

For Marcela, the benefits of volunteering at the café are that she gets to learn new skills, such as making coffee and serving food, by being in an environment where people are open to help in her progress as a beginner. “By volunteering, I feel like the coordinators are flexible and understanding. They understand you’re not getting paid.”

Even if the volunteer job in Mellemfolk is not in her field, Marcela argues that joining this activity is also essential for her future career prospects, establishing a network with different groups and developing communications skills. “In the café, there are different groups you can join. I feel like it will definitely help me with my communication skills.”

Volunteering may take up some time in our already busy lives, but it’s a rewarding way to destress and take our minds off academia for a little while. Aarhus has many opportunities to accommodate whatever your interests may be. Take a chance and try them out!



# Keeping our minds healthy

By Avi Gopani, Berta Olivier Cañadell, Elisabeth Bartelmus and Marcela Sanchez

*Majority of Mundusians have had to move to a new country to pursue this programme, and it can be challenging to start over in a new country. Mental health is an important issue that should be remembered when discussing the Mundus experience.*

## Mundusians’ feelings arriving to Aarhus

We asked our cohort to tell us about their mental health and the different ways they have been coping with new experiences in a new country. There’s a stigma surrounding mental health, and it can be a difficult conversation to have, so we are very grateful for the students who opened up to us about the different ways they have been dealing with these changes in their life. Mental health was a topic we wanted to explore to equip future Mundusians with tips on how to balance their mental health before moving to Denmark and during their stay.

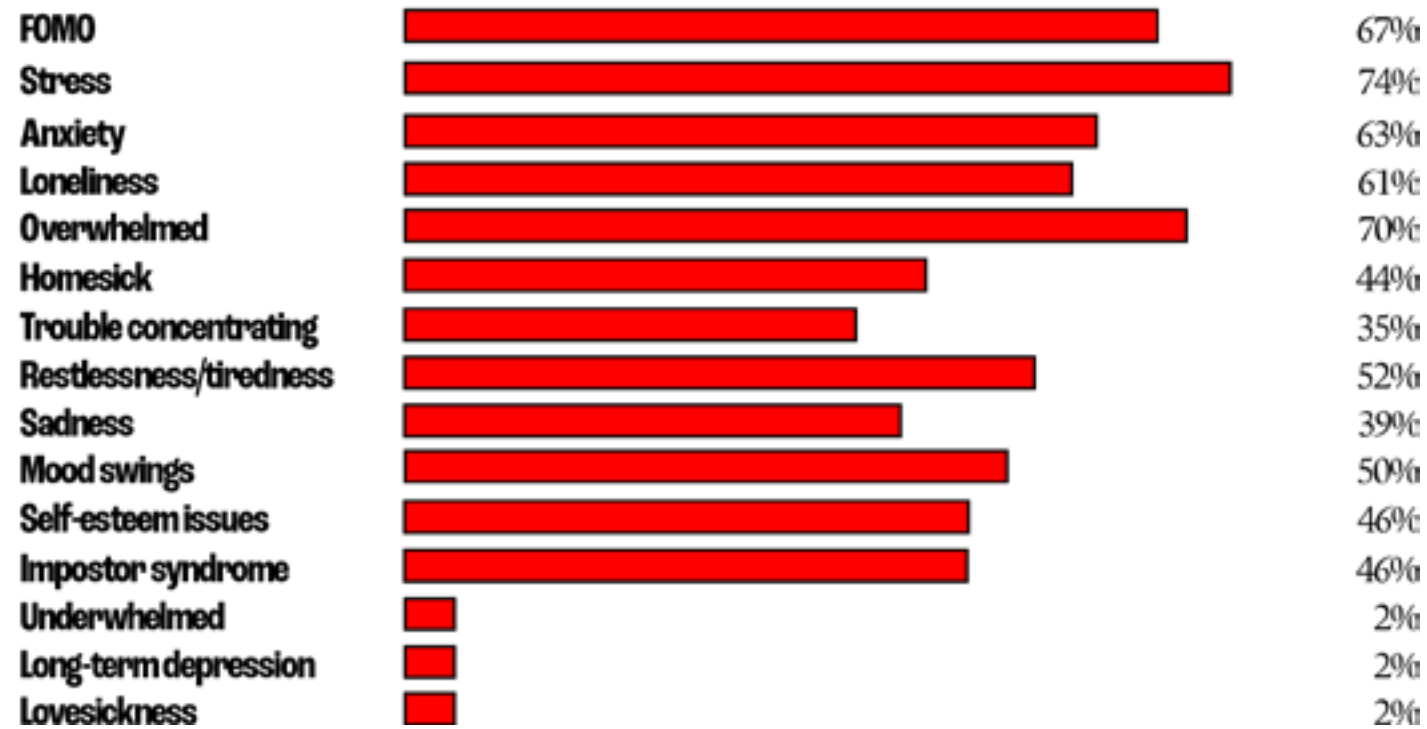
In a survey sent to all students of the 2022 cohort, 50% of the 46 answered said they have generally struggled with their mental health since arriving in Aarhus, and 41% said they had struggled sometimes. Only 9% didn’t struggle with their mental health at all. These statistics demonstrate that mental health struggles are a genuine issue affecting most Mundusians.

When asked about which feelings our cohort experienced, stress topped the list, with 74% of people admitting to having felt stressed. This was followed by feeling overwhelmed (70%), experiencing FOMO (fear of missing out, 64%) and anxiety (63%).





## Survey results



The situation Mundusians are in is very particular and can cause other struggles, like homesickness. Missing your old life, friends and family is natural, especially when you've just started figuring out how to navigate life in Aarhus.

Another important factor mentioned in the surveys was imposter syndrome. Soon after starting the Erasmus Mundus Master's programme, you will meet many people with varying backgrounds in journalism who might already have a Master's degree or are just generally crazy impressive. These qualifications are inspiring on the one hand but can also be very intimidating. Over the first couple of weeks, many have asked ourselves, "How did I get accepted here?". It is essential to know that everybody has earned their rightful spot in the Mundus programme. All of us bring different qualities to the table. We're here to learn from each other and offer support to those who struggle.

Lobna Awwad from Egypt, a Mundusian who has had previous experience living abroad, said she's still learning to navigate changes in her mental health. The weather and the load of university work have sometimes left her feeling anxious and disconnected from the people around her. She mentioned that being around people from different backgrounds and with varying levels of journalistic experience can kick-start her imposter syndrome, sometimes making her feel she shouldn't be here. She soon came to some important realisations over time: "Moving on, with every class that passes, you see that this IS the right place for you. You [deserve] to be around these people... from different backgrounds."

Lobna told us that talking to other students has helped her change her mindset regarding overcoming imposter symptoms. Instead of seeing students as competition, she now thinks, "Maybe they can teach me something. Maybe I can learn [something] from them."

Lobna tries to surround herself with students who remind her of her family and friends from back home – people who make her feel comfortable. Her message for incoming students?

**“Pay attention to what your head is saying to you.”**

To better understand the emotional impact experienced by international students, we spoke to Enrico Cappelletto, an Italian psychologist practising in Denmark. A foreigner himself, he understands the nuances of life-changing events such as moving abroad. He outlined that students usually face challenges like homesickness, stress or lacking confidence due to the different educational structure.

“Danish universities focus on group work, which can be difficult to get used to, but it's good for developing soft skills and getting used to working with new people”.

He's also seen some students struggling to manage work-study-life as some people (especially self-funded students) may have to combine studying and having a job, which can be overwhelming.

## Finding balance

When thinking about what can be done to improve mental health, Mundusians have many ideas, and everyone goes about it differently. Openly discussing any overwhelming feelings that crop up is an essential first step in dealing with mental health issues. Our cohort members frequently reach out to family and friends back home, but they also find comfort in talking to other Mundusians in similar situations. The students from our programme support one another; knowing you are not the only one going through a tough time can help.

Moreover, therapy can help with many of the issues previously mentioned by Mundusians, and it can also help identify problems. 20% of the surveyed Mundusians had been in therapy before moving to Aarhus and continue to talk to their therapists back home. 9% are looking to find a therapist in Aarhus. Another 13% went to therapy back home but don't continue it now. Attending online therapy sessions was often mentioned when asked what steps Mundusians take to stay healthy. For them, therapy is a tool to find ways to deal with their anxiety or to learn how to prioritise themselves.

Psychologist Enrico Cappelletto shared some tips about how to navigate feelings. Here are some of them, along with others provided by people in our cohort:

- *Keep in touch with family back home.*
- *Invest energy in activities that make you build a “local network” and make you feel connected with the new city you live in: explore the country you live in, get involved in sports activities, local groups, associations and so on.*
- *Find activities (hobbies) that make you feel connected with things that interest you, regardless of where you are.*
- *Accept the feeling of being alone and give credit to your emotions. We can do this by recognising our emotions and what they are telling us, writing a short diary or listening to music similar to our mood.*
- *Undertake hobbies that make you feel connected to yourself.*
- *Write your feelings on paper or your computer, then throw them out or delete the file.*
- *Find support systems near you: people you can connect to and feel safe with. Talk to Mundus students that are in a similar situation. Remember, you are not alone!*
- *Create a cosy & homey environment at your place.*
- *Keep active: physical exercise is important. Yoga and meditation can help a lot.*
- *Socialise, but remember to take time for yourself; find a healthy balance.*
- *Since it is dark outside, your body clock will be confused. Remind your body constantly that just because it is dark doesn't mean it is night. Stay active.*
- *Eat healthily.*
- *Don't be afraid to start therapy.*

“It can also be good to ask yourself, what's the function of my feelings right now? Why do I feel anxious? Why do I feel sad? What is my body telling me?” says Enrico Cappelletto.

Recognising the feeling is crucial – but it's also important to acknowledge that it is normal to feel this way. “You will face new feelings since this is a new and challenging experience. Give credit to your emotions. Try to stay with your feelings and accept them even when they are uncomfortable”, Enrico advises.

Finding a balance between socialising and making time for yourself takes time and effort. It is important to be honest with yourself and recharge your social batteries once they run out.