

THE SHAPE OF YOUR WELL-BEING

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**Work is good, so
long as you don't
forget to live.**

African proverb

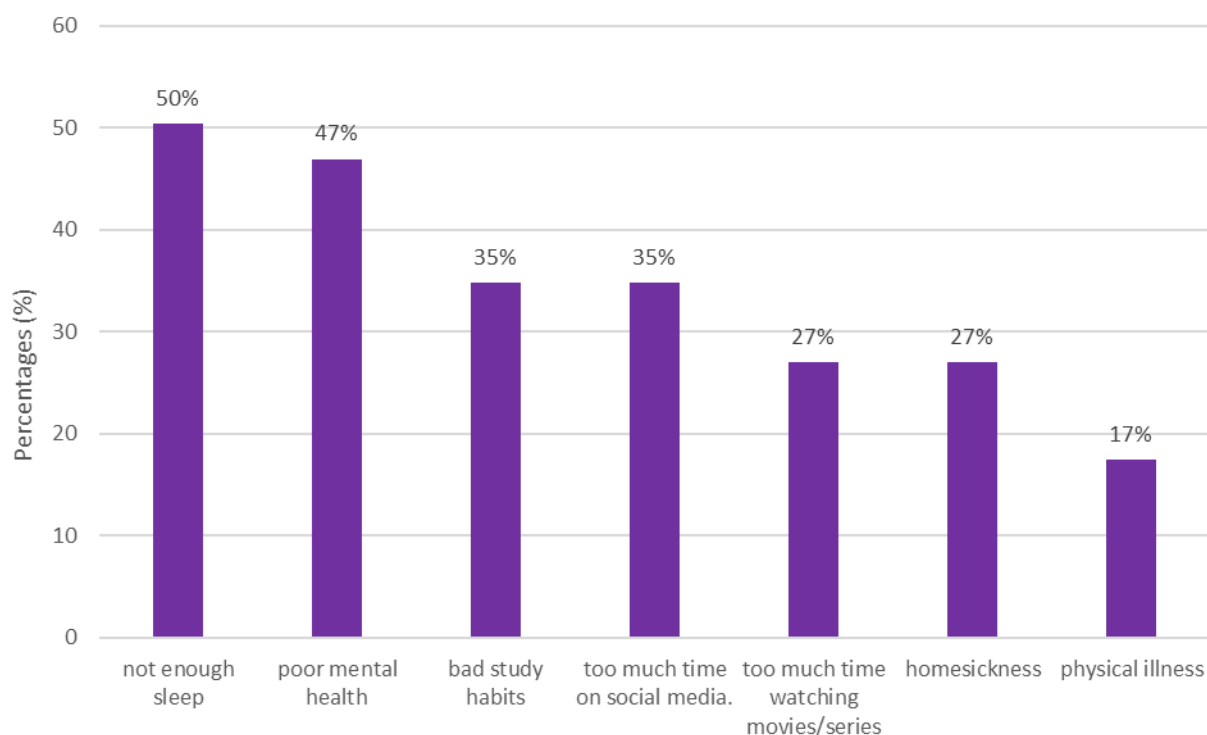




WHAT SHAPE ARE YOU IN?

Your ability to study successfully depends on your health and well-being. You can't be an effective student if you're not well! In a survey conducted among the 2023 first-year BSc students, 50% of the respondents said that poor mental health and 17% said that physical illness affected their studies negatively (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Student responses on personal factors negatively affecting their studies from the 2023 first-year BSc survey





So, what do you need to do so that you're not part of this year's 50% or 17%? Don't take your well-being for granted: make conscious choices that contribute to your ongoing physical and mental well-being. In order to have a successful year, you need to adopt an holistic approach, paying attention to your physical, mental, spiritual, financial and academic well-being. In this chapter, we explore each of these areas (and love and sex), why they matter, what you can do about them, and where to get help if you need it.

PHYSICAL WELL-BEING

There are three pillars to physical health: healthy eating, exercise and sleep. By paying attention to these pillars, you can keep your body in good health. In this section, we explore why each pillar is important and what you can do to keep these pillars strong.





Healthy eating

Your body needs a variety of nutrients, vitamins and minerals to function properly and be in good health, so it is important to eat a variety of foods. Vegetables and fruit are good for vitamins, minerals and fibre, especially those that are dark green or have yellow or orange flesh. It's healthier to eat unprocessed, unrefined foods. Wholewheat bread is better for you than white bread. Your body needs nine amino acids, which come from animal protein (chicken, meat, fish, eggs and cheese) or from the combination of a grain (rice, wheat or maize) with beans, lentils or other legumes. Drink plenty of plain water – it keeps your body hydrated, helps your system flush out toxins and is much healthier than fizzy drinks or coffee. If you don't have much control over your food options, do what you can with what is within your control. Eating as healthily as you can in your situation is part of taking responsibility for yourself.

If you are cooking for yourself, here are some tips. Read the nutritional information on the labels of the products you purchase so that you have an idea of what is going into your body. Buy in bulk or when there are specials, then cook in bulk to save time during a busy week. Ask the locals where they purchase their groceries, in case they know places with discounts. Avoid waste: bones and vegetable peels and tops can be boiled to make vegetable stock to add to soups and stews. Use the internet to search for a recipe that uses whatever ingredients you happen to have.

Be aware of your addictions, such as caffeine (in coffee, tea, colas and many 'energy' drinks) and sugar. Caffeine has a half-life of about five hours in your body – so drinking a cup at 7pm is the same as drinking half



a cup at midnight. Both may interfere with your sleep. Sugar gives you an energy boost, but may be followed by an energy slump where you feel tired. Too much sugar can also lead to inflammation in your body. If, on occasion, you do eat a lot of unhealthy sugary or greasy foods, don't be too hard on yourself. Just pick yourself up and try to focus on your healthy practices again. Find what works for you.

Sleep

Research shows that sleep is essential for learning. It assists in mental tasks such as figuring out difficult problems and helps you remember what you are learning. Good sleep helps your immune system because your body does repair work while you are sleeping. While you sleep, cerebrospinal fluid flushes toxins out of your brain.

Try to develop a regular sleep schedule, going to bed at the same time and getting up at the same time every day. Avoid caffeine and too much excitement immediately before bedtime; instead, unwind by stretching, reading a book or listening to some calming music.

Aim for minimum of seven hours of sleep a day, but eight hours is ideal. A late night here and there is okay, but it does mess with your sleep cycle. If you are one of those people who study better at night, be sure to take that afternoon nap and still attend your early morning lectures – adjust your schedule accordingly. Most university residences have rules about 'quiet time' and 'noisy hours', so you can plan your sleep and study schedules accordingly.



Exercise

Exercise boosts your energy levels, improves your mood, promotes better sleep and strengthens your immune system. It helps your brain grow new neurons and improves the oxygen supply to your brain, both of which improve learning. And, it can be fun!

You can exercise for free by taking the 'longer way' to class, always choosing to take the stairs rather than the lift, and walking from your residence, especially on good weather days. Try running up the stairs for a good rush of blood to your brain before your next lecture. For your safety, it is a good idea to walk in groups or create an exercise group at your residence.

UCT residences have the UCANTOO collaboration with Student Wellness Services (SWS), where students run or walk in groups every Sunday afternoon as a means of unwinding and keeping active. Ask at your residence or the SWS for more information. There is a UCT gym next to Graca Machel residence and there are many other gyms nearby where you can always ask for a student discount. And don't forget about the clubs and societies at UCT that are available to you. These environments can provide social interaction as well as physical exercise.


Pause to
ponder

How quickly can you climb the plaza steps?



MENTAL WELL-BEING

If healthy eating, exercise and sleep are the pillars of physical health, what are the pillars of mental well-being? It turns out that exercise and sleep are also good for mental health (two for the price of one!), because both make you feel better. In this section, we explore some other pillars.



When you exercise, *endorphins* are released. Endorphins are your brain's 'feel-good' neurotransmitters, so get moving ... dance to your favorite jams when you are feeling stressed.

Managing stress

Stress is a natural physical and mental reaction to life experiences. For short-term situations, stress can be beneficial because your body responds by releasing hormones that increase your heart and breathing rates, and ready your muscles to respond to a physical threat. But excessive stress (stress occurring too often, too long or too intensely) can negatively affect your ability to study.

Pause to
ponder

What are the triggers or causes of your stress?

The good news is that you can take practical steps to reduce the effects of stress, such as sufficient sleep, exercise, keeping your routine, making a 'to do' list and avoiding procrastination. Try writing down your concerns and feelings to stop them spinning in endless circles in your head. During a stressful period, take Vitamin B (ask a pharmacist for the cheap Vitamin B over the counter – it's the cheapest vitamin there is!). When you are feeling stressed, do a breathing exercise, for example box breathing: breathe in for four counts, hold



for four counts, exhale for four counts, and then hold again for four counts. Breathing exercises slow your heart rate, lower your blood pressure and increase your oxygen flow. If you use breathing exercises regularly, your body learns a new pattern, which, over time, leads to a general feeling of calm that makes it easier to handle moments of anxiety when they arise.

If you are struggling with managing your stress, tell your mentor, counsellor or a trusted friend how you are feeling. Take a look at others around you and think about how they are experiencing the same circumstances. There are probably others who are feeling the same way you do. Seeing your stress as normal can help you cope better with the situation.

Managing mental health

Mental illness is not something to be ashamed of, nor is it something to keep locked away and hidden. It affects us all at some stage of our lives, whether we accept it or not, and treating it as a dark secret will only make things worse. In the following extract, Sitara Hooseria relays her experience of struggling with her mental health and the strategies she recommends for you to take care of yourself.

Tips for managing your mental health

- *Love yourself.*
- *Don't compare yourself to anyone.*
- *Always write a to-do list (that's not time-specific).*
- *Don't miss lectures hoping you'll catch up.*
- *Make time for other activities besides studying.*
- *Make good friends.*
- *Don't give in to peer pressure.*
- *Be proud of your religion.*

Blessing Gumbu



MY STORY

Things I wish I had known before my mental health derailed my life

Sitara Hooseria Final-year chemistry student



My name is Sitara and I suffer from Major Depressive Disorder and Social Anxiety. I have been through many trials and tribulations, and I am certain I will encounter more in the future. That being said, I know exactly how it feels to fail tests/exams, even an entire course, simply because I could not bring myself to work. Depression wouldn't allow it. It was like sitting in the middle of a fire and not being able to stand up and run out. Some of you may already know what that's like, but for those of you who don't, here are some things that I wish I had known before my mental health derailed my life:

1. **Always choose happiness.** Especially when it comes to your majors. Don't ever silence the voice at the back of your mind telling you that something isn't right. What you thought you may have liked may not be what you expected, or maybe you've now realised that you enjoy something else. Listen to yourself. Many people have changed their majors multiple times (including myself). Are you even a UCT student if you don't change majors at least once?
2. **Don't overwork yourself.** Yes, academics are important, but if that's where all your time is going, it could lead to some serious mental health problems in the future. There is so much more to life than just academics and you shouldn't miss out. Make friends, make memories and live!



3. **Never forget why you came to university.** Even though having fun is important, it is equally important to never lose sight of where you're going. A lot goes on at university and you can't let yourself get lost in the middle of it. Don't force yourself to do anything you aren't ready for and stay away from people who don't respect your schedule.

We need to be vigilant of both ourselves and those around us. Sometimes we aren't able to see the bad things happening in our lives and we need someone else to tell us. Here are some things to look out for that may be signs of depression:

- Constant sadness.
- Lack of sleep.
- Losing interest in things i.e. not performing well anymore, not studying, completing assignments at the very last minute or not even submitting.
- Becoming isolated and distant.
- Anxiety.
- Lack of energy.
- Reckless behaviour.
- Suicidal thoughts.

If you feel like you may need help, never hesitate to ask. Don't wait for things to get worse. Trust me, I know. Make an appointment with SWS online or using the details found behind your student card.



Relaxation

Our brains need time to relax. After working hard the whole week, some time off hanging out with family or friends and doing some sort of activity that you enjoy, like sports or cooking, will do you good. It gives your mind the space and time to process your week and be creative. It can also give you that reviving spark to tackle the next week and all that it presents. Mingle at your local church, mosque, synagogue, sports club or community centre. Sing or make music with friends. Take some buddies for a walk on the mountain (it's right here!) or to the beach – time spent outdoors and in nature is good for the soul.

In many African cultures, unwinding is not seen as a waste of time, but rather as a valuable moment to process the day. There are good reasons why so many religions and traditional belief systems have a day of rest or a day where work is put aside and people slow down to spend time with family, congregation and community. Let's embrace and own our Africanism in this regard.

Connect with others.
Connect with nature.
Connect with yourself.



Have you seen the woman in the moon? She has a baby on her back, a pile of wood on her head and a dog running at her feet. She was sent to the moon because she collected wood on the day of rest.

Traditional African story



Your brain needs varied kinds of stimuli. Watch a movie with your friends, go to a play at UCT's Baxter Theatre (which often gives student discounts), or take in a free Thursday lunchtime concert at UCT's College of Music. UCT is filled with people from different cultures and upbringings, so engaging with others can be a way to expose yourself to different ideas (and even foods). Read a novel (not your textbook, unless that gives you joy). Have a hobby. Engaging with social media or watching TikTok/YouTube videos can be very relaxing, but should be done in short intervals during the day – these can be a great timewaster! Also remember that everything should be done in moderation – if you don't overdo things, you should be fine. And if you do stumble, take a breath and restart.

There is also a 'dark' side to relaxation.

Peer pressure may affect you in your relaxation time. Peer pressure is just bullying by another name. It is possible to call bullies out by saying 'hey, don't bully me, I'm not up for it' and walk away, but this makes you more susceptible to peer pressure because your brain is still maturing. Always remember who you are and what your values and goals are. Try to hang out with people with different backgrounds who share the same values and goals you do.

If you use alcohol to relax (since you've finally reached the age where it's legal!), take note of these few brain facts. The part of your brain most affected by alcohol is your hippocampus, which 'stores' your memory and learning. A person blacks out or can't remember things while out drinking because of damage to the hippocampus cells. Alcohol disrupts your ability to form new long-term memories, so alcohol and learning don't

I wish I knew on day one that I needed to create a life outside of my studies. I needed more creative avenues.

Bianca Masuku



mix well. Alcohol also interferes with the development of your brain, which only completes its development in your late 20s. One of the last parts of the brain to mature is your prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for your planning and decision-making. So, making decisions under the influence of alcohol can affect your safety and make you susceptible to risky behaviour like unprotected sex (more now than when you are older).

A study shows that one in five USA female university students is sexually assaulted when alcohol or other substances are involved.

You may now also have access to other brain-altering substances. The plant with many names (marijuana, cannabis, dagga, dipatje, dope, hash) is now legal because it is difficult to manage – people can grow it in their yards. Taking marijuana can lower your life satisfaction, lead to poorer physical and mental well-being, added relationship problems, and lower success in your academics. Take note, you may be against using of drugs, but drinks can be spiked and you can be tricked into taking substances. MDMA (ecstasy or molly) looks and tastes like a sweet. Marijuana can be baked in chocolate brownies, so the effects take time to kick in, making it easy to overdose compared to smoking a joint or spliff.

There are many choices you can make during your relaxation time. Always prioritise your personal safety and well-being.



SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING

Another part of the holistic approach to a healthy lifestyle is your spiritual well-being. Orateng Mogadingwane shares her experience below about how her beliefs and her spirituality helped and guided her through her first-year.

You can do anything to achieve what's best of yourself for the future.

Yanga Zweni

MY STORY

The tougher it gets, the more important it is to seek God

Orateng Mogadingwane



Now to the question, where is God/soul/spirit in all of this?

Varsity isn't easy, so doubting and questioning where God is in all of this is quite common, particularly when you're not getting the marks you used to and are facing personal problems. But I've learned and grown to be more grateful for my belief in God during those exact times in my life. It might not always feel like God is there, but for me, hope kept me going. In choosing to believe that He was there, made me see Him in times I would previously not have seen Him.

Understanding that I have been purposefully placed here on this earth, at UCT, in science. That's hope and reason enough for me to believe that God is with me and that He will guide me. It will get tough, but that's life. When you're going through a tough situation, acknowledge and be grateful for the good things that you already have. The tougher it gets, the more important it is



for us to seek God, to work on ourselves, to work on our souls and take care of our spirituality.

Part of settling into the fast-paced life of varsity, getting your degree and setting yourself up for success is: finding yourself. The few years that you are here are by far some of the most crucial in shaping the adult you will become. Besides the stress of dealing with culture shock, there's the fear of ending up where you never imagined or wanted yourself to be (i.e. with wrong friends, wrong habits, etc.), but still wanting to have the varsity experience everyone speaks about.

An important part of making it through first year was the decisions I made. These were guided by my values and morals and most importantly my beliefs.

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Do something that feeds your soul.

The experience of falling in love is wonderful. Enjoy it. Have fun! But also ask yourself honestly. Does this relationship support my long-term goals and dreams for my future? Few people actually stay with their first love, so don't risk your whole future. You will have many more opportunities for romance in the future.

Here are some important points to take note of:

- Before you can truly love anyone else, you first need to love yourself. Don't look to another person to fill your gaps. It simply won't work.



- A person who truly loves you wants the best for you. They should treat you with respect and never undermine you, not even in a joking way.
- The first time a romantic partner hurts you physically, tell someone. Don't keep it a secret: it's not you who should be ashamed. If they plead for forgiveness and promise it will never happen again, don't fall for it. Get advice from someone who cares about you.
- Ask your friends to be honest with you about any red flags they see. They can often see things in your life more clearly than you can.
- You are NOT responsible for someone else's behaviour. Nor can you change someone who cheats or lies (but you can choose someone who does not cheat and does not lie).
- You ARE responsible for your own actions and words. Be careful and thoughtful in how you treat those you get close to. You don't want to damage someone else or yourself along the way.
- Breaking up, even for all the right reasons, is hard. Ask your friends for moral support. Allow yourself the time and space to process and mourn the loss.

A big part of falling in love is physical attraction. A kiss and a touch can lead to something more. Make sure that whatever you do is the result of a conscious decision when your head is clear and you're not under the spell of a kiss. Every one of us has their own views and beliefs about the rights and wrongs of sex. That is up to



you. But whatever you believe, there are always consequences. Unprotected sex can lead to HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Unprotected sex can lead to a pregnancy which can change your life forever, especially at the age of 20! Note that SWS supplies free contraceptives, HIV testing and treatment for sexually transmitted infections.

FINANCIAL WELL-BEING

Worrying too much about finances will negatively affect your studies. On the other hand, learning to manage your money (whether it's a lot or a little) is a basic skill that, once mastered, will serve you for the rest of your life is.

Step one in managing your financial health is drawing up a budget. Make a list of everything you need money for, such as toiletries, food, transport, and now and again expenses like books and clothes. Don't forget to keep aside a bit as pocket money for things that you 'want' but don't necessarily 'need'.

Divide your monthly funds between the categories you have listed. Allocate a little money each month to 'now and again' expenses like books and clothes, so that when they are needed, you can purchase them. Also include an often overlooked item that is also important: money for emergencies, such as transport to attend a funeral. Keep track of what you spend on each item. Better money management starts with:



- Awareness – know where your money goes every month (e.g. are you spending too much on bank charges)?
- Budgeting – let your budget guide you; don't spend money you don't have.
- Saving – put money away for unforeseen circumstances.

If you need more money to survive, you can try to find some paid work. First-year students can typically find work as promoters or as high school tutors – check with UCT's Career Services for more information. Student housing, libraries, and the Baxter Theatre may also have jobs available on campus. Note, however, that it is UCT policy that a registered student may not do paid work for more than 20 hours per week. Also, be careful of taking on too much work – you still need lots of time to study!

HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR

You need to know that you deserve to ask for the 'transport' that gets you to the end of the degree. Not everyone can fit on the same bus.

Caitlyn Mahoney

Much of what we've suggested in this chapter, you can do on your own. But, you don't have to do this 'university thing' ALL on your own. In fact, it's often smarter to get help. Remember your dream and goal is to pass the year and get your degree, so you need to be able to tackle the problems that come your way. Help-seeking behaviour is part of problem-solving. It even helps you be TOUGH enough for science. It's part of your resilience when challenges come your way.



Here are a few tips on getting help at UCT:

- Don't be embarrassed or ashamed – everyone needs help and you have the right to ask for it.
- Once you know you need help, take action and be relentless in your quest for it – speak to your lecturers, tutors, friends (even Google!).
- You must be able to clearly communicate what you need help with or what is bothering you – write it down before sending that email or making that phone call.
- There's always someone willing to hear you and help you – a stranger, a professional, a mentor, a lecturer, a tutor, a classmate, a friend.
- Speak to your tutors or lecturers about accessing lectures or lecture transcripts online if you are struggling to keep up. You can also ask for more time in exams or to 'write' your exams verbally so ask.
- Keep a list of all the kind people you have met or interacted with at UCT.

Only as you gain more experience, can you navigate your degree better and seek out help - you know what signs to look for and also what to do. If you need immediate help, you can:

- Make use of the numbers at the back of your student card.
- Contact the Office for Inclusivity and Change (OIC) whenever you feel that you are being discriminated against.
- Call Campus Protection Services (CPS) in case of emergencies.

**Pause to ponder**

Write down what you need right now (in terms of help) so that you can take action and move forward.

Another important source of assistance is the Student Wellness Services (SWS) – they've been mentioned throughout this chapter. Make use of it. Here is useful information regarding SWS that may be of help to you.

MY STORY

What to expect from Student Wellness Services (SWS)

UCT science student



The SWS have a medical team with a psychiatrist, medical doctors, nurses and a pharmacy. They also have a team for counselling and an after-hours team who help students in residences outside of normal consulting hours. At SWS, the staff are kind and understand students. They do not judge you. They have years of experience working with students and have worked with a range of conditions.

When accessing SWS, take note of the following:

- Make sure that you have a booking before going to SWS.
- Factor in time travelling to and from SWS because they are based in Mowbray. There is no shuttle which goes straight to SWS.
- If you are ill, try to go to SWS before your class.



- Do not wait for the last minute – like just before your test or exams, to book a session. It will be difficult to get an appointment that suits you. They tend to get booked up around test and exam periods.
- If an issue presents, don't delay getting help. The longer you leave it, the worse it will get!
- Do not expect a medical/psychological report (e.g. if you are excluded at the end of the year) if you are not known to them (i.e. you have not seen someone on a regular basis).
- Ensure that you go on the day you want to apply for a deferred exam. If you go later than the day of the exam, it will be difficult to provide a medical certificate for the deferred exam application.
- Do not forget to cancel your appointment if you cannot make it. It will give another student an opportunity to see a practitioner.
- They have a walk-in service on fifth floor of the Steve Biko Building. You don't need to have an emergency to make use of this service. It is staffed by a nurse and a counsellor.

Note the following details related to payment:

- NSFAS students do not pay for these services.
- Students who have medical aid, can pay cash and claim back from their medical aid. However, the cost of seeing a psychologist or social worker cannot be claimed.
- You can add your bill to your fee account – this helps when other family members are paying.
- It is best to pay on the day of your consultation.



ACADEMIC WELL-BEING

Academic well-being involves keeping up with your assignments and coursework by putting time management strategies in place (see the 'Time management' chapter), while also keeping a healthy work-life balance. Keep a schedule and daily 'to do' lists. Avoid cramming and stress by attending your classes and tutorials regularly and reviewing your lecture notes every day. Study actively, but also take breaks in between: stand up, stretch, switch to a different subject, etc. Another important aspect of academic health is giving yourself permission to struggle and make mistakes, as discussed in the 'How to succeed in your first BSC tests' chapter.

***Icebo liyazakha* (a plan will come up)**

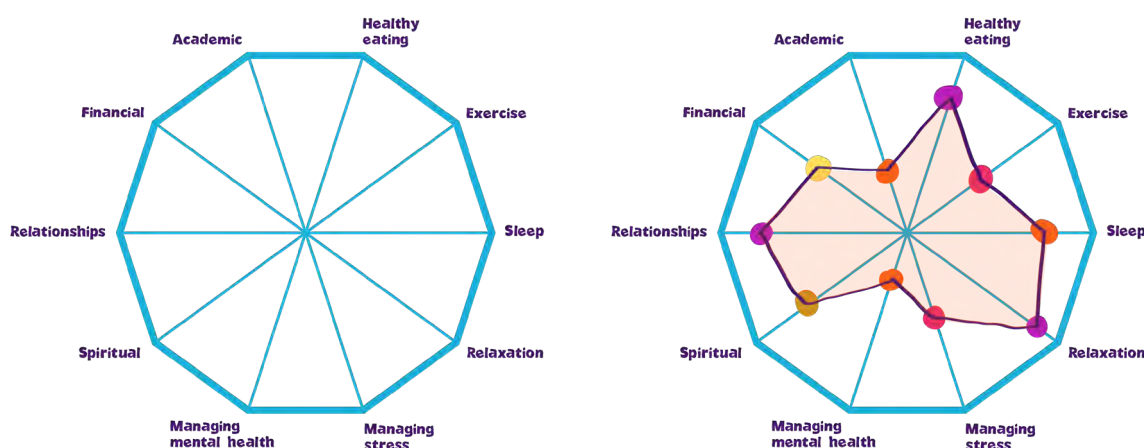
Icebo liyazakha simply means everything will be okay. *Icebo lizozakha noba udlula kwintoni na, kodwa* do not give up or feel like you have failed or feel like it is the end of the world, *hlala usazi ukuba icebo lizozakha. Usaphila konke kusezolunga Qhubeka uvuke uyozama, ngoba icebo lizozakha. Nakweyiphi na imeko okuyo,* don't give up, *icebo lizozakha.*

Emihle Kwetana



NOW, WHAT SHAPE ARE YOU?

Draw a radar chart like the one shown. Then use a dot in each of the pieces of the pie to indicate how you're doing in that area: the closer to the perimeter, the better you're doing. Join the dots to find out what shape you are.



Are you happy with your shape? If you'd like to change your shape, suggest to yourself a couple of practical steps you could take. Write your suggestions down, then choose two that you can implement (put into practice) today.

Start those healthy habits towards a better you. Also, give yourself a pat on the back for those parts of the pie you're doing well in! While there's always room for improvement, you should always take the time to congratulate yourself on those things that you are getting right, so keep up the good work!



READ/WATCH MORE

Fun on a budget

Here is an article about **fun things to do on a budget**.

Alcohol or substance use issues

For issues with alcohol or substance use, the Ke Moja WhatsApp Chat Platform is available seven days a week, from 8am to 5pm. WhatsApp 087 163 2025 for a live chat with one of the counsellors.

Anxiety breathing exercises

To learn breathing exercises to help with anxiety, read **this article**.

Love and sex

If you feel insecure in this area, or if you feel you don't really know enough to act responsibly and carefully, you can phone **Lifeline** (0800 567 567) or send a "pls call me" to **loveLife**:

- **Vodacom** *140*0833231023#
- **MTN** *121*0833231023#
- **Cell C** *111*0833231023#

Both organisations have centres throughout the country with very good counsellors.

Stress management and healthy lifestyle

Take a look at these videos for useful tips on managing stress and leading a healthy lifestyle:

- **BBC: Managing stress – Brainsmart**
- **Managing stress and homesickness**
- **90:10 – The single most important thing you can do for your stress**



Student's Wellness Services

Get more assistance from **SWS**

Alternative services to SWS

- Day hospital in Woodstock
- Nurse at Medisphere (Rondebosch), Medirite (Riverside Mall) and Rustenburg Pharmacy (Fountain Square Rondebosch)

Alternative counselling

- Famsa – 021 447 7951 (Donation required)
- Counselling Hub – 021 462 3902 (Donation required)

Sports Science Institute

Click **here** for more information on the Sports Science Institute.

UCT clubs and societies

Click **here** for more information on UCT clubs and societies.

UCT Career Services

Click **here** for more information on the UCT Career Services.

Office for Inclusivity and Change (OIC)

Click **here** to contact the OIC.

Campus Protection Services (CPS)

021 650 2222 (24 hours)

021 650 2223 (24 hours)



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