

## **Wellness Tip** **Tending to Vulnerability Factors**

Our ability to respond effectively to situations in our lives, emotions that emerge, thoughts that come to mind, and interactions we're a part of is greatly impacted by the current state of our being.

Maybe you have had the experience of being your best self in one circumstance on a particular day, but wildly missing the mark on another. Welcome to being human in all of its messy glory! When this happens, we can experience confusion, frustration, and get upset with ourselves. *What's wrong with me? Where did THAT come from?*

It's important to acknowledge that you are not a robot, with unwavering consistency in functioning. We are susceptible to and impacted by variables that stress our system and make it more challenging to regulate ourselves cognitively, emotionally, and interpersonally. These are called vulnerability factors.

When you are noticing that you're feeling "off" or are responding in ways that deviate from your typical self, get curious about what factors may be making you more sensitive and susceptible to dysregulation. Some possibilities are listed below:

1. Physical illness: if you have a chronic illness or chronic pain, ensure you're caring for your body in a manner that soothes those symptoms as much as possible. Maybe you're fortunate not to have a chronic condition, but are experiencing other symptoms of illness like a headache, a pulled muscle, a sinus infection, etc. These, too, create stress in your system and make you vulnerable to dysregulation. Treat and take care of your illness so you feel better faster!
2. Hunger: Perhaps you've heard of people who get 'hangry'. Other folks get 'hanxious'. Eat meals at intervals that keep your system running smoothly.
3. Diet: When our diet is unbalanced and lacking overall nutrition (e.g., running on sugar, caffeine), it will impact the way we feel and process situations. Incorporate vegetables, fruits, grains, and proteins to meet your system's needs for running smoothly. Also, stay hydrated with water!
4. Sleep deprivation/disruption: When you are sleep deprived or sleep is suboptimal, it can affect your ability to process information, how you experience emotions, and whether you respond in an effective way. Being tired and exhausted makes our system more sensitive to stressors. Make effort to get the quality and quantity of sleep needed to support overall health.
5. Substances: Many substances compromise our ability think clearly and stay emotionally regulated. Both being under the influence or in a state of withdrawal alters our ability to act in ways congruent with who we want to be. Be mindful of your use of nicotine, caffeine, alcohol, recreational drugs, etc. and consider how they impact your internal sense of balance and ability to effectively respond to situations. Consider cutting back or stopping use of substances to give your system a chance to function from a place of homeostasis.
6. Being in a state of distress or emotional overload: Some stress can be beneficial for motivating our behavior as we reach for goals (called eustress). However, when our systems are overloaded with stress we can experience intense emotions which are hard to regulate - like shame, rage, despair, etc. To prevent overload, it's essential you work to process and alleviate stress on a consistent basis. This can look many ways and could include activities such as moving your body/exercise, talking to trusted others, engaging in grounding activities, getting out into nature, setting boundaries/limits to protect yourself, and engaging in general body care (soothing showers, etc.).

7. **Physiological discomfort:** As much as we sometimes try to ignore our bodies, the state of our internal system will impact us. Physiological sensations ranging from having to use the restroom to the ebb and flow of monthly cycles can increase susceptibility to stress. Tune into your physical system and take care of your precious body as best you can.

When you know a vulnerability factor (or two or three) are at play, it can cue you in to the fact that you may need to tend to your physical system in the moment (if possible) to increase the likelihood of getting back on track. If it's not a vulnerability factor which can be addressed quickly, you are encouraged to be more mindful throughout that experience/situation/day regarding the fact that you may be a bit more sensitive than you normally would be. That's okay! You may need to use more strategies or tools to stay balanced. You may choose to disclose to others that you're feeling off-kilter. You may benefit from some self-compassion practice that day to soften rather than get upset with yourself.

If you would like to talk with someone about how to manage vulnerability factors, or for any other questions or concerns, feel free to contact the Medical Student Counseling Center to talk with a counselor or schedule an appointment: [osac-mscc@uiowa.edu](mailto:osac-mscc@uiowa.edu) | 319-335-8056 | 1240 MERF

Check out the MSCC Website for past Wellness Tips:

<https://medicine.uiowa.edu/md/student-support/student-counseling/mscc-wellness-programs-and-resources>

Remember, life is really hard at times - be gentle with yourself!

**Rebecca Stinson, PhD, ABPP**

Senior Behavioral Health Clinician  
Medical Student Counseling Center  
Roy J. and Lucille A. Carver College of Medicine  
University of Iowa

*Pronouns: she/her*