

Strengthening Your Psychological Immune System

#WellbeingWarriors

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Quote by Jim Rohn: "You must take personal responsibility. You cannot change the circumstances, the seasons, or the wind, but you can change yourself."

Ever wonder how two people can go through similar hardships, but react entirely differently? Similar to the COVID-19 pandemic; why do some people get mild symptoms while seemingly healthy individuals are critically affected?

This article will explore how you can strengthen your psychological immune system, to help protect yourself from mental health difficulties. The psychological immunity that could help your mental wellbeing under challenging times is referred to as 'protective factors'. Protective factors help prevent the development, or worsening, of mental health difficulties. These factors incorporate a holistic view by looking at the individual-, familial- and community aspects.

Individual factors

Includes healthy lifestyle choices, meaningful interpersonal relationships, effective problem-solving skills and healthy self-esteem.

- **Interpersonal skills.** Effective interpersonal skills enable you to build healthy relationships and communicate efficiently. Being able to discuss challenges and reach out to people around you is a vital component of coping with the demands of life.
- **Nutrition.** Never underestimate the power of [proper nutrition](#) on your overall wellbeing. A nutritious and balanced diet can help you feel energetic, think clearly and boost your mood. Staying hydrated is just as crucial as nutrition - aim for drinking two litres of water a day.
- **Physical activity.** Ample research shows the [positive effects](#) adequate exercise has on your mental health. This protective factor assists you in managing a variety of mental health challenges and improves your overall wellbeing. Start slowly and aim for 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity [exercise](#) as recommended by the World Health Organization.
- **Sleep.** [Sleep deprivation](#) can negatively impact your learning, emotions and behaviours. Failing to prioritize sleep could make you less efficient in dealing with life's challenges. For young adults, 7 - 9 hours of sleep is a sufficient amount.
- **Healthy thinking.** Focus on the opportunities in any given situation, view the world in a balanced manner, and consider all the evidence before making rash conclusions. Our [thoughts are powerful](#), and we have full control of steering them towards [healthier thinking patterns](#). Pay more attention to your thought patterns and adjust accordingly.
- **Self-esteem.** Believing that you can conquer difficulties, knowing your value and accepting your flaws all speak to a healthy self-esteem. Having [low self-esteem](#) can increase your vulnerabilities to mental health difficulties. Here are a few suggestions on how to [improve your self-esteem](#).

- **Self-sufficiency.** [Self-sufficiency](#) is related to self-esteem. When you feel confident to make independent decisions, without the approval of others, this confidence will help you take charge of your life.
- **Emotional self-regulation.** Emotional self-regulation refers to the ability to effectively manage distressing emotions. From another vantage point, it is the time taken between becoming aware of the emotion and reacting on it. Poor emotional self-regulation can make it hard to effectively respond to challenges. Therefore it is essential in strengthening your ability to [manage difficult emotions](#).
- **Coping and problem-solving skills.** The ability to [successfully deal with hardships](#) and [solving problems](#) will significantly benefit your wellbeing.
- **Identity exploration.** An [identity crisis](#) can lead to feelings of confusion and isolation. Be curious about yourself and the future, including work, relationships and world philosophies. This exploration will strengthen your sense of belonging as well as your sense of purpose.

Quote by Eleanor Roosevelt: "In the long run, we shape our lives, and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And the choices we make are ultimately our own responsibility."

Familial factors

The amount of support received, or sought, from loved ones.

- **Adequate social and emotional support.** Supportive family members, even if it is virtual, can assist with healthy coping. Communicate to your family members how they can support you, as this can help you feel worthy, loved, or cared for. Supportive relationships with family members can lead to increased self-confidence and self-worth.
- **Nurturing environment.** A nurturing environment is two-fold; who and what you surround yourself with. The [people around us](#) can affect our decision-making, self-esteem, and way of thinking. Also, pay more attention to your immediate environment, bedroom and/or study location. Ask yourself how you can make your room a safe space, your sanctuary, and [more cultivating](#).
- **Social activity.** Valuable social interactions with family members have shown to decrease loneliness, increase a sense of belonging, and helps with fighting symptoms of anxiety and depression. When we are feeling low in mood, our natural reaction might be to withdraw, however, [social activities](#) are vital for our general wellbeing.
- **Family boundaries.** Clear and healthy boundaries have many advantages. They can help your family members respect your preferences, protect your personal space and aid your assertiveness when conflict arises. [Start setting boundaries](#) to help strengthen your psychological immune system.
- **Autonomy.** For many students leaving home and attending university, autonomy is a newly found freedom. Being autonomous refers to having the ability to make your own decisions. It can contribute to a higher quality of life and increased resiliency. Use this new independence responsibly by making smart choices.

Quote by Martin Seligman: "Wellbeing cannot exist just in your own head. Wellbeing is a combination of feeling good as well as actually having meaning, good relationships and accomplishments."

Community factors

Includes the sense of belonging, opportunities for meaningful exploration, and support systems to assist in your overall mental wellbeing.

- **Friendships.** Having deep, meaningful relationships outside of your family can significantly contribute to your wellbeing, feeling accepted and reducing feelings of isolation. [Meaningful friendships](#) can also boost happiness and reduce stress.
- **Connectedness to adults outside of the family.** Your exposure to other cultures, belief systems, ideas and rules will increase when entering university. Embrace these relationships and be curious about people outside of your frame of reference. As a young adult, you have the independence to evolve, adapt your worldviews and explore new terrains.
- **Access to appropriate mental health services.** Sometimes professional help is needed. Reach out to the established services (E.g. [UFS Psychologists](#), [UFS Social Worker](#)) available on campus.
- **Opportunities to serve as a volunteer.** Volunteer work has many advantages. Meaningful participation could help with a sense of belonging, give you valuable work experience for your CV, and allows you to feel virtuous. This is also an excellent way to meet new friends and feel a sense of accomplishment. Visit the [UFS Student Life](#) website for associations you can join.
- **Presence of mentors.** University has a rich, diverse community of mentors, whether in the classroom, on the sports field or in arts and culture. Find a mentor that can help with your development of skills and interests, or inspires you to set goals for your future.
- **Physical safety.** Having an overall sense of security will decrease feelings of distress. Make your physical safety a priority, on- and off-campus. [UFS Protection Services](#) provides regular updates on how they are improving the safety of students and staff, on and off-campus.
- **Opportunities for exploration in work.** University is a stepping-stone to your future world of work. Use this time to do career research, partake in holiday jobs and compile your CV. Exploration during your studies can help immensely with getting to know your preferences and preparing you for the world of work. [UFS Career Services](#) provides helpful insights on how to start with your exploration journey.

Life is unpredictable and will challenge you to your limits in ways that you could not have imagined. We don't have control over what life throws at us. We do have control over how we nurture our protective factors to build a healthy psychological immune system. It is never too early or too late to start. A strong psychological immune system will help you through challenging times. So, be proactive and strengthen your psychological immune system by solidifying your protective factors.

Quote by Stephanie Lahart: "Respect, love, and value yourself. Always remember to be good to yourself by taking care of yourself. Make yourself a priority and know that it's okay. Don't feel guilty for loving yourself, first! You're just as important as anybody else."