

# Mental Health in Early-Career Science

## How to recognize pressure early — and respond in ways that help



This talk helps you understand what is happening when academic life becomes draining — and gives you practical options for what to do about it. It is not about performing wellness. It is about staying capable over time.

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**JÖRG BERGMANN**

# What this talk is for

This talk moves from understanding to responding — so you leave with orientation, not just information.



Why academic structures can become draining — and why that is not a personal flaw?



How to tell strain, overload, and crisis apart — so the response fits the state?



What tends to help early — and when to reach beyond self-help?





# Why this situation of ECS can be genuinely hard

**Deep meaning & identity investment**

**High competition & constant evaluation**

**Uncertainty, dependence & limited control**

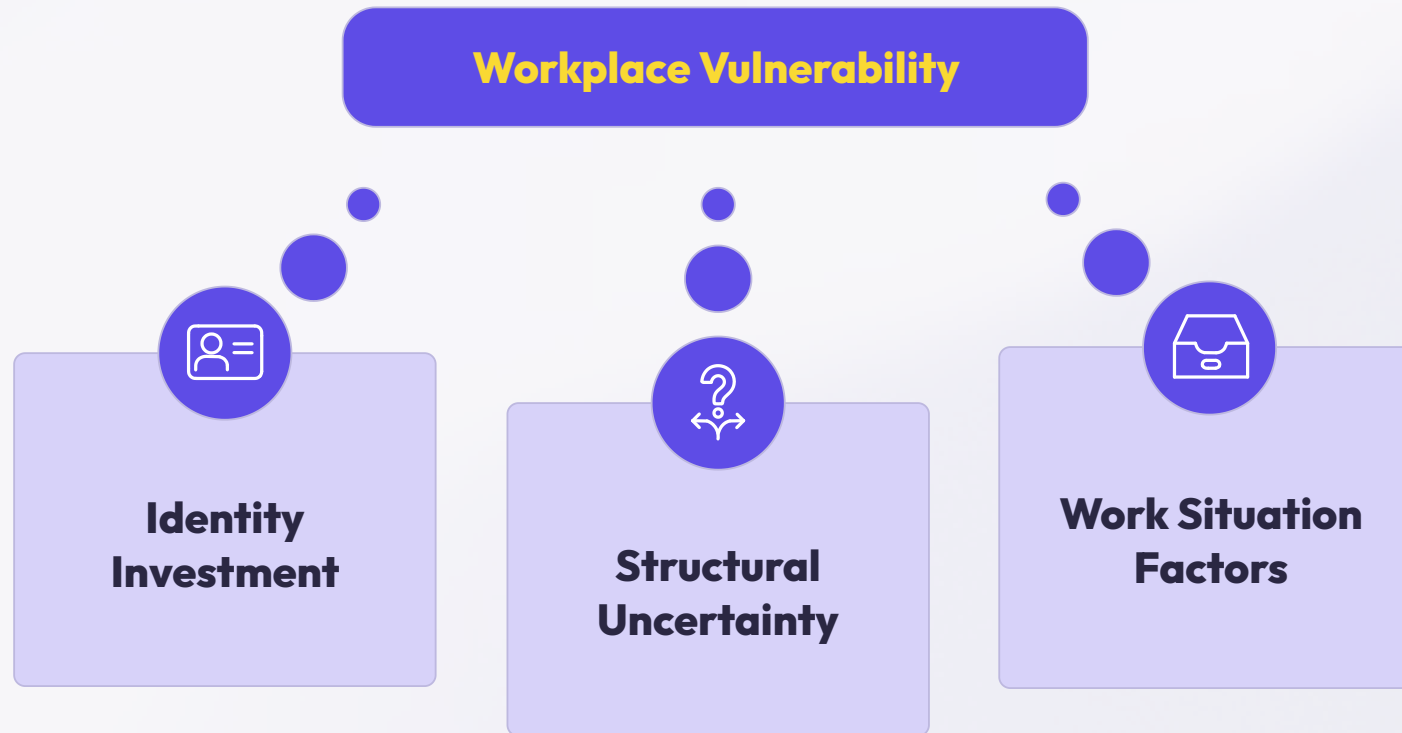
**Mobility, isolation & publication pressure**

This does not make researchers weak. It makes the situation genuinely demanding.

*Martínez-García et al., 2024; Levecque et al., 2017; Janke et al., 2025.*

# Pressure builds where identity investment meets structural uncertainty.

This is not a personal weakness. It is what happens when meaningful work is embedded in precarious conditions.



# When external pressure becomes self-pressure

## Science promises

Curiosity

Autonomy

Contribution

Meaning

## Early-career reality often adds

Metrics

Gatekeepers

Short-term contracts

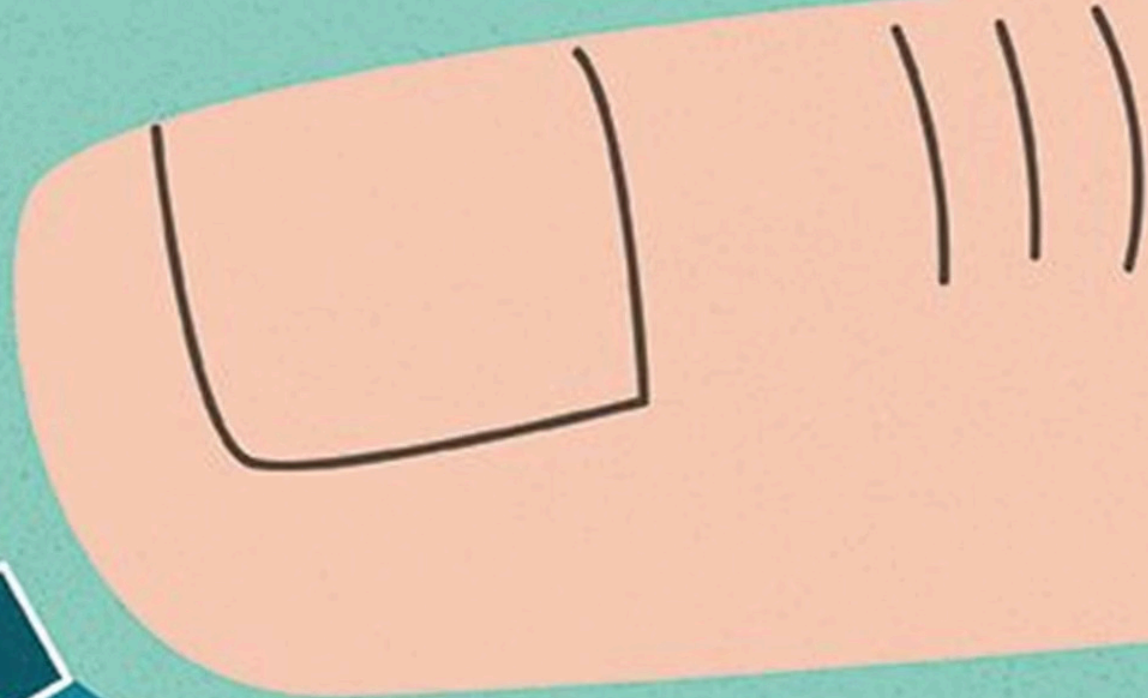
External dependence

Funding pressure

**In academic work, external pressure often becomes internal pressure — because the work is personal.  
The system is not broken — but it is demanding. Recognizing this is the first step.**

*Janke et al., 2025; Levecque et al., 2017.*

Before we look at what gets in the way — here is what we are working toward.





# What makes academic pressure different

## Personal Investment

Meaningful work can feel deeply personal  
— so setbacks land personally.

## Constant Evaluation

Evaluation is constant — papers, grants,  
metrics, supervision, comparison.

## Uncertain Progress

Progress is uncertain — effort and  
outcome do not move in sync.

## High Dependence

Dependence is real — on supervisors, reviewers, funding, and  
contracts.

## Open-ended Demands

The work is open-ended — it can always ask for more.

**Managing academic stress requires more than emotional coping; it demands structural clarity, clear boundaries, and active support.**

# What you are working toward

Staying capable over time is not about endurance. It is about protecting what makes good work possible:

**Recovery**

**Connection**

**Realistic limits**

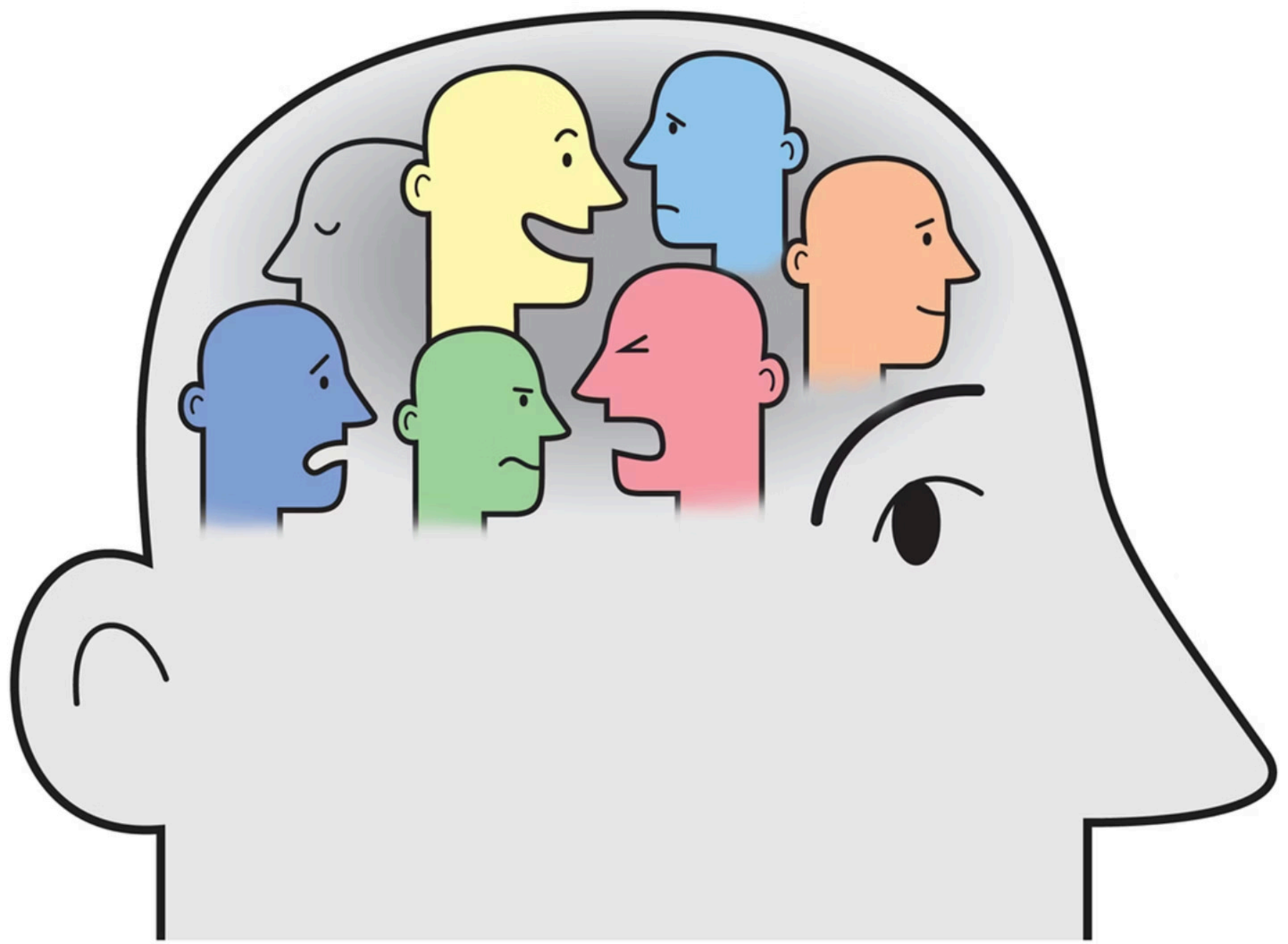
**Meaning**

**Timely support**

**Staying capable is not about doing more. It is about protecting the conditions that make good work possible — including yourself.**

*Martínez-García et al., 2024; Janke et al., 2025.*







# Good for a Sprint — bad for a Marathon

Stress is the body's alarm system — useful in short bursts, costly when it never switches off.

**Short-term**, it mobilizes focus — **useful before a talk or a deadline**

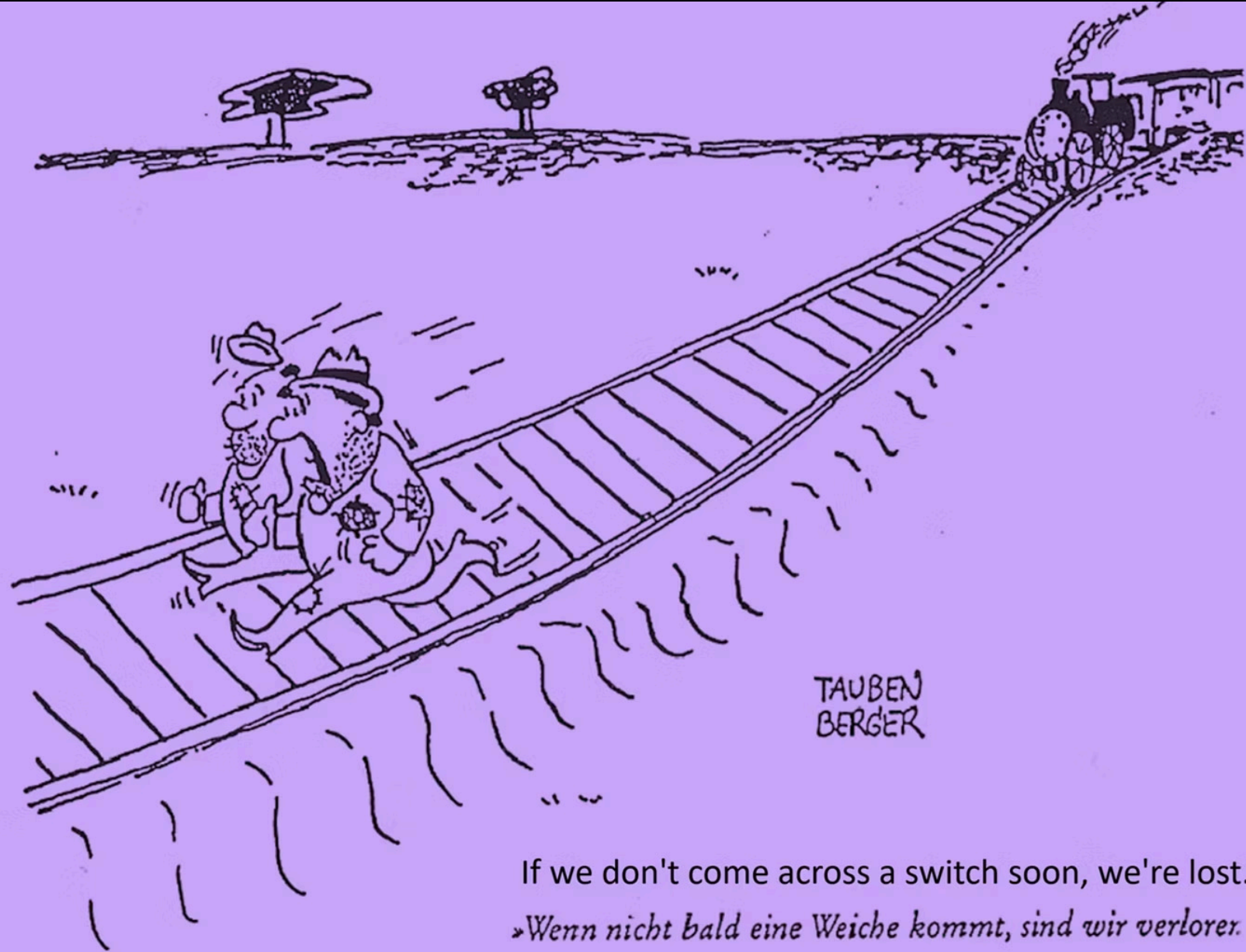
Under **sustained pressure**, the system **starts scanning for danger more easily** — a rejected paper, a supervisor's silence, a missed milestone can all feel threatening

Then more and more things feel urgent or high-stakes — even when they are not

What began as protection can start amplifying pressure. This is not weakness — it is a system under sustained load.

*Arnsten, 2009; McEwen, 2007.*





If we don't come across a switch soon, we're lost.  
»Wenn nicht bald eine Weiche kommt, sind wir verloren.

Aus der »Frankfurter Rundschau«



## Signs that the load is building

**Weekends no longer feel restorative**

**Attention narrows — reading the same paragraph repeatedly**

**Perfectionism becomes harsher — nothing feels good enough**

**Rumination increases — replaying conversations, anticipating criticism**

**Withdrawal from colleagues or social contact**

**Sleep disrupted — or sleeping more without feeling rested**

When these signs appear, the question is not 'how do I push through?' — it is 'what does this state need now?'

*Recognizing the state is the first move. The next question is: what helps?*

*Hazell et al., 2020; Levecque et al., 2017.*

# Not all pressure is the same — and the response should fit

At different points, people may be in very different states:



**Strain, overload, and mental health conditions are not the same thing. Each calls for a different response.**

What matters is not just whether distress is present — but how intense, how long, and how much it is getting in the way.

*The useful question: not 'what am I feeling?' but 'what state am I in — and what does it need?'*

❏ Not all distress is a disorder. But not all distress should be managed alone.

*WHO, 2025; Keyes, 2002; Galderisi et al., 2015.*

# What kind of response fits which state?



## **Under strain**

Regulate early. Pause, breathe, name what is happening. Protect recovery time.



## **Overloaded / significantly distressed**

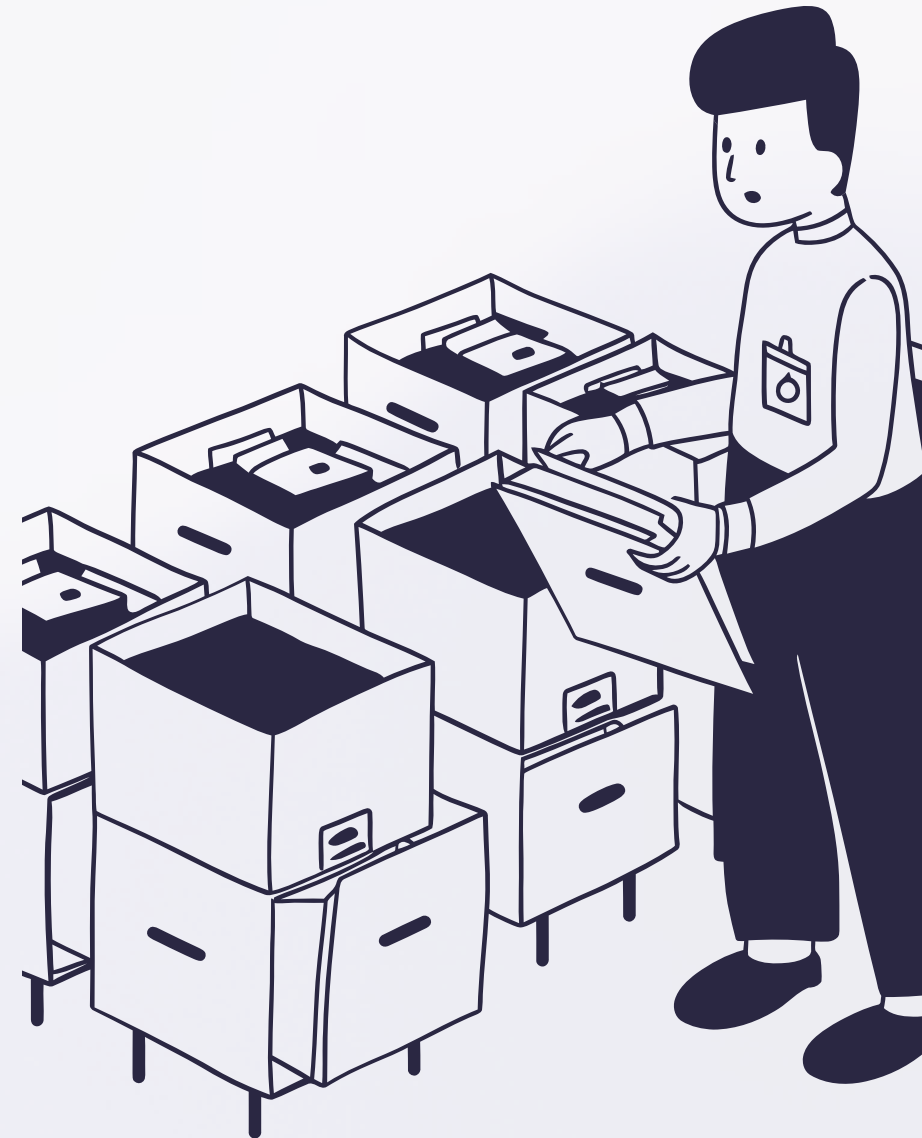
Reduce load where possible. Talk to someone. Peer support or counseling — sooner rather than later.



## **Crisis / severe functional impairment**

Seek professional help now. This is not a failure — it is the right response to the situation.

The goal is not to cope with everything alone. The goal is to match the response to the state — and to reach further when the state requires it.



These strategies work — for the right states. Knowing where they apply, and where they don't, matters.

## Self-help has a place — and a limit

### Self-help works well for

- Transient stress
- Mild overload
- Early warning signs
- Everyday regulation

### Self-help is not enough when distress is

- Severe
- Persistent
- Functionally impairing
- Linked to self-harm or suicidality

❏ In those cases, professional support is not a last resort — it is the appropriate response.

Self-regulation is a skill, not a substitute for support. Sometimes the task is not to regulate better, but to change the situation or ask for help.

*WHO, 2025; NIMH, n.d.*

A photograph of a house on fire at sunset. The house is on the left, with flames and smoke rising from the roof. The sun is a bright orange orb in the center of the sky, casting a long, horizontal glow. The background shows a dark landscape with trees and a body of water in the foreground. The overall color palette is dominated by oranges, yellows, and dark blues.

# Relaxation training in a burning house...

Why the solution should fit the problem.

# Four things that help — early



## Calm

### Lower arousal before it escalates.

e.g. Before a difficult supervision meeting, 5 minutes of slow breathing — not to perform calm, but to give the nervous system a pause.

→ **One deliberate pause today.**



## Clarify

### Separate what you can influence from what you cannot.

e.g. A rejected paper feels total — but the feedback, the revision, the next submission are all within reach.

→ **Write down one thing you can act on today.**



## Reframe

### Question the threat-only story.

e.g. 'I'm not good enough' vs. 'This is a hard phase in a demanding system.' Both feel real — only one is accurate.

→ **Ask: What is the evidence? What else is true?**



## Reach out

### Use people and services early — not only in crisis.

Telling a trusted colleague 'I'm struggling with this' is not weakness. It is how pressure becomes bearable.

→ **“I'm more under strain than I look right now.”**

# You are not meant to carry this alone

Individual strategies have limits. When pressure becomes internalized, what helps most is often other people.



## Peers & writing groups

A peer who normalizes struggle. A writing group that creates accountability without judgment. Trusted colleagues who know the system.




## Mentors & academic support

A mentor outside your direct supervision line. Someone who can see your situation from a distance and help you name what is happening.



## Professional support

University counseling services. Occupational health. Your GP. These exist for exactly this — use them before the situation becomes acute.

 **Asking for support is not a sign that self-regulation failed. It is part of how capable people stay capable.**

*Hazell et al., 2020; Holt-Lunstad, 2024; WHO, 2025.*

And for some states, the right move is to reach further still.

# When to reach further — and why that is the right move

Reach out to a professional if any of the following apply — not as a last resort, but as a timely and appropriate response:

**Distress feels severe or out of proportion**

**Sleep, concentration, or appetite have changed significantly**

**Daily tasks — writing, reading, showing up — have become hard to manage**

**Symptoms have persisted for two weeks or more**

**Thoughts of hopelessness, self-harm, or suicide are present**

- Seeking support is not the opposite of self-regulation. It is what self-regulation looks like when the load exceeds what one person can carry alone.

*NIMH, n.d.; WHO, 2025.*

**Suicidal thoughts are not a sign  
of weakness.**

**They are a signal  
that the psychological load has  
become too heavy — and that  
support is needed now.**

If you or someone you know is experiencing this, please reach out. The next slide has  
contacts available 24/7.



# Crisis Support & Emergency Contacts

Immediate help available 24/7 – you are not alone

**Emergency:** 112 (life-threatening situations)

**Medical On-Call:** 116 117 (urgent, non-life-threatening)

[telefonseelsorge.de](https://telefonseelsorge.de)

**Helpline Internation:** <https://helplineinternational.com.au/>

[List of suicide crisis lines](#)

[berliner-krisendienst.de](https://berliner-krisendienst.de)

**Social Psychiatric Services:** Local mental health crisis support



Suizidprävention Berlin



## Home – Suizidprävention Berlin

Silence costs lives If you found your way here, you may be looking for help. Are you feeling down right...

I want to understand ▾

About us ▾

Engl

# Silence costs lives.

## Preventing suicides – talking helps!

Learn more



# Three things to carry with you



**If this has been hard, that reflects the situation — not something wrong with you.**



**Different states need different responses. Knowing which state you are in is already a useful move.**



**Reaching out early — to a peer, a mentor, a professional — is part of staying capable, not a sign of failure.**

There is no tidy ending to this topic — which is probably why you are here. I'm glad to go further in either direction: what you can do inside the situation — and what might need to change around it. Both are worth talking about.

# Selected References

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