MindBoost @CU

Breathe, Don't Burn Out

Your guide to less stress and better well-being at university

Practical tips, simple exercises
and healthy strategies
for everyday student life

CU Health
Hochschule Kärnten

Carinthia University of Applied Sciences
Hochschule Kärnten

A project by MindBoost@CU in collaboration with the Student Health Center

Study, Achieve, Breathe.

Exams, deadlines and pressure to perform are part of everyday student life. Sometimes, personal well-being gets left behind.

This is where MindBoost@CU comes in

MindBoost@CU is a student health promotion project at CU – Carinthia University of Applied Sciences. It focuses on neuroenhancement, stress and healthy coping strategies.

Our survey in the summer semester of 2026 (June 18 to July 31; n = 162) showed that neuroenhancement played a relatively minor role among respondents. In contrast, 53.7% (87 students) reported high levels of stress on the Heidelberg Stress Index.

What can you expect?

This booklet offers practical tips, healthy alternatives to enhance performance and short exercises for everyday student life. You will also learn where to find support at your university.

Less Pressure. More Well-Being.

Neuroenhancement: Learning at the Push of a Button?

Exam stress, late-night studying and the desire to perform well: Sometimes an extra energy boost can seem tempting.

What is neuroenhancement?

Neuroenhancement means deliberately using substances to try to improve concentration, attention or mental performance in healthy people.[1]

This includes coffee and energy drinks, often called soft enhancers, as well as prescription medication taken without a medical need.[1]

Better performance – but at what cost?

Caffeine can increase alertness for a short time.[2] However, misusing prescription stimulants can lead to health risks, such as sleep problems or dependence.[3]

Important: Not every supposed improvement in performance is actually helpful.



Being at your best starts with taking good care of yourself, not with a pill.

When Studying Gets Stressful

Exams, deadlines, part-time jobs and personal responsibilities: Students often have to manage many demands at the same time. This can quickly create the feeling that you always need to perform well.

When the pressure increases

During demanding periods of study, time pressure, high expectations and exams can become stressful. A study shows that these pressures may also be linked to the desire to improve performance through substances.[4]

More than just good grades

University life is not only about studying and achieving good results. Your well-being is just as important. However, between lectures, exams and other responsibilities, personal needs can sometimes be overlooked.



Your health is just as important as your academic success.

Brain Food Instead of Brain Boost?

Our brain needs energy and different nutrients to function properly. But can certain foods really improve our concentration?

A balanced diet – better nutrition

Carbohydrates, fats and proteins provide energy and support important functions in the body. Vitamins and minerals are also essential for many metabolic processes. A review found that better diet quality among students is often linked to lower levels of stress, anxiety and depressive symptoms.[5]



Omega-3 – Food for the Brain?

Omega-3 fatty acids are important parts of nerve cells. They are found in foods such as oily fish, walnuts and flaxseeds.[6]

B Vitamins – More Is Not Always Better

Vitamin B12 and folate play an important role in normal brain function. A deficiency can affect mental performance. However, people who already get enough of these vitamins do not seem to benefit from taking high doses.[7]

Good nutrition matters. But there is no guaranteed food-based learning boost.

Staying Awake at All Costs?

Coffee, energy drinks or water? Choosing what to drink is especially important during long days of studying.

Hydration and Concentration

Dehydration can increase tiredness and affect mood and mental performance. Studies show that drinking water after a period without fluids can improve certain cognitive abilities.[8]

As a general guide, adults should drink around 1.5 to 2 litres of fluids per day. More may be needed in hot weather or during physical activity.[9]

What Does Caffeine Do?



Caffeine blocks certain adenosine receptors in the brain and can temporarily increase alertness and attention.

Whether caffeine also improves complex thinking and decision-making is not yet clear. Its effects also depend on the amount consumed and individual sensitivity.[2]

Caffeine can help you stay awake, but it cannot replace enough sleep.

What Your Brain Really Needs

Studying, exams and long days take a lot of energy. But staying productive in the long term does not mean you have to be active all the time.

Sleep – More Than Just Rest

While we sleep, our brain processes and strengthens newly learned information. Lack of sleep can affect attention, memory and concentration.[10]

Most adults are advised to get 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night.[11]



Movement Gets Your Mind Going

Regular physical activity supports physical health and can also improve mental well-being and reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression. Even short movement breaks can help interrupt long periods of sitting while studying.[12]

Breaks Are Part of Learning

When you focus for long periods, you need time to recover. Short breaks can help reduce tiredness and allow you to return to your work with renewed attention.[13]

Rest is not wasted study time. It is an important part of learning.

Small Break, Big Impact

Sometimes you don't need a big change, just a moment to breathe. Especially during stressful periods at university, short breaks can help you take a step back from studying.

A Short Break for Yourself

On the next pages, you will find simple exercises that you can try without any special equipment. Whether between lectures, before an exam or after a long day of studying: Choose what feels right for you.

Your Exercises at a Glance

- **Back to the Here and Now**
  Become aware of your thoughts and surroundings.
- **Tense and Release**
  Release physical tension in a focused way.
- **Stretch & Reset**
  Break up long periods of sitting with small movements.
- **Five Minutes for Yourself**
  Take a short walk and focus on your surroundings.
- **Don't Be So Hard on Yourself**
  Treat yourself with more kindness.

Note About the Exercises

The exercises have been simplified for MindBoost@CU based on existing health information. They can support self-care in everyday student life, but they do not replace professional counselling or treatment if you experience ongoing or severe psychological distress.

Mind Racing? Back to the Here and Now

Approx. 2 minutes - Mindfulness Exercise - Grounding

Your thoughts are racing, your to-do list keeps growing, and you don't know where to start? This short exercise helps you focus your attention on the present moment.

How it works:

1. **Take a moment:** Pause what you are doing. Notice any thoughts or feelings without judging them.
2. **Feel the ground:** Place both feet firmly on the floor and feel the contact beneath them.
3. **Breathe calmly:** Breathe out and in slowly and gently. You don't need to take particularly deep breaths.
4. **Notice your body:** Gently stretch your arms or press your hands lightly together.
5. **Explore your surroundings:** Look around. What can you see, hear and physically feel? Then return your attention to your next task.

This exercise is based on a grounding technique described in guidance from the World Health Organization (WHO). It focuses attention on the body and immediate surroundings.[14]

Tense and Release

Approx. 2 minutes - Muscle Relaxation

Stress can cause physical tension. This exercise helps you notice the difference between tension and relaxation in your body.

How it works:

1. **Sit comfortably:** Sit on a chair in a relaxed position and place both feet on the floor.
2. **Tense your hands:** Gently make fists with both hands for about 5 seconds. Notice the tension without causing any pain.
3. **Release the tension:** Open your hands and relax them for about 15–20 seconds. Notice the difference between tension and relaxation.
4. **Relax your shoulders:** Gently raise your shoulders for about 5 seconds, then let them drop again.
5. **Notice how you feel:** Take a moment to notice how your body feels now and continue breathing calmly.

Progressive muscle relaxation is based on consciously tensing and relaxing different muscle groups.[15]

Stretch & Reset

Approx. 2–3 minutes - Movement Break

Sitting for long periods can cause muscle tension. This short movement break helps you loosen up your body and focus your attention on yourself again.

How it works:

1. **Stand up:** Stand up and place your feet about hip-width apart.
2. **Circle your arms:** Slowly and gently circle your arms forwards and backwards.
3. **Straighten up:** Straighten your upper body and gently pull your shoulders back and down.
4. **Loosen up:** Relax your arms, gently move your shoulders and continue breathing calmly.
5. **Notice how you feel:** Pause for a moment and notice how your body feels.

Regular movement and gentle mobility exercises can help break up long periods of sitting. This exercise was developed for MindBoost@CU based on the Austrian Health Insurance Fund's brochure Beweg' dich – Gesunder Rücken.[16]

Five Minutes for Yourself

Approx. 5 minutes - Mini-Walk - Movement Break

Sometimes a short change of scenery can help you take a break from the stress of studying. This mini-walk combines movement with mindful awareness.

How it works:

1. **Leave your study space:** Stand up and, if possible, go outside or walk around the building for a few minutes.
2. **Walk without rushing:** Walk at a comfortable pace without trying to reach a specific goal.
3. **Notice your surroundings:** Keep your phone in your pocket if possible. Take a moment to notice what you can see and hear around you.
4. **Return mindfully:** After about five minutes, return to your study space and think about which task you would like to focus on next.

The Austrian Public Health Portal describes physical activity and short walks as possible ways to manage stress.[17]

Don't Be So Hard on Yourself

Approx. 2 minutes - Self-Compassion

"I'm not good enough." or "Everyone else is doing better." Thoughts like these can come up during stressful times. This exercise encourages you to treat yourself with more kindness.

How it works:

1. **Notice your thoughts:** Ask yourself: What am I saying to myself right now? Maybe you're thinking, "I'll never manage this."
2. **Recognise self-criticism:** Notice the thought and say to yourself: "I realise I'm being very critical of myself."
3. **Change your perspective:** Think about what you would say to a good friend in the same situation.
4. **Speak kindly to yourself:** Choose a helpful sentence, such as: "This is difficult right now. I can still be kind to myself."
5. **Take the next step:** Focus your attention on the next small task you can manage.

The World Health Organization describes treating yourself with kindness as a strategy for coping with difficult thoughts and feelings. [14]

Good to Know – Our Sources



[1] Dietz, P., et al. (2018). Prevalence estimates for pharmacological neuroenhancement in Austrian university students: Its relation to health-related risk attitude and the framing effect of caffeine tablets. *Frontiers in Pharmacology, 9*, 494. https://doi.org/10.3389/fphar.2018.00494

[2] McLellan, T. M., et al. (2016). A review of caffeine's effects on cognitive, physical and occupational performance. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews, 71*, 294–312. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2016.09.001

[3] Hildt, E., et al. (2015). Reflections on addiction in students using stimulants for neuroenhancement: A preliminary interview study. *BioMed Research International, 2015*, 621075. https://doi.org/10.1155/2015/621075

[4] Engel, K. M., & Meissner, K. (2025). Neuroenhancement unter Studierenden im ländlichen Raum – eine Querschnittstudie zu Prävalenz, Genderunterschieden und Beweggründen. *Prävention und Gesundheitsförderung, 20*, 421–427. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11553-024-01139-7

[5] Phelan, J. M., et al. (2025). The association of overall dietary quality on stress, anxiety, depression, and academic performance in college students: A systematic review. *Journal of American College Health, 73*(3), 977–988. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2024.2418521

[6] Rabast, U. (2022). *Gesunde Ernährung, gesunder Lebensstil: Was schadet uns, was tut uns gut?* (3rd ed.). Springer.

[7] Morris, M. S. (2012). The role of B vitamins in preventing and treating cognitive impairment and decline. *Advances in Nutrition, 3*(6), 801–812. https://doi.org/10.3945/an.112.002535

[8] Zhang, J., et al. (2020). Different amounts of water supplementation improved cognitive performance and mood among young adults after 12h water restriction in Baoding, China: A randomized controlled trial. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17*(21), 7792. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17217792

[9] Bundesministerium für Arbeit, Soziales, Gesundheit, Pflege und Konsumentenschutz. (2025, June 25). *Wie viel soll man trinken?* Öffentliches Gesundheitsportal Österreichs. https://www.gesundheit.gv.at/leben/ernaehrung/info/fluessigkeitsbedarf.html

[10] Rasch, B., & Born, J. (2013). About sleep's role in memory. *Physiological Reviews, 93*(2), 681–766. https://doi.org/10.1152/physrev.00032.2012

[11] Watson, N. F., et al. (2015). Recommended amount of sleep for a healthy adult: A joint consensus statement of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine and Sleep Research Society. *Sleep, 38*(6), 843–844. https://doi.org/10.5665/sleep.4716

[12] World Health Organization. (2020b). *WHO guidelines on physical activity and sedentary behaviour*. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240015128

[13] Albulescu, P., et al. (2022). "Give me a break!" A systematic review and meta-analysis on the efficacy of micro-breaks for increasing well-being and performance. *PLOS ONE, 17*(8), e0272460. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0272460

[14] World Health Organization. (2020a). *Doing what matters in times of stress: An illustrated guide*. https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/331901

[15] Redaktion Gesundheitsportal. (2024, October 4). *Progressive Muskelentspannung*. Öffentliches Gesundheitsportal Österreichs. https://www.gesundheit.gv.at/leben/stress/progressive-muskelentspannung.html

[16] Österreichische Gesundheitskasse. (2026). *Beweg' dich: Gesunder Rücken* [Brochure]. https://www.gesundheitskasse.at/cdscontent/load?contentid=10008.763643&version=1774955005

[17] Redaktion Gesundheitsportal. (2021, December 21). *Stress bewältigen.* Öffentliches Gesundheitsportal Österreichs. https://www.gesundheit.gv.at/leben/stress/entspannt-bleiben.html

You Don't Have to Do It All Alone

Exam stress, personal worries or the feeling that everything is too much? Sometimes short breaks and relaxation exercises are not enough. In these moments, seeking support can help.

Support at Your University

The Student Health Center at CU – Carinthia University of Applied Sciences is a point of contact for student health and well-being.
Here you can find information about available support services and learn who to contact if you need help.

Find More Information Here:

https://www.cu-hochschule-kaernten.at/en/services/cu-health/student-health-center



Asking for help is a sign of strength.

Help When You Need It

Whether you are dealing with personal worries, mental health challenges or a crisis, here you can find important contacts and support services.

Emergency & Health Advice

Ambulance: 144

Police: 133

EU Emergency Number: 112

Health Advice: 1450 (24/7)

Emergency SMS for Deaf People:
0800 133 133

For Students

Counselling and Crisis Support (Student Health Center):
+43 5 90500 7105

Psychological Student Counselling Klagenfurt: +43 463 23482

Instahelp: Online psychological counselling for students and staff

Psychosocial Support

AVS Psychosocial Services:
+43 463 512035-0

Carinthia Psychiatric Therapy Centre:
+43 463 329850-40130

COURAGE* Klagenfurt: +43 660 1661668

Carinthia Violence Protection Centre:
+43 463 590290

Men's Helpline: 0800 400777

Caritas Carinthia – Men's Counselling:
+43 463 500667

Crisis Services & Helplines

Telephone Counselling: 142 (24/7)

Rat auf Draht – Helpline for Children and Young People: 147 (24/7)

Psychiatric Emergency and Crisis Service (24/7):
PNK East: +43 664 3007007
PNK West: +43 664 3009003

Women's Helpline Against Violence:
0800 222 555 (24/7)

LEGAL NOTICE
Media Owner and Publisher: FH Kärnten, gemeinnützige Gesellschaft mbH, Europastraße 4, 9524 Villach, Austria.
Responsible for the Content: MindBoost@CU project team, CU – Carinthia University of Applied Sciences.
Design: MindBoost@CU project team. Layout created with Canva.
Image Credits: AI-assisted illustrations created with ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2026).
Printed by: druck.at Druck- und Handelsgesellschaft mbH.
Place of Publication: Villach, Austria.
Place of Production: Leobersdorf, Austria.
Publication Date: November 2026.