example, in your bedroom, at the dining table, or in the bathroom, you will not use your phone or computer;

set ,offline hours'

– choose one or two hours a day (for example, in the evening) when you deliberately avoid social media, online videos, or web browsing;

limit notifications – *reduce the constant influx of stimuli by turning off non-essential app alerts.*

Social Expectations

Contemporary culture promotes the cult of success. We are expected to be multitasking, productive, and to maintain perfection in every area of life — work, family, health, and appearance.

The pressure to be perfect contributes to:

- perfectionism;
- comparison with others;
- pursuit of unrealistic standards;
- feelings of inadequacy;
- lowered self-esteem;
- burnout.

How can you cope with the pressure?

1. Reflect on what 'a good life' means to you — perhaps it is not only about career success. Maybe it's family? Possibly a time for hobbies?
2. Limit self-comparison — reduce the time you spend on social media, where comparisons are easiest to make.
3. Practice assertiveness — set boundaries not only with others, but also with yourself.
4. Focus on the process, not just the outcome — appreciate the small steps and progress you make toward your goals.

Appreciate the small steps.

And what about our relationships?

Did you know that strong social bonds reduce cortisol levels?

They are extremely important. Let's now take a closer look at technology and relationships.



*What
about online
meetings?*

The Benefits Technology Brings to Relationships:

- the ability to connect and meet across distances;
- creating and maintaining communities;
- making it easier to organize joint work or shared events.

However — a word of caution!

Although technology makes communication easier, it also often makes it more superficial. Instead of deep, face-to-face conversations, short text messages and emojis dominate. As a result, we gradually lose the ability to build deep and authentic relationships — **and sometimes even develop a fear of closeness**. Some people avoid deepening real-life relationships because virtual interactions feel safer and easier to control. In the long run, however, this tendency fosters loneliness and emotional isolation.

Therefore, while technology provides us with tools to connect with others, the key is to use it consciously — in a way that supports real-life relationships rather than an approach that replaces them..

How to Do It?

1. Respond actively – instead of just “liking” a photo, leave a comment or send a private message. It shows genuine interest in the other person's life.
2. Initiate offline contact – use social media to arrange real meetings. Invite someone for coffee instead of limiting your contact to online messages.
3. Apply the “no-phone rule” – for example, when you're having dinner with your family, turn off phones, the TV, and other distractions.
4. Be mindful – during conversations, focus on listening and engaging in dialogue. Eye contact and full attention show that you value the other person's presence.
5. Plan shared online activities – play online games together, watch movies using synchronization apps, or have video calls while cooking. These are virtual, yet still shared, experiences.

When Stress Appears – Practical Ways of Coping with Everyday Challenges

Did you know that the human body's ability to respond effectively to stressors is one of the most remarkable gifts nature has given us?

Yet in our daily lives, we tend to complain about stress rather than appreciate that we are equipped with such a specialized system. This happens mainly because we encounter numerous stressors every day — while often lacking effective strategies to manage their consequences. We therefore experience many burdensome effects of our nervous system's activity. To change this, it is worth first understanding the underlying processes taking place in our bodies and minds.

Hans Selye formulated the theory of the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS), describing three stages of the body's reaction to stress:

Alarm phase – This is the initial response to a stressor. The nervous and endocrine systems release stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline. The body mobilizes its resources — heart rate and breathing accelerate, muscles tense, pupils dilate, and sweating increases.

Resistance phase – If the stressor persists, the body enters the second phase, trying to adapt to the new situation and maintain alertness. Although the signs of stress may not be as visible as before, the body still uses large amounts of energy to stay on guard. Prolonged exposure in this phase can lead to a depletion of resources.

Exhaustion phase – When stress continues for too long and exceeds the body's adaptive capacity, exhaustion occurs. Energy and immune reserves are depleted, which may lead to weakened immunity (such as anxiety or depression) and physical health problems (such as heart disease or hypertension).

Recall a stressful situation you have recently experienced. How did your body react?

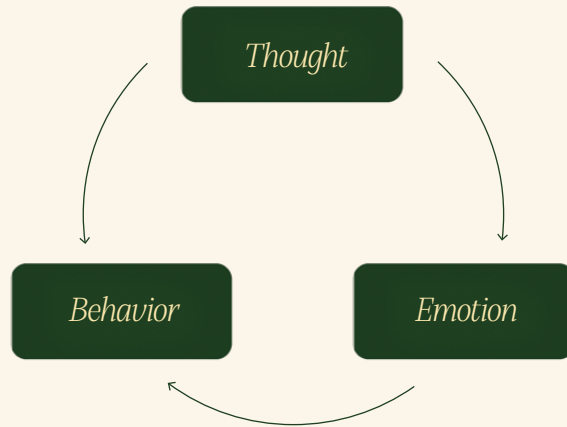


The main mechanism underlying stress is the, 'fight-or-flight' response. When the brain detects a threat — even something as simple as workplace pressure — the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis becomes activated, releasing hormones that prepare the body for immediate action.

In the short term, this system is extremely effective. However, in today's world, where stressors are usually psychological rather than physical, chronic activation of this mechanism can become harmful to our health.

How Thoughts Influence Emotions

Every thought triggers an emotional reaction and leads to a specific behavior. When we think negatively — for example, 'I will definitely fail' or 'I'm worthless' — our brain interprets these thoughts as real, activating corresponding nervous system responses. The relationship between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors can be seen as a cycle in which each element continuously influences the others.



The influence of thoughts on well-being can therefore be described as a cycle in which thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are closely interconnected..

We all have thinking patterns that reinforce negative beliefs about ourselves and others. Here are some of the most common cognitive distortions:

Black-and-white thinking – viewing the world in extremes, without shades of gray, e.g., 'If I'm not the best, I'm a failure.'

Overgeneralization – drawing broad conclusions based on a single negative event, e.g., 'I failed once, so I'll always fail.'

Mind reading – assuming what others think, often negatively and without evidence, e.g., 'They must think I'm boring.'

What to Do When Negative Thoughts Arise?

Do not take your thoughts as absolute truth.

Instead, ask yourself::

- 1. Is what I'm thinking actually true?*
- 2. Is there any evidence that contradicts this thought?*
- 3. Could there be another, more realistic explanation?*
- 4. Does this thought support my health and well-being?*
- 5. What would I say to a friend who thought this way?*
- 6. Does this belief help me achieve my life goals?*

Benefits of Saying STOP to Negative Thinking?

Breaking self-sabotage

Instead of giving up due to fear or self-doubt, you can give yourself a chance to take on challenges that once seemed impossible. You can strengthen your sense of agency and avoid remaining a passive participant in events — which plays a crucial role in building psychological resilience.

Increased Self-Confidence

When your mind is no longer accompanied by a constant inner critic, you begin to see your strengths and achievements. You start to notice how many things you do well and gain a deeper awareness of your own worth. This is the key to building healthy self-confidence and lasting self-esteem.

Improved Mental Health

Constant negative thinking puts a heavy strain on the psyche. It can lead to chronic stress, anxiety, or even depression. Actively stopping these thoughts helps lower cortisol levels (the stress hormone), which translates into greater well-being. A calmer mind allows you to achieve inner peace.

More Positive Energy

Freeing yourself from negative thoughts gives you more energy and motivation to act. Instead of focusing on what might go wrong, you concentrate on what you can accomplish. This positive shift attracts people and favorable circumstances into your life.

Better Relationships with Others

When you say “stop” to negative thoughts, you stop projecting them onto other people. You no longer assume that someone will criticize or judge you. This helps you build deeper, more authentic relationships based on trust rather than fear. Replacing negative beliefs with positive ones is a long process. However, think about it — isn't it worth the effort if it can lead to such a meaningful change in your life?

And what about emotions?

Emotions are an inseparable part of life — they are natural, necessary, and serve important functions. They inform us about our needs, values, and boundaries. They help us make decisions, build relationships, respond to danger, and motivate change.

Common myths about emotions:

- ‘Expressing emotions is a sign of weakness.’
- ‘Emotions like anger or jealousy are bad.’
- ‘I must always be positive.’
- ‘Regulating emotions means suppressing them.’

Such beliefs lead to avoidance and emotional suppression, which leads to an increase in tension, and worsens mental well-being.

What Emotions Are — and What They Are Not?

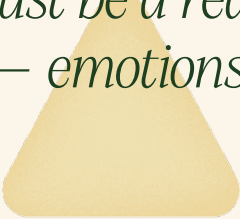
Emotions are not weaknesses — they are signals that something important is happening.

There are no ‘good’ or ‘bad’ emotions — all provide useful information.

Emotions **do not need to be rational** — they are valid even if they don't seem logical.

We may not control which emotions arise, but **we can choose how to respond to them.**

Caution — a common trap!
We sometimes treat emotions as facts:
“If I feel fear, there must be a real threat.” Remember — emotions are signals, not facts.



Let's take a look at the functions of three of the most commonly recognized emotions:

Fear

warns us of danger and mobilizes us to escape or protect ourselves.

Anger

signals that our boundaries have been crossed — it motivates us to defend ourselves or change the situation.

Sadness

tells us that something is important to us; it motivates change and communicates to others that we need support.

What happens when emotions are ignored or suppressed?

Unrecognized and unprocessed emotions accumulate and indeed intensify. They can lead to inner tension, outbursts of anger, chronic fatigue, sleep problems, and somatic symptoms (such as headaches, stomach pain, or muscle tension). In the long run, they may also contribute to mental health difficulties such as depression or anxiety disorders.

The goal is not to “stop feeling” — but to learn how to reside with your emotions and manage them in a healthy way.

So what can you do?

- Recognize and name your emotions.
- Understand their causes and functions.
- Express them in ways that do not harm yourself or others.

Example:

Instead of yelling at a coworker in a moment of anger, I can:

- notice that I feel angry and irritated;
- reflect on what triggered these emotions;
- consciously choose how to respond (for instance, take a short walk before addressing the issue, or respond assertively instead of reactively).

What Supports Our Emotional Life:

Mindfulness – pause and notice: “What is happening to me right now?”

Naming emotions – try to identify specific emotions: “I feel angry / sad / jealous.” Naming them helps you understand what is going on inside.

Understanding causes and functions – reflect on why you feel this way. What is this emotion trying to tell you? What do you need?

Normalizing and accepting emotions – instead of fighting them, approach them with kindness and curiosity. Give yourself permission to feel. Emotions pass when we allow them space.

Pause and breathe – simple conscious breathing techniques can help you reduce tension and “come back to yourself.”

Taking care of yourself in emotional moments – depending on the situation and your preferences, helpful activities may include: talking to someone you trust, physical movement, expressive writing or starting a diary, listening to music, or practicing relaxation techniques.

Everyone experiences emotions — even the difficult ones. *It's completely normal to feel overwhelmed, tired, irritated, or sad at times.* What matters most is taking care of yourself in those moments and learning how to be with your emotions instead of ignoring or judging them.

Emotional regulation is *a skill that can be learned* — regardless of age or experience.

Practicing simple strategies every day can significantly improve your quality of life, mental health, and relationships with others.



Working with the Body as a Method of Regulating Tension

Our body and mind are closely connected — **emotions are reflected in the body**, and physical tension affects our mental well-being. This is why one of the most effective strategies for coping with stress and emotional tension is conscious **work with the body**.

How Does Tension Manifest in the Body?

- stiffness in the neck, shoulders, or jaw;
- tightness in the stomach, rapid heartbeat, shallow breathing, headaches;
- a general feeling of being “tense” or “on edge”;
- difficulty concentrating or remembering;
- chronic fatigue and sleep problems.

These signals are your **body’s way of saying it needs release and recovery**.

What Helps?

Movement and physical activity – regular, moderate exercise (walking, yoga, dancing, swimming, cycling) helps release tension and improves mood.

Short breaks at work – stand up, stretch, or take a short walk around the building. These small pauses help reduce tension and stress throughout the day.

Body scanning – notice tension before it takes over. Move your attention slowly through different parts of your body (feet › calves › thighs › hips › abdomen › chest › back › shoulders › neck › face › head). Notice areas of tightness and gently release them.

Diaphragmatic breathing — slow, deep belly breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system — our body’s natural “stress brake.” Pay attention to make your exhalation longer than your inhalation (for example, inhale for 4 seconds, exhale for 6).

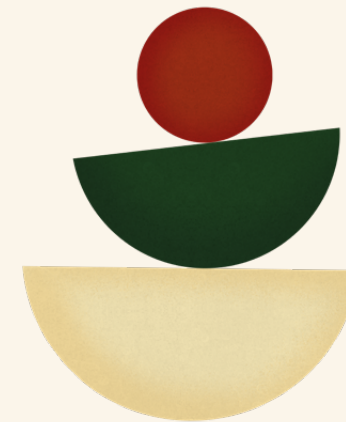
Relaxation Techniques

- I Jacobson’s Progressive Muscle Relaxation – tensing and releasing each muscle group in sequence.
- II Relaxation music.
- III Visualization techniques – guided imagery that helps calm the mind and body.

Recordings of all these practices can easily be found on platforms such as YouTube or Spotify.

Other effective methods of releasing tension include:

massage, warm baths, acupressure mats, or weighted blankets.



Tip:
Practice regularly — not only during moments of crisis. Consistent practice works in a preventative manner and strengthens your ability to manage stress.

Rest and Recovery

We're curious — do you know how to truly rest and recharge your batteries? It may seem simple, yet in our experience, many people experiencing mental health difficulties, do not rest effectively.

Rest is not a luxury — it's a necessity.

The ability to regenerate is a key component of psychological resilience.

Make sure you include daily, high-quality rest in your routine.

1. Try to rest regularly — don't wait until burnout appears.
2. Scrolling through social media on the couch isn't a real rest — the flood of content overstimulates the brain and increases anxiety and tension.
3. Practice digital hygiene — mute unnecessary notifications, set specific offline hours, carefully choose the content you consume, and avoid "doom-scrolling".
4. Choose active rest, preferably outdoors and in daily contact with nature.
5. Take care of your sleep — its duration, regularity, and quality directly affect mood, concentration, and resistance to stress.

Helpful rule: One hour of "doing nothing" is not wasted time — it's an investment in your mental health.

Sleep

Good, high-quality sleep is the absolute foundation of both physical and mental health. It's worth paying more attention to it and ensuring the right conditions for restful sleep.

Consistent sleep and wake times – going to bed and waking up at similar hours each day (even on weekends) supports the regulation of your circadian rhythm.

Light hygiene – get exposure to natural light during the day and limit blue light from screens (phone, laptop, TV) in the evening.

Relaxing bedtime rituals – such as reading, drinking herbal tea, taking a warm bath, or doing breathing exercises — these signal to your body that it's time to rest.

Optimal bedroom conditions – quiet, dark, cool (ideally 18–20°C / 64–68°F), with a comfortable mattress and bedding.

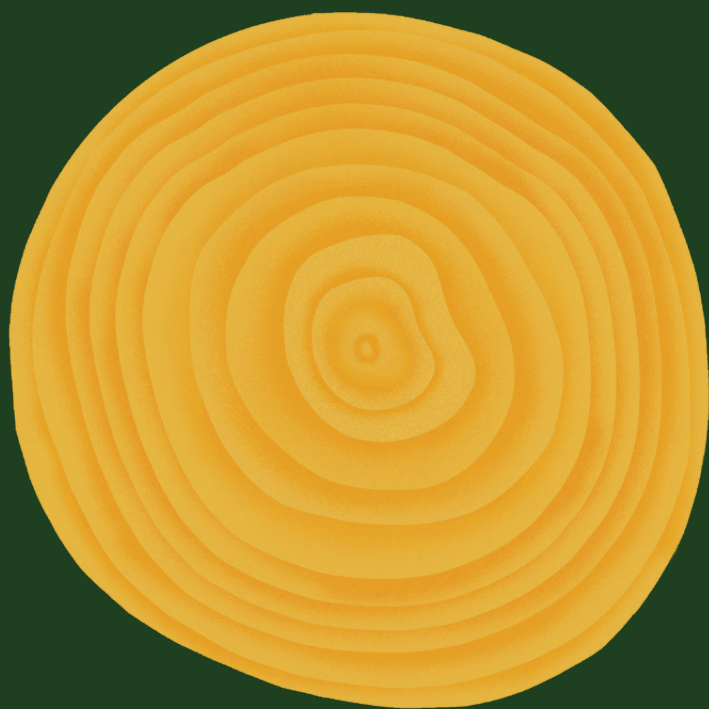
Avoid stimulants – such as caffeine (coffee, cola, energy drinks), nicotine, and alcohol in the second half of the day.

Limit heavy evening meals – have a light dinner 2–3 hours before bedtime.

Move during the day – regular physical activity improves sleep quality.

Use your bed only for sleep and intimacy – avoid working, watching videos, or scrolling your phone in bed so as to strengthen the association of "bed = rest."

Manage stress and tension – through techniques such as meditation, writing a diary, breathing exercises, or progressive muscle relaxation to quieten a racing mind before bed.



Contact with Nature

Contact with nature acts as a natural regulator of our nervous system — it lowers stress levels, promotes calmness, and helps restore emotional balance.

Time spent in forests increases alpha brainwave activity, associated with relaxation and creativity.

Forest environments activate the prefrontal cortex, which supports introspection and self-awareness — helping you to understand your emotions and make more conscious decisions.

Being surrounded by greenery activates the parasympathetic nervous system, responsible for slowing the heart rate, deepening breathing, and creating a sense of peace.

Contact with nature lowers cortisol and adrenaline levels, reducing tension while increasing serotonin and dopamine, which enhance mood and well-being.

Phytoncides — natural essential oils released by trees — have anti-anxiety, anti-inflammatory, and immune-supporting effects.

Healthy habit:

Make sure to include daily contact with nature — a walk in the park, a short rest on a nearby bench, or adding more plants at home. Notice how it affects your well-being.

Taking Care of the Body

You already know that your body stores unprocessed emotions, tension, and stress. Conscious work with the body is an effective way to regulate tension and improve your mood.

Remember to:

- engage in regular physical activity (even 15 minutes a day!)
 - take a walk, stretch in the morning or evening, or enjoy some free dancing to your favourite music;
- take relaxing baths, get a massage, or use an acupressure mat or weighted blanket;
- use the relaxation techniques you've already learned.

*A small change:
five minutes of stretching or breathing after
work can be the beginning of a new habit that
improves your everyday well-being.*





Relationships as a Source of Support and Safety

Secure, supportive relationships are among the most important protective factors for mental health. Focus on the quality of your relationships rather than their quantity.

1. Surround yourself with people with whom you feel you can truly be yourself.
2. Respect your boundaries in relationships — don't be afraid to say that something doesn't feel right or that you simply don't want to do something.
3. Shared moments, laughter, and a sense of being supported are concrete psychological resources that help in difficult times.

Remember:

*asking for help is
a sign of maturity,
not weakness.*

Cultivating Positive Emotions and Experiences

Cultivating positive emotions and experiences means consciously noticing, strengthening, and nurturing moments that bring joy, peace, satisfaction, as well as a sense of meaning. Doing so builds an “inner reservoir of resources” that you can draw from during difficult times — it strengthens psychological resilience, balances difficult emotions, and supports long-term happiness.

It's worth making a daily habit of:

- noticing small joys — the taste of coffee, morning light, a kind conversation;
- writing down things you're grateful for — even one a day;
- allowing yourself to laugh, play, and enjoy “unproductive” moments;
- doing something that brings you pleasure.

Remember: a daily dose of pleasure and mindfulness toward small joys is a powerful investment in your mental health.

Micro-Habits — Small Daily Steps

Micro-habits are simple actions that you can easily incorporate into your day — small steps that gradually build real resources and a sense of agency:

- two minutes of mindful breathing after waking up,
- a glass of warm water in the morning,
- a mindful walk after work without your phone.

Remember: these can be small, achievable actions that fit into everyday life and don't require great willpower.

What to Remember

Psychological resilience is not fixed — you can strengthen it through lifestyle and conscious choices.

Self-care is not selfish — it's an act of responsibility for your own health and well-being.

Everyday self-care creates a safety net for more challenging days.

Take care of yourself first — that's how you gain the strength to care for others and perform better in your responsibilities.

Don't wait for a crisis — taking care of yourself today is an investment in your strength for tomorrow.

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