Focus, Time Management and Personal Energy of Students during Online Education

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Abstract

Focus and personal energy during study and work are vital in all learning outputs, especially in the covid-19 time that addresses the importance of self-focused behaviour in online learning environments. In this paper, we present a method of gaining insight into previous knowledge of students' approaches to focusing and managing personal energy during covid-19 online studying environment to overcome stress. "Manage your energy, not your time" cites a Harvard Business Review study (Schwartz & McCarthy, 2016), explaining that time management is a waste of time; therefore, we should manage our energy instead. Leaders should focus on managing personal energy and surviving in the workplace to manage stress and achieve a balanced career and private life in the long run. Management course students at the School of Economics and Business, University of Ljubljana, can be perceived as future leaders; we collected their opinions. We used content analysis to estimate how stress affects them and how they manage the consequences of stress, particularly procrastination. The problem with procrastination is that our brains are programmed to procrastinate, especially when it comes to new, unknown tasks. Therefore, our mind responds to postponing the task as fear arises with an unknown task. Results are presented, and key identified themes offer implications for managing physical, emotional, and mental energy. Students perform different cardiovascular sports activities to reduce stress and successfully overcome studying goals in the covid-19 environment.

Keywords: Time management; focus; students; online education
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Introduction

Stress is a very common reaction to mental or emotional pressure, especially when we are in a situation we cannot manage. Stress results in physical, emotional, and/or mental responses. Positive stress keeps us alert and motivated; meanwhile, a long-term negative stressor (chronic stress) cause several problems to the person experiencing it, for example, physical symptoms (aches and pains, chest pain, exhaustion, insomnia, headaches and shaking, high blood pressure, muscle tension, digestive problems, skin problems, weak immune system, and others), as well as emotional and mental symptoms (depression, panic attacks, sadness, anxiety, and irritability, among others. People often develop unhealthy behaviors when overcoming chronic stress, such as drinking, gambling, eating disorders, smoking, using drugs, compulsive sex, shopping, or internet browsing (Cleveland clinic, 2021).

Nevertheless, also the COVID-19 pandemic changed our daily lives more than ever; people started working from home, and the educational sector transitioned to online education. It brought several consequences for the students, ranging from additional negative stressors, such as experiencing technical challenges, social isolation, and health problems, to positive influences in terms of no need for commuting and, therefore, important cost savings (Grah & Penger. 2021).

This paper aims to study how stress affects students and how they manage the consequences of stress, particularly procrastination. The research questions we aim to answer are:

- RQ1: Which approaches to focus and manage personal energy do students use to overcome stress?
- RQ2: How does stress affect them?
- RQ3: How do they deal with procrastination?
- RQ4: How do they take care of their energy (physical, emotional, and mental)?
- RQ5: Which cardiovascular activities and how often do they perform them?

To understand the phenomena, we performed the survey with open-ended questions among the first-year students of the Basics of Management and Organization course conducted at the School of Economics and Business, University of Ljubljana. For data analysis, content analysis was performed. Key themes are identified and presented in quantitative terms next to the NVivo results.

In the following subsection, a short theoretical overview of stress is presented. The next section is dedicated to the methodology, followed by the Results, Discussion, and Conclusion sections.

COVID-19 and online education

The outbreak of COVID-19 started in 2019 in the People's Republic of China and quickly became a global pandemic. To prevent paralyzing healthcare systems, numerous measures were taken around the globe, ranging from restrictions to travel, social distancing, wearing face masks, isolations and quarantines, and nevertheless, school and inevitable business closures on behalf of telecommuting (Fauci et al., 2020), among others (Grah et al., 2021). Even though Covid-19 is somehow under control (e.g., vaccines and other measures taken), transition to the online environment, at least partially, is still in place, as is the case with part-time study at the School of Business and Economics, University of Ljubljana.

The fast development of information-communication technologies enabled the transition to online education. Yet, the courses must be designed appropriately for online execution to attract and challenge students (Ally, 2008). Different advantages of online education can be identified, to name a few (Dhawan, 2020; Ally 2008,

Bączek, 2021): (1) easier accessibility - no location and access to material limits, (2) affordability (lower commuting and accommodation cost), (3) time flexibility (4) comfortable surroundings, and (5) learning pedagogy. Nevertheless, there are also some important negative aspects or stressors (Dhawan, 2020, Bączek, 2021): (1) technology-related problems, (2) can be boring, unengaging (3) lack of social interactions, (5) personal attention, (6) average course content, (7) challenges in understanding instructions.

The covid-19 pandemic and related measures are being taken to preserve health systems from breaking down around the globe, causing additional stress for many people (Madero Gómez et al., 2020). During the Covid-19 pandemic, many workers started to work remotely, changing their working conditions and daily routines (Şentürk et al., 2021). Due to social distancing, people spend more time at home and use new technology, causing additional technostress, especially for workers not accustomed to using this technology before (Oksanen et al., 2021).

Stress

Stress can be understood as part of daily human experience, yet associated with a variety of different problems, ranging from surgical trauma, burns, emotional arousal, mental or physical effort, pain, fatigue, fear, the need for concentration, loss of blood, the need for concentration, intoxication with drugs or environmental pollutants, to unexpected success requiring reformulation of lifestyle. It is to be found everywhere, business people under constant pressure, athletes straining to win, air-traffic controllers' responsibility for others' lives, and others (Selye 1976, in Fink, 2010). Stress is always subjective, and different people react differently to stressors, depending on the situation and skills of an individual. What someone might tolerate, others can try to avoid. Extreme stress can lead to burnout (Crampton, 1995).

For our brain to function optimally, the right level of arousal is needed, as performance is poor at low and high-stress levels while excellent at a reasonable level of stress (Rock, 2009). Therefore, not all stressors and all stress are harmful, especially if it is short-term and related to the task we are doing. However, long-term chronic stress causes negative symptoms in people (Cleveland clinic, 2021).

Positive stressors are usually short-term, feel exciting, improve a person's attitude and performance and motivate people (Kassymova et al., 2018). On the other hand, negative stress has increased significantly. It was estimated in 2018 to cost US businesses up to $300 billion a year (Mohney, 2018), not to mention its possible devastating consequences on our emotional and physical health. Schuller (1980), for example, listed numerous stress symptoms divided into three groups: 1) physiological: heart rate, headache, respiration, blood pressure, heart attack, and others; 2) psychological responses (affective and cognitive)- fight or withdrawal, regression, apathy, fixation, projection, negativism, fantasy, boredom, misjudgment, forgetfulness, trust issues, dissatisfaction, inability to organize, inner confusion about roles or duties, tunnel vision, inattentiveness, irritability, procrastination, and others; as well as 3) behavior: loss of appetite, weight gain or loss, sudden change of appearance, complexion, difficult breathing, smoking habits, use of alcohol, drugs, lower performance and job involvement, loss of responsibility and creativity, absenteeism, accident proneness and many other. One of the consequences of stress is procrastination, and most of us procrastinate. The problem with procrastination is that our brains are programmed to procrastinate, especially when it comes to new, unknown tasks. Therefore, the response of our mind is to postpone the task. Fear arises with an unknown task.

There are numerous studies, and different approaches suggested to overcome stress. For example, yoga might improve physical, emotional, and mental health (Cocchiara et al., 2019), and mindfulness helps reduce stress (Chiesa et al., 2009).

For stress prevention, different organization-level methods exist, such as task redesign, improved morale, flexible work schedules, increased autonomy, participative management, fitness and sports programs, and others (Crampton, 1995). Several individual-level techniques can be used when experiencing chronic stress (Mental Health Foundation, 2021):

1) Recognize when stress is a problem (link experienced signs of stress with pressures to find causes of stress
2) Think about where we can make changes
3) Build supportive relationships
4) Eat healthily
5) Control and cut down on smoking, drinking
6) Do exercise
7) Take time for ourselves to relax
8) Practice mindfulness
9) Sleep a lot
10) Be kind to ourselves

For students, Kassymova et al. (2018) suggest stress management techniques, such as relaxation, meditation, deep breathing, mental help promotion, and others. Despite the prevalence of stress among university students (Kassymova, 2018), only a fraction seek professional help (Saleh, 2018). Therefore, we were specifically interested in how students manage stress and which approaches they use.

Methodology

To overcome stress, this research aims to gain insight into previous knowledge of students' approaches to focusing and managing personal energy during the Covid-19 online studying environment. Specifically, we collected the answers of the part-time business students enrolled in the Foundations of management course in the school year 2021/22. The course is taught in the Slovene language as part of the School of Economics and Business, University of Ljubljana curriculum. Surveys with open-ended questions were conducted to collect content-rich data and gain a deeper understanding of the research phenomenon. Specifically, we were interested in the following questions:

1. Which approaches to focusing and managing personal energy do you use to overcome stress?
2. How does stress affect you?
3. One of the consequences of stress is also procrastination. How do you tackle overcoming procrastination?
4. How do you take care of your physical energy, list three activities?
5. How do you take care of your emotional energy, list three activities?
6. How do you take care of your mental energy, list three activities?
7. We increase our focus and, at the same time, reduce stress by including cardiovascular activities in our lives. Which cardiovascular activities and how many times a week do you perform them?

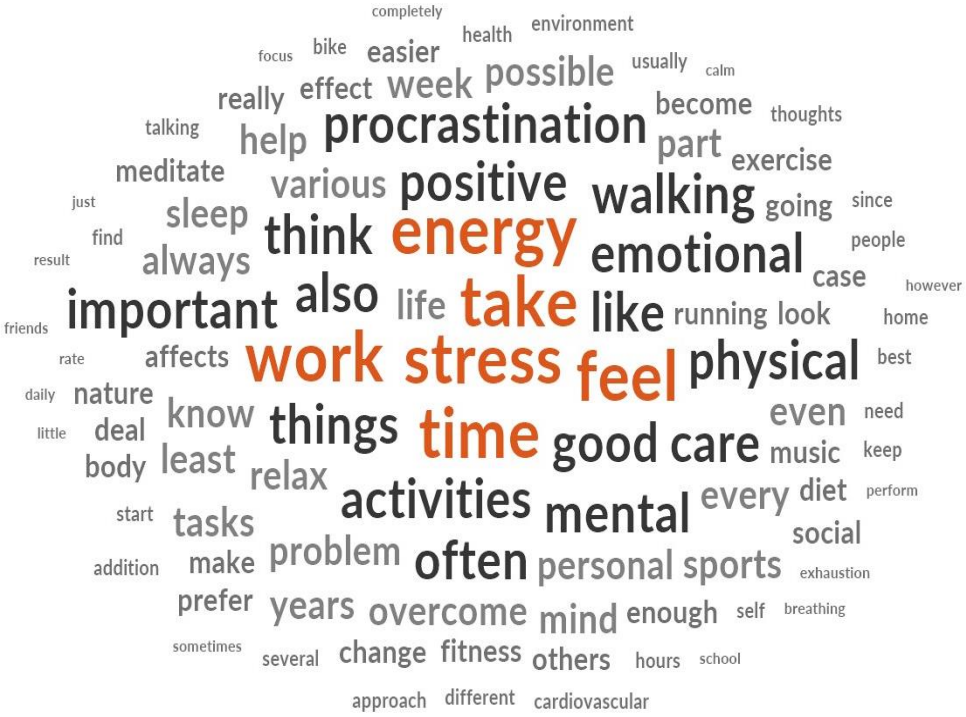
Of 22 students, 15 responded with valid answers, namely 46,7% males and 53,3% females. To grasp the overview of the collected data, the first part of the analysis is performed by using NVivo software to identify the most frequently used words related to the studied phenomenon. Before the analysis started, all collected answers were translated into English to find the 100 most often-used words (with

synonyms). In the second part of the data analysis, the content analysis (Stemler, 2000) was performed, which enabled us to compress the collected answers into a few categories based on specific rules and, therefore, quantify the qualitative data.

Results

Nvivo result (see Figure 1), namely the 100 most often used words, show that students experience stress and take a range of different approaches to deal with it, such as walking, running, they go to fitness or gyms, listening to music, or sleep or take some time for themselves to relax. Stress causes several consequences, including procrastination, lack of positive energy, and mental and emotional changes.

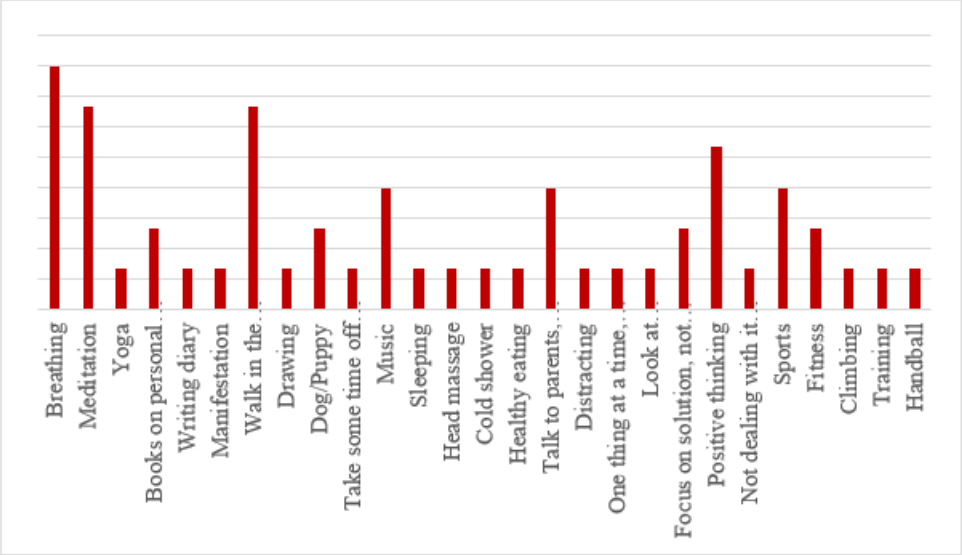
Figure 1
Managing stress and personal energy – most often used words by students – Nvivo analysis



Source: Author's illustration

First, it investigated which approaches students use to focus and manage personal energy to overcome stress. As shown in Figure 1, students use a range of different approaches. Most often mentioned is the deep breathing technique, which is used by 40% of the respondents, followed by meditation and walking in nature (33,3%). In addition, they also practice positive thinking (26,7%), listen to music, talking to beloved ones (parents, partners, siblings) (both 20%). Quite often, they also do different sports (altogether 53,3%; not specified by 20%, fitness 13,3%, climbing 6,7%, training 1%, and handball 6,7%). Also, pets/dogs, books on personal growth (13,3%), and several other approaches help them overcome stressful times. Approaches to focus and management of personal energy are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Approaches to focus and management of personal energy



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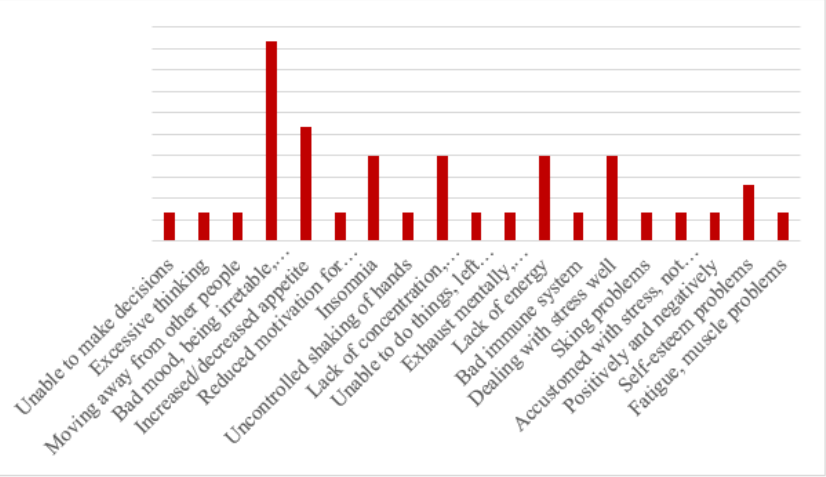
Further, we wanted to determine how stress affects students (Figure 3). 46,7% said they experience bad mood, anger, dissatisfaction, lower tolerance, and irritability. Also, they experience a change in their appetite (increased or decreased; 26,7%) and quite often suffer from insomnia (20%), lack of concentration, and headaches (20%). They also lack energy (20%), and 13,3% experience self-esteem problems; meanwhile, 20% claimed they deal with stress well. They also mentioned numerous other consequences, such as a bad immune system or skin problems.

Figure 3
How stress affects students (2)



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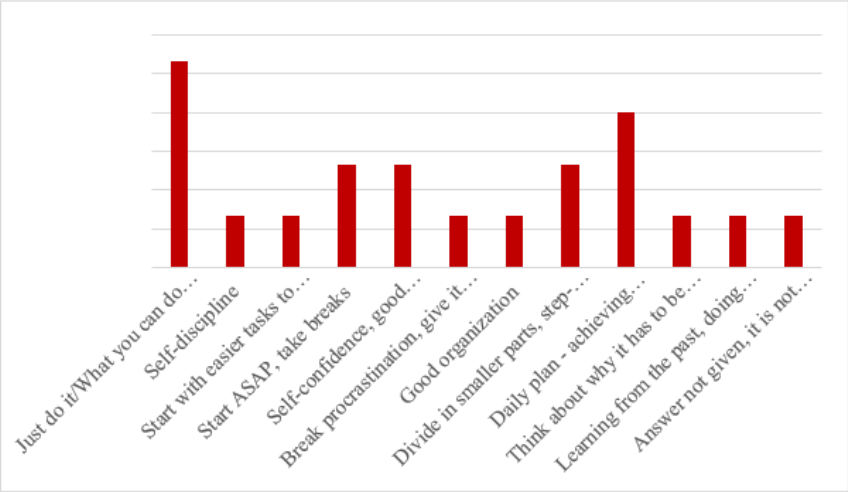
In addition, we were specifically interested how students overcome procrastination, which is one of the consequences of stress. Most often, students take the approach "Just do it!" or "Don't procrastinate on tomorrow, what you can do today" (26,7%); they also do the daily plan, as achieving smaller tasks increases motivation and self-confidence, which gives them the stamina to proceed further (20%). They also like to start as soon as possible to afford breaks (13,3%), and they

need the self-confidence to do the task (12,3%) next to other options, as presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4
Approaches to overcome procrastination



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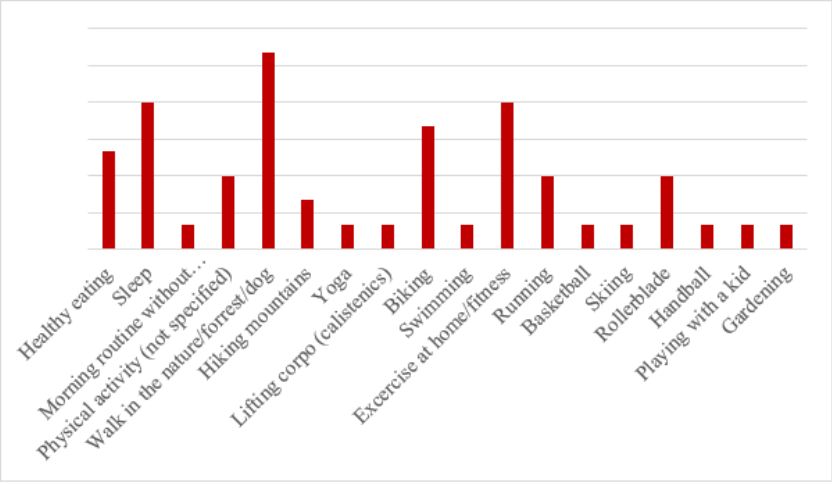
Our next question was focused on activities (three) students use to take care of their physical energy. More than half (53,3%) mentioned walks in nature and/or with dogs and physical activities: not specified 20%; exercising at home or in fitness 40%, biking/cycling 33,3%, running 20%, rollerblading 20%, hiking 13,3%, next to other sports, e.g., calisthenics, swimming, basketball, skiing, or for example handball. Also, good sleeping habits are pretty important, 40%, next to healthy eating (26,7%). They (6,7%) also practice morning routines without electronics and distractors. (see Figure 5)

Figure 5
Approaches to taking care of physical energy



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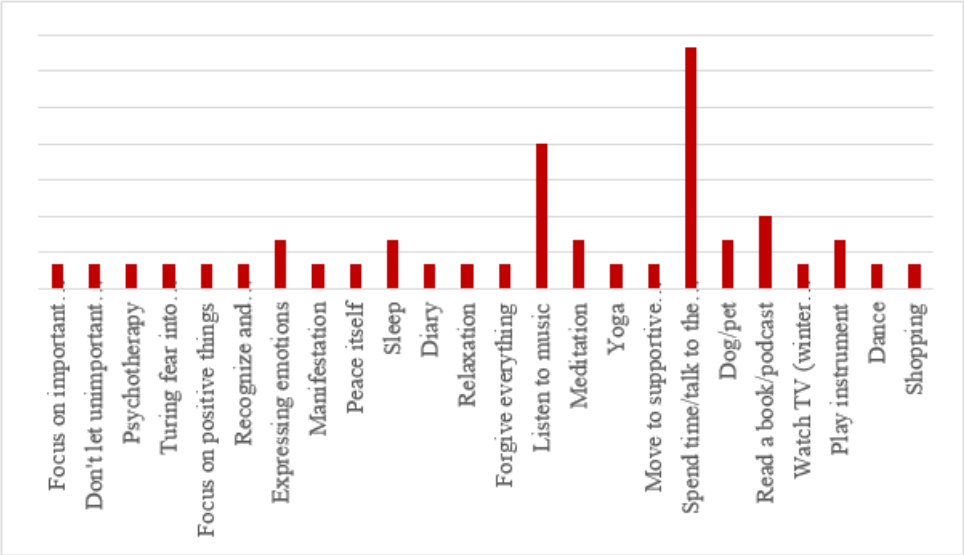
For taking care of emotional energy, most respondents (66,7%) spend time talking to the dearest people and their friends. 40% also listen to music; 20% read a book. They also (13,3%) play instruments or produce music, play with a dog, meditate, sleep, and express emotions (see Figure 6).

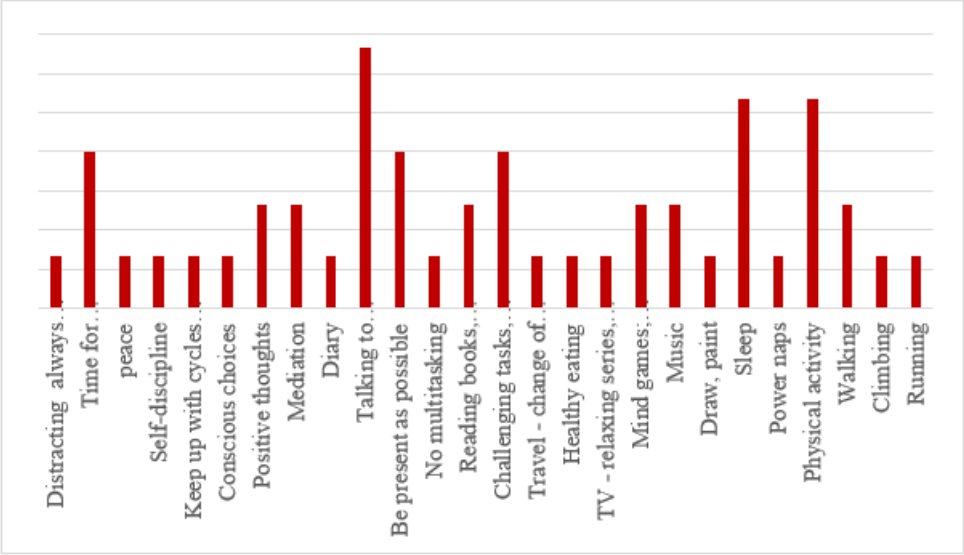
Figure 6
Approaches to taking care of emotional energy



Source: Author's illustration

For taking care of their mental energy, answers are dispersed. 33,3% talk to friends/family/partners, they also sleep (26,7%) or do some physical activities (not specified by 26,7&, walk 13,3%, climbing 6,7% and running 1%). 20% also mentioned they take time for themselves and their hobbies; they try to be as present as possible or creative by performing some challenging, creative tasks. See Figure 7.

Figure 7
Approaches to taking care of mental energy

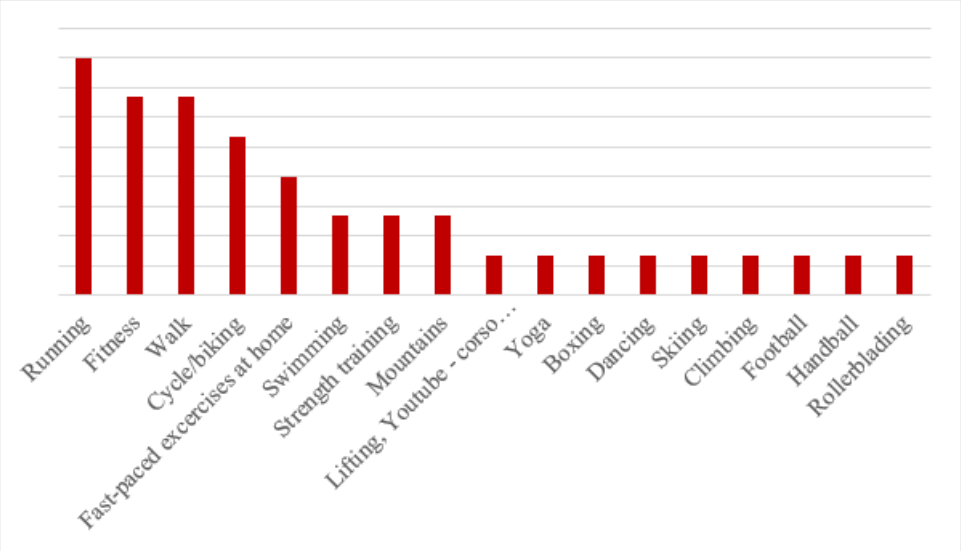


Source: Author's illustration

We were also interested in which three cardiovascular activities students perform (as perceived by them) and how often they do them. Fitness and walking are the most popular (both practiced by 33,3%), followed by cycling/biking (26,7%), fast-paced exercising at home (20%), swimming, strength training, and hiking mountains (all 13.3%). Nevertheless, they also mentioned boxing, dancing, skiing, climbing, football, handball, rollerblading, and practicing yoga (all 6,7%), see Figure 8. 13,3%

do activities daily, 13,3% six times a week, 33,3% at least three or more times a week, 20% at least two times a week, 13,3% as often as possible, and 6,7% did not specify.

Figure 8
Approaches to taking care of physical energy (7)



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Discussion and conclusion

The results of our study show that students experience lots of stress and suffer all kinds of consequences, despite being at the beginning of, or not entering, their professional lives. In answering our research question, we found they use various approaches to deal with stress. It is usually up to an individual to identify different approaches/tools and apply them successfully to overcome stress. To raise a healthy, self-confident professional workforce, we strongly suggest increasing awareness of stress among youth on national, organizational, and individual levels and taking appropriate measures. For example, at national levels, projects addressing stress among youth could be promoted more, or courses/additional content addressing managing stress could be added to official curriculums. Also, schools and universities could do their share, e.g., by emphasizing these topics among their pedagogues, teachers, and staff, to be more sensitive to students experiencing stress. For example, teachers could focus more on students' strengths instead of their weaknesses, as negative criticism might have devastating consequences for young people (Kassymova, 2018). Or they could provide some stress management training as part or in addition to their official curriculums.

Nevertheless, physical activity is also essential for managing stress, and PE could be performed daily at all educational levels. Nevertheless, the pace of living is fast, and some people do not take the time to become aware of the stressors in their lives or their children's lives. We believe more should also be done on the individual level to build (and not decrease) their self-confidence to do assignments and other tasks, which cannot be taken for granted.

This study has some important limitations: (1) the survey was done in the Slovene language, and some meaning could be lost due to translation (e.g., Nvivo analysis). In addition, also the sample of the study was small, so the findings cannot be generalized. Therefore, we suggest similar surveys be done nationwide, or at least a

much larger sample, to identify different stressors and stress levels and offer our future professionals appropriate tools to manage stress.

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