

Do you need help, academia?

MIND MATTERS is a campaign of the IMP, IMBA, GMI and the Max Perutz Labs with the aims to raise awareness about mental health in academia, destigmatize mental health issues and getting help, inform about professional help services on campus and encourage mental health self-care.

On the world mental health day, the 10th of October, we kicked-off our campaign. The academic community came together in the IMP lecture hall for a thought provoking and insightful day on the topic of mental health in academia.

The event commenced with a video recording of words of welcome from Heinz Fassman, the President of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. In his welcome address, he commended our community's efforts to address this important topic and take a first step to remove taboos and creating an environment where individuals can openly discuss their struggles.

In our first session, representatives of six different mental health organisations introduced their help services and offers. They stressed the significance of seeking assistance when necessary and encouraged us to make use of their services. "Prejudices prevent a visit, but it is completely normal to have problems and it is appropriate to do something about them", concludes Kathrin Wodraschke from the PBS.

"Mental health is not a destination, but a process"

NOAM SHPANCER

▼ Heinz Fassmann, president of the Austrian Academy of Sciences sent us his greetings



MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS 2023

After the presentations of the individual help services, it became evident that, in all cases, a limited number of sessions can be offered, but notably, these sessions are provided at no cost. More information on the individual help services and contact details can be found at the end of the newsletter and on the homepage of the training unit: <https://training.vbc.ac.at/resources/health-wellbeing/>.

Following an energising break with coffee and cake and personal exchanges with the representatives of the help services, our event continued with our keynote speaker Aljoscha Dreisörner. Aljoscha's engaging talk provided evidence for academia being in a mental health crisis and offered practical solutions to tackle the topic of mental health in academia.

In order to improve mental wellbeing in academia, Aljoscha suggested a three-tiered approach:

- **System-centered approach:** This entails changing the cultural dynamics of academia. It involves altering the prevailing 'publish or perish' attitude and creating more non-permanent positions independent from publishing output.
- **University/department-centered approach:** Institutions should play a pivotal role in providing support. This can include campaigns, on-campus coaching opportunities, and ombuds services. But the key challenge here is to encourage individuals to utilize these resources actively.
- **Person-centered approach:** Techniques like meditation practices and self-compassion can help individuals cope with the stressors of academic life.



While he acknowledged that the latter only serves as a band-Aid for much needed larger structural changes (point 1 and 2), Aljoscha encouraged us to implement two strategies into our daily lives based on his own and other people's research:

Meditation: a one minute daily routine
In an on the spot demonstration, Aljoscha introduced a simple, yet effective one minute meditation practice. The three-step process is designed to bring intentionality and mindfulness into your daily routine.

ONE MINUTE MEDITATION

1. **Find your space:** Sit at the edge of your chair with an upright, straight posture. This helps you create a sense of purpose in your meditation.
2. **Focus on your breath:** Close your eyes and take a deep breath into your belly, followed by a long exhale. Direct your attention to the sensation of your breathing and the movement of your belly as you inhale and exhale.
3. **Recenter your mind:** If your mind wanders during the meditation, gently guide your focus back to your breathing. You can gradually increase the duration as you become more comfortable with the practice. It's a small investment of time that can yield substantial benefits.

Self compassion: a path to emotional resilience
We academics often strongly identify with our work, which can lead to equating our achievements with our worth and as such

▲ **Our invited help services.** From left to right: Viktoria Lanthier (Institute for Vitalpsychology, iVip), Kathrin Wodraschke (Psychological Counselling Services for Students, PBS), Si-John Park (Crisis Intervention Center), Nina Corsini and Mehdi (Ombudspeople), Michael Hamberger (Work and occupational psychology, University of Vienna), Florian Grössl (Coaching on campus).

failure being perceived as lack of worth. To address this, Aljoscha introduced the concept of self-compassion, a research-based construct rooted in Buddhism. It offers a kinder way to relate to oneself, akin to how a good friend would offer support during challenging times and comprises three vital components.

- **Mindfulness and Acceptance** (vs overidentification): Instead of over-identifying with your struggles, acknowledge that you are experiencing pain in the present moment.
- **Self-kindness** (vs self criticism): Extend the same level of compassion to yourself that you would offer a friend facing difficulties.
- **Common Humanity** (vs isolation): Recognize that the challenges you face in academia are not isolated; they are shared experiences. You are not alone in your feelings of rejection or imposter syndrome.

In his research he determined that self-compassion can reduce the amount of negative emotions, which are negatively linked to job satisfaction and work engagement, and thereby increase job satisfaction^{1,2}. In order to train our self-compassion he suggested us two tools:

SELF-COMPASSION BREAK

A mental exercise:

1. **Acknowledge moment of suffering**, what are the emotions ("yes this is difficult")
2. **Common humanity** ("others have had similar experiences")
3. **Self-kindness** ("how can I be kind to myself now")

As a practical measure towards self-compassion, he introduced his fascinating study that aimed to identify if coping with stress can be improved only through touch from others or if self-touch is sufficient. The setup of the study was that participants were either hugged by a stranger or had to hug themselves, each for 20 seconds, before they had to do a stresstest.

Throughout the experiment the stress level of the participants was monitored. Intriguingly, the study showed that the simple 20 second self-soothing touch (see picture-below) can be as effective as an external touch in blunting your stress response to challenging situations³. A small thing one can incorporate into daily life.



The last point that Aljoscha raised in his talk was that **supervisors have the potential to exert a positive influence on the mental well-being of early-career researchers**. He encouraged group leaders to participate in leadership courses without stigma:

“We are not becoming PIs (...) for being managers or leaders but for being great scientists. (...) but you are supposed to be good at it [leadership], why would you be good at it, if you never learned it?”

Additionally, he offered two solutions for mentors how to increase the well-being of their mentees:

- **Goal progress:** help PhD students progress with their work, stay on schedule, not run out of funding and finishing their thesis (i.e. with regular meetings, realistic expectations, help writing papers for cumulative thesis, etc.)
- **Offer emotional support:** be mindful of power structures (i.e. type of communication), create a culture of psychological safety and trust, create a positive error culture and normalize failure (i.e. PIs lead by example and acknowledge that they also get rejected and struggle sometimes)

In our last session, a panel discussion moderated by Eva Schmid, Aljoscha, coach Florian Grössel, PhD representative Lorena Hofbauer and Max Perutz Labs PI Sascha Martens discussed about strategies to improve mental health and well-being in academia and on our campus. It became clear that finding solutions for individual psychological challenges at the campus level is a complex endeavor and that we need new tools to be able to effectively tackle them.

Nonetheless, it's both uplifting and empowering to emphasize that each and every one of us has the capacity to foster a more wholesome campus atmosphere by looking after our own well-being and, through our actions, providing support to others.

▲ Our keynote speaker Aljoscha Dreisoerner, postdoc in the Lab of Urs Nater at the University of Vienna, shared with us his insights on how to tackle the mental health crisis in academia.

▼ Our panelists. From left to right: moderator Eva Schmid, Head of Scientific training, and panelists Aljoscha Dreisoerner, coach Florian Grössel, PhD representative Lorena Hofbauer and Max Perutz Labs PI Sascha Martens.

SELF-SOOTHING TOUCH

Right hand on heart, left hand on belly.



Picture taken from <https://www.new-synapse.com/aps/wordpress/?p=234>

Aljoschas talk convinced us: self-compassion and mindfulness can help us deal with everyday life stress in academia.

How can I increase my self-compassion?

1. **Make it a goal** - “I want to be more self-compassionate”
2. **Become mindful with the negative tendencies** (self-criticism, isolation, overidentification)
3. **Use focused interventions** (self-compassion break, self-soothing touch, guided meditation, etc.)



INTRODUCED HELP SERVICES

iVip – Institute for Vitalpsychology

Vitalpsychology offers consultations for employees and students of **IMP, IMBA, GMI and VBCF** regarding work related and/or private challenges that have an impact on work, health or well-being. Two sessions are free of charge. For more information you can contact **Dr. Verena Monschi** - the contact person of Vitalpsychology: v.monschi@vitalpsychologie.at

Work & Occupational Psychology Team, University of Vienna

The Work & Occupational Psychology Team offers consultations for **employees of the University of Vienna** regarding all general psychological and psychosocial issues of employees. Free of charge. For more information you can contact the following email address: rrm.arbeitspsychologie@univie.ac.at

Psychological counselling services for students Vienna

PBS offer free of charge psychological counselling for **students and persons applying for studies** including personal, studying, and social issues or career decision. For more information you can contact the following email address: psychologische.studentenberatung@univie.ac.at

Crisis Intervention Center Vienna

They are a multiprofessional team of psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers who offer free of charge consultations for **all adults** of the age of 18 onwards regarding acute stress caused from work or personal issues. For more information you can contact them via kriseninterventionszentrum.at

Mental Health Coaching on Campus with Florian Grössel

Florian offers 1on1 or group coachings, peer group support or seminars free of charge for employees and students of **IMP, IMBA, GMI, Max Perutz Labs and VBCF**. For more information you can contact him directly at florian.groessler@imp.ac.at.

Ombudspeople

They are represented by trained staff members who volunteer to provide confidential advice for complaints, witnesses, and accused parties incl. bullying, harassment, and discrimination. Their services are available without costs for everyone at **GMI, IMBA, IMP, VBCF (and Max Perutz Labs)**. Ombudspeople and their contact details are listed at the training unit website <https://training.vbc.ac.at/resources/ombudspeople/>

“Try to be a positive force for the mental health of others”

ALJOSCHA DREISOERNER

ALJOSCHAS PUBLICATIONS

1. Dreisoerner, A., Junker, N.M. & van Dick, R. **The Relationship Among the Components of Self-compassion: A Pilot Study Using a Compassionate Writing Intervention to Enhance Self-kindness, Common Humanity, and Mindfulness.** J Happiness Stud 22, 21–47 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-019-00217-4>
2. Dreisoerner, A., Klaic, A., van Dick, R. et al. **Self-Compassion as a Means to Improve Job-Related Well-Being in Academia.** J Happiness Stud 24, 409–428 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-022-00602-6>
3. Dreisoerner A, Junker NM, Schlotz W, Heimrich J, Bloemeke S, Ditzen B, van Dick R. **Self-soothing touch and being hugged reduce cortisol responses to stress: A randomized controlled trial on stress, physical touch, and social identity.** Compr Psychoneuroendocrinol. 8:100091 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpnec.2021.100091>

OUR UPCOMING EVENTS

Check out our weekly posters and newsletters, and get inspired by our fantastic speakers:

Over Zoom:

- 18.10. Desiree Dickerson
- 24.10. Thomas Reinbacher
- 30.10. Britta Hölzel
- 07.11. Nina Junker

For more information, check your inbox and the info screens regularly! **We are looking forward to seeing many of you at our next events!**



▲ Our team at the kick-off event. From left to right, in the back: Max, Anna, Julia L., Lena, Julia J., Laura; in the front: Irena, Tamara, Amina; Daniel