

**A GUIDE FOR THE WEST LOTHIAN  
COLLEGE COMMUNITY:**

# **COPING WITH UNCERTAINTY IN CHALLENGING TIMES.**

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Globally, there are many challenges we humans are facing. As well as surviving a pandemic, we are witnessing climate change and war. This can become very overwhelming. Whether you feel that you're personally affected by this kind of news or not, it can be very upsetting to face some of the challenges of our global reality. **It's okay and it is normal to feel stressed, nervous, or helpless right now.**



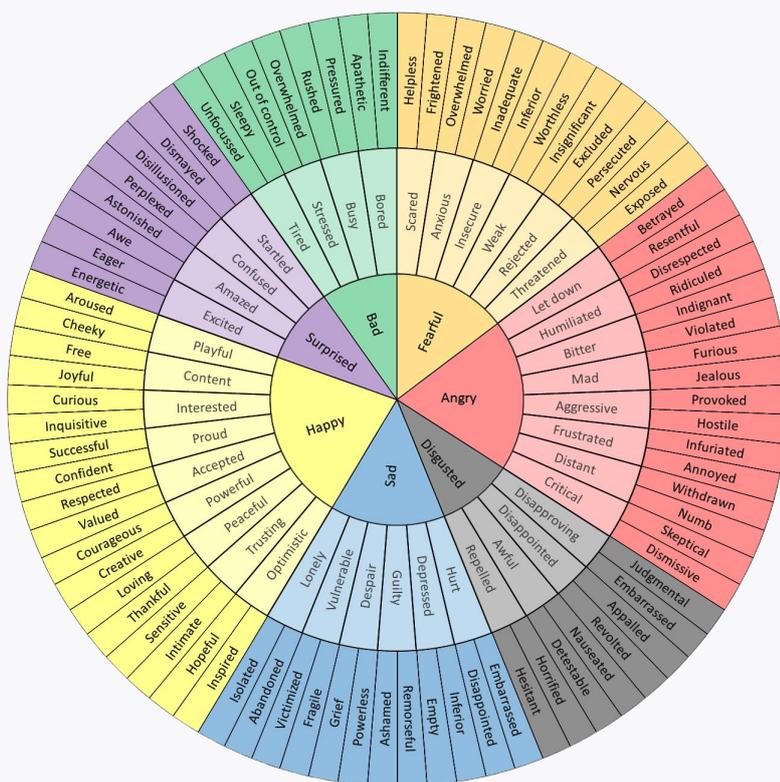
None of the skills or techniques we will share with you to support your mental health and wellbeing are replacements for systemic political changes that provide an equitable safety net for all. **However, the ability to cope can make hardship more bearable.** While there is no 'one-size-fits-all' single answer on how to cope, there are **real evidence-based approaches to keeping yourself well.** Through this guide, we hope to suggest different ways to support you to do this.

In recent weeks of writing this resource those who have history, heritage or family in Ukraine may be especially struggling knowing their home is under attack. **We share the deepest sympathy for the people of Ukraine and from all war-torn backgrounds and want to remind you of our support**



# ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR FEELINGS.

‘Acknowledging your feelings’ might seem like an obvious piece of advice on the surface, but it is not always a simple thing to do. Some people find being honest about their vulnerabilities a real struggle, while many of us **do not have a broad language around emotions**. In circumstances such as these, it can be helpful to use a Feelings Wheel:



Try to work out how it is that you really feel when you're overwhelmed: is anger mixed up with sadness, are there any better words to put to what you are experiencing? Not only will this make things clearer for you, it might help you describe yourself better to friends and those who are supporting you.

Be aware of the physical signs that the events are emotionally getting to you, like changes in appetite, stomach troubles, sleeplessness, muscle tension and irritability.

# ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR FEELINGS.

The challenge with uncertain situations is that there are gaps in what we know, and our brains want to fill in the gaps.

We fantasise what might happen to fill those gaps, what could go wrong, what might happen next. It's possible to imagine things getting limitlessly bad.



However, uncertainty is a fact of life which will never go away as we are probably never going to be able to travel ahead in time. We can learn to tolerate – or at least accept – uncertainty. It is very difficult, but does avoid us using our brainpower spending time trying to fix something which isn't within our power to fix.

# PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR MINDSET.

In the long run it doesn't help to pretend something is 'fine' if it is not. **However, the way we think about things really does affect the way we feel.** Remember that it's valid and normal for upsetting things to be upsetting, anger inducing things making you angry etc but a **balance must be struck.** We can allow ourselves to feel sad, **we don't have to reject negative emotions if they are true,** but finding a way **not to be consumed or overwhelmed by these feelings** is essential.

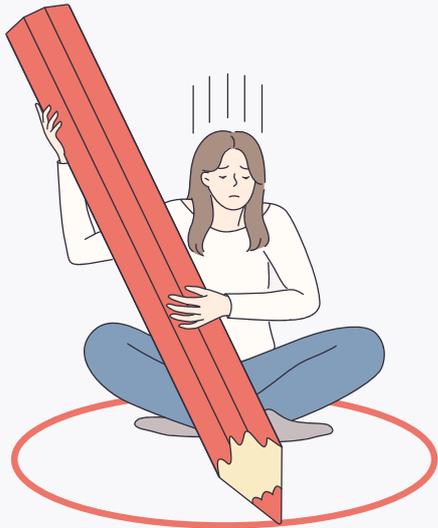
**'Catastrophising'** is a word which means 'viewing a situation as considerably worse than it actually is.' Try not to catastrophise on a personal level – yes, there are catastrophic things going on in the world, but part of the reason we can feel overwhelmed over them is because we start to see them as an attack on **our personal safety and circumstances.** If we are seeking clarity by looking for more information, eg reading news about war, we might see the same news again and again. **This doesn't allow us to step back and see the clearest, biggest picture.**



If you find yourself trying to fill in the gaps in a negative way, try to address your thoughts and **consider how realistic or helpful they are.** For example, if you find yourself thinking: 'This is the worst thing ever. If this happens, then this might happen, and then I won't get to do this' consider how you can **gently adjust your thoughts,** it might be more realistic to say: 'I'm really upset by the news. I want things to go well and I'm scared they won't, but I'm going to prioritise looking after myself.'

# SWITCH OFF.

In your life there will be sources of stress which you can limit, **know that you have the power and the right to limit these stressors.** That might mean:



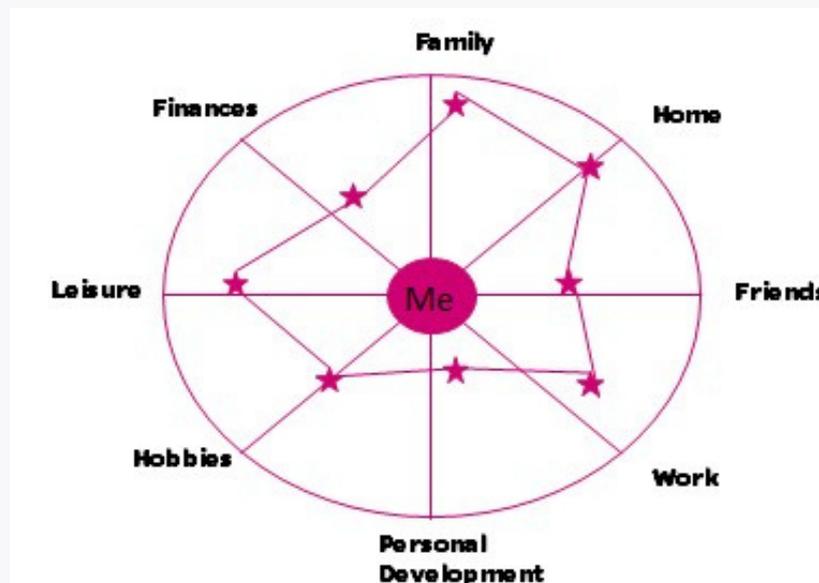
- Turning off the news, or picking an hour where you catch up with the news and avoiding it at other times.
  - Staying away from social media, unfollowing certain accounts or blocking key words,
  - Having less contact with certain people.
- There's nothing wrong with setting boundaries to keep yourself well.

In difficult times we might find ourselves **obsessively watching the news for updates or constantly scrolling through social media feeds** to seek more information. However, this can give you a **false sense of control**. In reality, many news updates do not need to be monitored on an hourly basis and knowing about them doesn't really help us in these big situations. While staying up to date can help you be prepared in certain circumstances, psychologists say this can backfire and **increase anxiety in the long term**.

However, there are things we can control, such as our general well-being – and this is a very productive thing to focus on.

# SELF CARE IS NOT OPTIONAL.

We hear of self care all the time, but it can be helpful to revisit what it really means and why we do it. Self Care can move beyond the popular idea of bubble baths, beard oils and herbal teas, which are totally valid and brilliant but **not the be-all and end-all of looking after ourselves**. But where to start? If you're unsure, try this activity:



1. Draw a circle with five lines through it.
2. Each spoke represents an important area of your life with you at the centre, the hub that holds everything together. Think about what you would put at the end of each spoke.
3. Now think about each of these areas in turn and mark on the spoke where you feel you are in relation to your heading.
4. If you feel that you have everything well controlled and can make no difference to that area, mark yourself right out at the end of the spoke.
5. If there are issues, then bring your mark nearer to the hub. The nearer to the hub, the more attention you require to pay to this area.
6. Once you have done this for each spoke, join the marks up.



# SELF CARE IS NOT OPTIONAL.

Ideally, you want to have a rounded circle in the wheel. This would indicate that you have the main areas in your life balanced and controlled.

Look at your wheel and decide which areas require attention due to the wheel's imbalance; this will help you focus on where to improve. **The lowest area could be a good place to start to prioritise and give you a focus for your self care.**

For example, the person in the above diagram wheel has a fantastic balance in their 'Family' section – maybe intuitively, their first place to turn for self care might be spending time with family members. However, if their fulfilment in the area of 'Personal Development' is relatively low, **this could be a more productive place to focus.**

Sometimes when we are looking to change our mental health and wellbeing as part of self care, we can look to more 'literal' sources of mental health support, such as Counselling. However, **smaller changes to our day to day routine can make such a foundational change** in our lives from which growth can come.

Be careful about coping strategies that **might make things worse.** Keeping yourself busy might keep you distracted. But it can also make you feel exhausted or add stress. A glass of wine or a beer in the evening may help some people relax. But drinking isn't a great way to deal with stress. It can actually make stress and anxiety worse. **If you find that stress and anxiety are making it hard to manage daily life, talk to a doctor.**

# HELP WHERE YOU CAN.

Helping others, making an **individual contribution which makes an active difference** can greatly improve our mood. It can feel like a special accomplishment when it is on our own accord or through our own passion to help.

Through helping we can gain back a feeling of control and empowerment, but also the sense of **connectedness and belonging** we get from being part of a common goal and working towards a greater good.

There are unlimited ways you can **help and take part in communities**, whether through formal volunteering, sharing support on social media, offering childcare or doing something practical like cooking a meal. This is **focusing on what we can do**, whilst also making connections and trying something different.

Here are some verified ideas on how we might help efforts around the Ukrainian war and might give ideas for future scenarios:



if you would like to chat, have any questions about this resource please email our Student Support Services: [supportlearning@west-lothian.ac.uk](mailto:supportlearning@west-lothian.ac.uk)

## Support for students:

- **Free counselling service:** On MSTeams or in person, email [counsellingservice@west-lothian.ac.uk](mailto:counsellingservice@west-lothian.ac.uk)
- **Togetherall:** online community 24/7 mental health support. Website is [togetherall.com](https://togetherall.com)
- **Nightline:** Phone line or messenger, [ednightline.com/instant-messenger/](https://ednightline.com/instant-messenger/) or call: 0131 557 4444
- **LT4U:** Online or phone, 40 minute listening appointments, email: [wlclisting@gmail.com](mailto:wlclisting@gmail.com)
- **The Man Cave:** Online and in person mens mental health group. Email: [themancave@west-lothian.ac.uk](mailto:themancave@west-lothian.ac.uk), or via social media
- **Students Association:** A wide range of support from hot food to school uniforms, to clubs and peer support. They even have a Recharge pack, a self help kit with resources for you. Visit them at No.1 on the Square, or contact via social media, MSTeams or email [StudentAssociation@west-lothian.ac.uk](mailto:StudentAssociation@west-lothian.ac.uk)
- **Student Support:** Offer a wide range of support, visit them at No.1 on the Square, or email [supportlearning@west-lothian.ac.uk](mailto:supportlearning@west-lothian.ac.uk)

## Support for staff:

- **Employee Assistance service:** Free 24/7 support on a range of wellbeing issues tel 0800 028 5148 or [wlcouncil.optimise.health](https://wlcouncil.optimise.health)
- **Free counselling service:** can be accessed via the above or HR and People Development Team
- **Togetherall:** online community 24/7 mental health support. Website is [togetherall.com](https://togetherall.com)
- **LT4U:** Online or phone, 40 minute listening appointments, email: [wlclisting@gmail.com](mailto:wlclisting@gmail.com)
- **The Man Cave:** Online and in person mens mental health group. Email: [themancave@west-lothian.ac.uk](mailto:themancave@west-lothian.ac.uk), or via social media

**More info on our Staff Zone Mental Health Support on SharePoint**



**More info on our Mentally Healthy Community Page on Moodle**

