

Have you already made an appointment to a psychologist?

**Simple steps that can make easier your condition while you will be
waiting for your visit to the specialist.**

(Short guide)

**Dr.phil. Anna Sergiienko
Prof. Dr. phil. Svenja Taubner**

**Institute for Psychosocial Prevention
Belongs to Center for Psychosocial Medicine
RUPRECHT-KARLS-UNIVERSITÄT HEIDELBERG**

**HEIDELBERG
2025**

Contents:

How to use this guide?	2
1. Where and How Can I Seek for a Help in Germany, regarding to my psychological condition?	3
1.1. Where to go, where to run?	3
1.2. What specialists are available in Germany in the field of mental health and how can they help?	3
1.3. WHERE can you find the right specialist? The answer is - in Clinics or Praxis	3
1.4. What will be needed for the appointment?	4
2. How could I understand before visiting a specialist: "What's happening to me?"	4
2.1. Depressive symptoms	4
2.2. Panic attacks	5
2.3. High level of anxiety	5
2.4. Sleep problems	6
2.5. Post-traumatic stress disorder	6
3. What should I do while I am waiting for my appointment with a specialist?	6
3.1. Self-Help with Depressive Symptoms	7
3.2. Self-Help with Panic Attacks	8
3.3 Self-Help with High Anxiety Levels	9
3.4. Self-Help with Sleep Problems	10
3.5 Self-Help with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder	11
INSTEAD OF AN EPILOGUE. Smile for the new day!	13

How to Use This Guide?

If you are reading this guide, it means that you are likely going through a difficult time and need help and support. Perhaps a kind word and good advice will be enough, or maybe you need professional assistance.

In this short guide, we will try to help you navigate in to the labyrinth of your emotions and offer several self-help steps:

The first step is to understand which specialists can help you. You will know who and how you can contact in Germany for psychiatric and psychological (psychotherapeutic) assistance.

The second step is to understand yourself. We will try to assist you in understanding what is happening with you.

Pay attention to the symptoms you may be experiencing, some of which we describe in this guide. We hope this will help you not only choose the right specialist but also provide some self-help.

The third step is to start taking action! We offer some simple, but effective self-help methods that you can easily use even without special training and that may ease your condition while you are waiting for your appointment with a specialist.

We hope that this guide will be helpful to you!
Have a nice reading!

With respect and understanding,
Dr. phil. Anna Sergiienko
Prof. Dr. phil. Svenja Taubner
Institute for Psychosocial Prevention, Heidelberg

1. Where and How Can I Seek for a Help in Germany, regarding to my psychological condition?

1.1. Where to go, where to run?

If you need psychological or psychiatric help in Germany, your journey begins with a visit to your family doctor (in Germany, they are called Hausarzt). It is very important to tell your family doctor what is bothering you. Try to be honest and open as it possible.

You may be troubled by sleep problems and nightmares, emotional distress, issues with others, fears, anxiety, low mood, and so on.

Remember that some illnesses can also be a result of stress, so it's advisable to discuss any physical problems with your family doctor.

Additionally, it's important to check the overall condition of your body, as the cause of your psychological state may be linked to hormonal imbalances (special attention should be paid to the thyroid gland), deficiencies in microelements and vitamins (e.g., iron and vitamin D), etc.

IMPORTANT! Do not self-medicate! Excessive intake of microelements and hypervitaminosis can also harm you!

Your family doctor may, in certain situations, prescribe some medications that could help you to some extent. Additionally, they can refer you to a psychiatrist or a psychotherapist.

Unfortunately, family doctors rarely recommend specific specialists, so you often have to search for them on your own.

1.2. What specialists are available in Germany in the field of mental health and how can they help?

A psychiatrist is a medical doctor who has completed medical education and holds a special license. He or she conduct diagnostic interviews, and sometimes testing, to evaluate your mental health. A psychiatrist can provide a diagnosis. However, don't be afraid of the diagnosis, as these seemingly "intimidating" terms are simply professional definitions for what you are experiencing. There are specific codes and terms used for it.

A psychiatrist can, if necessary, prescribe medication. It is common practice to inform patients about potential side effects, which do not always occur, but it is important to be aware of them so that you know how to respond correctly without unnecessary worry or concern.

Meetings with a psychiatrist initially occur approximately 1-2 times in a month, and later, it may be reduced to once in every 3 months.

A psychotherapist – in Germany, this is the term used for what we commonly refer as Psychologists.

However, these psychologists are having some specific qualification requirements. They are specialists who have received higher education in psychology, followed by specialized training and obtaining a license to conduct psychotherapy. A psychotherapist cannot prescribe medication. They provide assistance in various situations related to emotional, psychological, or behavioral well-being.

How does it work? Usually, in a conversational form: the psychotherapist listens, asks questions, sometimes suggests exercises or homework, and, if necessary, conducts diagnostics. For example, for the high level of anxiety, they might recommend keeping a thought journal or practicing mindfulness. It all depends on the approach – some use cognitive-behavioral therapy, others use psychoanalysis or psychodynamic approaches, and some focus on systemic family therapy. All of these are well-established and widely recognized methods in international practice!

1.3. WHERE could you find the right specialist? The answer is - in Clinics or Praxis.

Clinics are often affiliated with Universities and offer outpatient care, meaning you don't need to be admitted to a hospital – you simply come for your appointment at the scheduled time.

Many clinics have departments that specialize primarily in either psychiatry or psychotherapy.

For example, at the Institut für Psychosoziale Prävention at the University Hospital (Heidelberg), you can only seek psychotherapeutic help. Here is staffed mainly psychologists-psychotherapists, and there is no inpatient care, although occasional consultations with a psychiatrist may be available.

There are also primarily psychiatric departments, such as ZI Mannheim, where you can receive help from a psychiatrist. Outpatient care is available, but there is also an inpatient unit where both psychiatrists and psychotherapists work.

A Praxisklinik is a private practice of a specialist (either a psychotherapist or a psychiatrist). The address and specialization of a practice can easily be found online. We recommend reading reviews if available. Or, simply look around during your walk – you can often see signs with the Praxis's name and specialization on the facades of buildings.

1.4. What will be needed for the appointment?

The appointment with a specialist can be covered either by insurance (fully paid by the health insurance company) or privately (in which case you will need to pay for it yourself).

For an appointment covered by insurance:

- With a psychiatrist – you need to obtain a prescription from your family doctor and bring your health insurance card.
- With a psychotherapist – sometimes only your health insurance card and your consent are enough, but sometimes a prescription from a doctor may be required (such a prescription can be issued by your family doctor, psychiatrist, neurologist, endocrinologist, or even a gynecologist).

2. How could I understand before visiting a specialist: "What's happening to me?"

You have made an appointment with a psychotherapist or psychiatrist. However, unfortunately, the appointment may be scheduled for a week, two weeks, or even a month later. Do not worry about this. You can always help yourself to some extent while waiting for the appointment. It all starts with understanding what is bothering you, what is happening to you, and how it manifests.

Below is a brief description of the symptoms of the most common reasons for seeking a psychologist-psychotherapist. At the end of each description, you will find the page number where some simple and accessible self-help methods are listed, specifically for these symptoms. You can easily apply them to improve your condition while waiting for your appointment with a specialist.

If you notice any symptoms, don't rush to diagnose yourself – leave that to the specialists. Just listen to yourself in order to choose the most suitable self-help techniques.

2.1. Depressive symptoms

Depressive symptoms may manifest as apathy, fatigue, loss of interest in life, or a sense of hopelessness. They can affect emotional, physical, and cognitive areas (thinking, memory, attention, etc.). The symptoms may not appear all at once or may appear unevenly.

The main manifestations of symptoms include:

- Constant sadness, a feeling of emptiness, negative thoughts (including about oneself and the future).
- Loss of interest and/or pleasure in previously enjoyed activities.
- Feelings of guilt and worthlessness.
- Irritability or even aggressiveness.
- Problems with concentration, memory, and decision-making.
- Loss of appetite or constant desire to eat (emotional eating).
- Sleep problems (insomnia, nighttime restlessness, difficulty falling asleep, early waking, etc.).
- Persistent fatigue, physical pain without an obvious medical cause.
- Reluctance to socialize or be around people.
- Lack of desire or energy for personal growth or to do anything at all.

Pay attention to the daily mood fluctuations. Usually, by the evening, we feel tired, and our mood slightly decreases, but if every day you feel worse in the morning than in the evening, it is important to consult a psychiatrist.

IMPORTANT! If you are experiencing these symptoms, it is recommended to seek help from a mental health specialist. While you are searching or waiting for an appointment, please go to page 7, section 3.1, and use the available self-help methods.

2.2. Panic Attacks

These are sudden, unpredictable episodes of uncontrollable, irrational fear or anxiety that can occur anywhere (often it could be in some specific places) and at any time.

The duration of panic attacks varies from a few minutes to several hours, although it may feel like time is stretching. Often, this state occurs AS IF without any objective reasons and catches the person off guard.

Panic attacks can occur as a result of an internal conflict and/or after intense stress, when there are insufficient internal resources to cope with it.

The main symptoms during a panic attack include:

- Shortness of breath, rapid, labored breathing.
- A feeling of heaviness in the chest, pain, weakness, possible shaking, chills.
- Increased sweating.
- Numbness in the hands and feet.
- Rapid heartbeat.
- Dizziness, feeling of weakness, sensation of impending fainting.
- A sense of "detachment" from the surrounding world and from one's own body.
- Discomfort in the stomach area, sickness.
- A feeling of intense cold or heat.
- Unpleasant, distressing, restless thoughts ("I'm going crazy," "I'm going to die," "I'm having a heart attack," "I'm losing control," "I'm going to scream," etc.).

After a panic attack passes, you may feel that such thoughts and feelings are absurd, but during the panic attack, they are like obsessive delusions that you cannot shake off.

IMPORTANT! If you are experiencing these symptoms, it is recommended to seek help from a mental health specialist. While you are searching or waiting for an appointment, please go to page 8, section 3.2, and use the available self-help methods.

2.3. High level of anxiety

Anxiety can be appropriate to the situation, and there is no need to worry excessively if the anxiety goes away once the causes are removed. However, if the anxiety does not go away (because its causes are not addressed and remain constant), or if anxiety arises and persists without any clear reason, it can lead to a number of negative manifestations (symptoms).

The main symptoms include:

- Constant feelings of worry or fear.
- Persistent inner tension and expectation that something bad may happen.
- Problems with concentration, memory.
- Negative thoughts and catastrophizing.
- Difficulty making decisions.
- Rapid heartbeat, sweating, shaking or trembling (usually in the hands), muscle tension.
- Headaches or other physical pains without an obvious medical cause.
- Sleep problems (restless sleep, insomnia, panic attacks during sleep).
- Avoidance of situations that may trigger anxiety;
- Constant seeking of support or, on the contrary, extreme reluctance to ask anyone for help.
- Fear of starting new tasks, which interferes with work, studies, personal growth, relationships, hobbies, and even proper rest.

IMPORTANT! If you are experiencing these symptoms, it is recommended to seek help from a mental health specialist. While you are searching or waiting for an appointment, please go to page 9, section 3.3, and use the available self-help methods.

2.4. Sleep problems

Sleep problems can manifest in various forms, depending on what causes them: stress, anxiety, or physical conditions. However, they can only be called sleep disturbances when the symptoms (one or more) are regular over a period of several weeks.

The main symptoms include:

- Difficulty falling asleep (often intrusive thoughts prevent sleep, even when very tired).
- Frequent awakenings (disrupted sleep, and it's hard to fall back asleep after waking up during the night).
- Early awakening (sometimes several hours before it's time to get up) and difficulty falling asleep again, even if you want to.
- Shallow sleep (no feeling of rest after sleeping).
- Daytime fatigue (sleepiness during the day, sluggishness, irritability, difficulty concentrating, and memory problems due to poor sleep).
- Nightmares or anxious dreams.
- Constant tension in the body, fatigue, anxiety, rapid heartbeat before sleep or in the morning after waking up.

IMPORTANT! If you are experiencing these symptoms, it is recommended to seek help from a mental health specialist. While you are searching or waiting for an appointment, please go to page 10, section 3.4, and use the available self-help methods.

2.5. Posttraumatic stress disorder

It may develop (but may not develop!!!) after severe traumatic events (violence, accidents, war, loss of loved ones, natural disasters, etc.), both for direct participants and witnesses. Symptoms typically do not appear immediately, but rather after some time following the traumatic event.

The main symptoms include:

- Intrusive memories in the form of nightmares, anxious dreams, obsessive thoughts about the event (difficult to get rid of), flashbacks (the feeling that the event is happening again right here and now).
- Avoidance of places, people, emotions that may remind of the event, refusal to talk about what happened.
- Constant feelings of anxiety, guilt, shame.
- Loss of interest in things that used to bring joy.
- Memory problems (sometimes gaps in memory) and difficulty concentrating.
- Feeling detached, isolated from others, a sense of loneliness.
- Increased irritability and/or outbursts of anger without an apparent reason.
- A heightened sense of alertness, as if danger is nearby.
- Sleep disturbances (restless and interrupted sleep, difficulty falling asleep).
- Increased sensitivity to loud or unexpected sounds, movements.
- Increased heart rate, sweating, trembling, etc. when recalling the event.

IMPORTANT! If you are experiencing these symptoms, it is recommended to seek help from a mental health specialist. While you are searching or waiting for an appointment, please go to page 11, section 3.5, and use the available self-help methods.

Recommendation! If you're feeling confused by all these symptoms, don't worry. Simply choose the self-help exercises that resonate with you the most. And remember, we all have significant, sometimes hidden resources within us. Try to unlock them!

3. What should I do while I am waiting for my appointment with a specialist?

The answer is simple – try to help yourself! This is completely within your ability. We offer several well-established self-help methods that can be used even without special training.

There is no universal self-help technique. Some methods may suit you better, while others less so. You can use them all, or just the ones that feel most comfortable for you and, above all, that you believe will be most effective.

IMPORTANT! Self-help is not a substitute for professional support in severe cases, but it can make easier your condition and give you the strength to move forward.

3.1. Self-help with Depressive Symptoms

1. Small steps

- Don't set big goals; start with simple tasks: getting out of bed, washing your face, drinking water. Praise yourself even for small accomplishments — it's important.
- Break your day into small tasks (for example, "15 minutes of cleaning") to avoid feeling overwhelmed.

2. Physical activity

- Even a 10–15 minutes walk or light exercise can boost your levels of endorphins — the "happiness hormones."
- If you have no energy at all, simply stretching or walking around the room is better than doing nothing.

3. Connection with the outside world

- Call a friend or send a message, even if you don't want to discuss your problems. A simple "Hi, how are you?" can ease the feeling of isolation.
- Step outside for at least 5 minutes — sunlight and fresh air contribute to serotonin production.

4. Self-care

- Eat regularly, even if you don't feel hungry: a banana, nuts, yogurt — something simple and nutritious. Hunger can worsen feelings of sadness.
- Maintain personal hygiene. You can also take a shower or wash your face with cold water — it helps to "refresh" and gives a sense of renewal.

5. Cut out the excess

- Reduce the time spent on social media or news — comparing yourself to others or exposure to negativity can worsen your state of mind.
- Avoid alcohol — it might temporarily relieve tension, but it later amplifies symptoms of depression.

6. Working with thoughts

- Try to find counterarguments to negative thoughts (e.g., "I'm starting a new day — and that's already something").
- Don't believe everything your mind tells you in such a state — depression distorts perception.
- Keep a diary and note at least one (ideally three) things or situations each day for which you could praise yourself. It's recommended to reflect on these achievements before going to sleep.
- List the good things you have in your life right now. When we're in a low state, we often develop a sort of tunnel vision, focusing predominantly on the negatives.

7. Rituals and routines

- Establish a minimal schedule: morning — tea, afternoon — a short walk, evening — a movie. Routine provides stability when everything feels chaotic.
- Try something enjoyable that you used to love, even if it's an effort: music, an old favorite TV series, or hot chocolate.

8. Expressing emotions

- It's okay to cry if you feel like it — suppressing tears can be more harmful.
- Draw something, write a letter (even if you don't send it), or scream into a pillow — releasing emotions can ease the internal pressure.

9. Breathing and relaxation

- Breathing techniques not only help distract from negative thoughts but also harmonize emotional states on a physiological level. One method: slow breathing, inhale for 4 seconds,

exhale for 6–8 seconds. Focus on the process of breathing — this exercise reduces internal tension.

- Lie down with a warm heating pad or wrap yourself in a blanket — warmth has a calming effect.

IMPORTANT!

- ***If you have thoughts that you do not want to live or if your condition persists for weeks without improvement, it is a sign to seek help from a psychologist or doctor. Self-help is beneficial for mild symptoms or as additional support.***
- ***Depression is not laziness or weakness but a condition that can be managed, even if it feels otherwise right now.***

3.2. Self-help with Panic Attacks.

When you feel panic, try not to run from the place where it caught you. Instead, focus on calming yourself by using one of the suggested techniques.

1. Breathing into a Paper Bag

- Take a paper bag, place it over your face so that it covers both your nose and mouth, and begin breathing into it slowly and evenly, inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your mouth. Panic subsides as the gas balance in your blood is restored.
- If you don't have a paper bag at hand, your cupped hands can serve as a substitute.

2. Abdominal Breathing

- During a panic attack, aim to slow your breathing to 8–10 breaths per minute. Focus on breathing with your abdomen, but it's essential to practice this technique in advance. Place one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach. Try to breathe in such a way that only your stomach moves up and down while your chest remains still. This exercise will also help you concentrate on your breathing, noticing the inhale, exhale, and pauses in between.
- Once you master this, try holding your breath after inhaling while slowly counting to 8–10. Then exhale gently, counting to 3. Repeat 1–3 times, or more if needed, until you feel calm. Afterward, continue breathing in this rhythm: inhale (counting to 3) and exhale (counting to 3).

3. Feel Your Body

- Notice how your clothes fit on you — how tightly the fabric hugs your body, where it touches your skin, and where it doesn't. Alternatively, pay attention to how your shoes feel on your feet, how you sense the soles, and wiggle your toes. What sensations do you feel in your feet? How do your socks or stockings feel? The key is to fully focus your attention on the sensations in your body.
- You can also apply something cold to an exposed area of your skin or roll a spiky ball in your hands.

4. Clap Your Hands Until You Feel Tingling

During a panic attack, there's often a sensation of weightlessness or unreality in your body. To ground yourself and return to reality, it's important to "come back down to earth."

- You can clap your hands, legs, or other parts of your body until you feel a slight tingling sensation — enough to start perceiving those parts of your body again. Shifting your focus and concentrating on physical sensations can help manage even the most intense panic attacks.
- If the attack is happening to someone else, you can gently clap their hands or legs. There's a reason why, in movies, a slap is used in such situations — it helps shift focus from one sensation to another. The key isn't the number of body parts you clap but the quality of the sensations.

5. Observe-Smell-Listen

- Pay attention to the scents around you and listen closely to the sounds in your environment.
- Focus on small details. For instance, closely examine a neighbor's shoes — notice every crease, every lace, every crack, or scratch... or observe the pattern on a dress or a trinket box. It can be any random object. The key is to concentrate on the minute details and study them carefully.

6. Find and Count

- Start counting any objects around you (those you see in front of you or even imaginary ones) and try to focus all your attention on the counting.

- Pick any large number and begin subtracting 7 from it — as it's both a "lucky" number and slightly tricky for subtraction.

7. Observe Yourself from the Outside

- When a panic attack occurs, start observing yourself, your sensations, and the negative manifestations of panic. You can sit down and either write them down or record them on a voice recorder.
- The main goal is to try to step "outside" the situation and look at it from an outsider's perspective. In doing so, you become a detached observer, simply noting what is happening and how. This approach helps to diminish the intensity of panic experiences.

8. Panic on a "Schedule"

If you feel a panic attack approaching, it's time to show who's in control.

- The first step is acknowledging that you MIGHT experience a panic attack, but instead of ignoring it, you postpone it. You ALLOW yourself to panic, BUT NOT RIGHT NOW — only at a specific time in the future, for example, in 2 hours when you return home.
- After 2 hours, deliberately focus on your feelings. If at first, you manage to delay your panic even for just a few seconds, it's already a small victory. This shows that you're beginning to take control of the panic — and YOU decide when to experience it and when to remain calm.

Recommendation! In addition to the techniques mentioned above, you can also spend your free time practicing meditation, autogenic training, various relaxation and breathing techniques, or engaging in creative activities to express your emotions through art.

3.3. Self-help with High Levels of Anxiety

Anxiety can be exhausting, but it is manageable with self-help techniques that calm both the body and mind.

1. "4-7-8" Breathing Technique

- Inhale through your nose (counting to 4).
- Hold your breath (counting to 7).
- Slowly exhale through your mouth (counting to 8).

Repeating this 4–5 times can help reduce stress levels.

2. "Square" Breathing - with an imaginary square in front of your face

- Inhale through your nose, as if from the top-left corner of the square (counting to 4).
- Hold your breath (counting to 4) while looking at the top-right corner of the square.
- Exhale through your mouth (counting to 4) toward the bottom-right corner of the square.
- Hold your breath again (counting to 4) while looking at the bottom-left corner of the square.

This exercise is helpful not only for reducing heightened anxiety but also for managing panic attacks and post-traumatic stress disorder.

3. "Grounding"

When anxiety overwhelms you, redirect your focus to reality by trying the following methods:

1) or Identify:

- 5 things you can see;
- 4 things you can touch;
- 3 things you can hear;
- 2 things you can smell;
- 1 thing you can taste (e.g., take a sip of water).

2) or Hold something in your hands (a ball, keys).

3) or Place your palms on a cold surface.

4) or Put a sour or spicy candy in your mouth, such as one with ginger or chili pepper.

The key to all these methods is finding a vivid sensation to focus on, helping you shift your attention. However, always act with care to avoid harming yourself or others.

4. Physical Discharge

Movement, light physical activity, and the associated relaxation help to "burn off" excess adrenaline, which contributes to heightened anxiety:

- Taking a light walk, jumping in place, or shaking your hands can be beneficial.
- Try stretching, yoga, meditation, or observing nature.

5. Managing Thoughts

- Write down what is troubling you and categorize it into "what I can control" and "what I cannot control." Focus only on the first category.
- Repeat calming phrases, such as: "This will pass, I can handle it."
- If automatic negative thoughts flood you like a tsunami, find an "antidote" for them, which you can create using the formula: "Even though... (negative thought). - At least... (antidote)."

6. Distraction

- Engage in an activity that requires focus, such as drawing, assembling puzzles, or listening to audiobooks.
- Focus on tasks involving rhythmic or familiar automatic movements (knitting, cleaning, or washing dishes). These activities can have a calming effect.

7. Physical Relaxation

- Massage your temples, neck, or palms. This can help release tension.
- Practices like meditation and relaxation exercises can also provide a sense of relief, even if only slightly.

8. Limiting Stimulants

- Reduce caffeine intake (coffee, tea, energy drinks), as it increases heart rate and anxiety.
- Avoid excessive consumption of news or social media, especially before bedtime.

9. Regular Habits and Rituals

- Ensure you get enough sleep. Sleep deprivation increases anxiety. Go to bed at the same time every night.
- Create rituals (e.g., elegantly setting up tea time, playing music during breakfast, adding flowers for lunch, lighting a candle for dinner, or reading a book before bed).
- Eat a balanced diet. Hunger, overeating, or blood sugar swings can trigger nervousness.

10. Support

- Talk to someone close to you. Simply say, "I'm feeling anxious, can you listen to me?"
- If no one is nearby, write down your thoughts or draw them — "pour your heart out on paper."

3.4. Self-help with Sleep Problems

These simple self-help methods are aimed at promoting relaxation, establishing a routine, and reducing the impact of factors that interfere with rest.

1. Establish a Sleep Routine

- Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, including weekends. This helps your body adjust its internal clock.
- If you can't fall asleep within 20–30 minutes, get up and do something calming (like reading or listening to music). Return to bed when you feel sleepy.

2. Bedtime Ritual

- Set aside your phone, computer, and other screens an hour before bed — their light suppresses the production of melatonin (the sleep hormone).
- Do something soothing: drink herbal tea (chamomile, mint), read a book, or listen to soft music.
- Try breathing exercises: inhale (counting to 4), exhale (continuing to count to 6–8). This helps reduce tension.

3. Manage Your Thoughts

- If racing thoughts keep you awake, keep a journal: before bed, write down everything that worries you, your plans, etc., to "unload" them from your mind. Set those thoughts aside for tomorrow.

- Try the "reverse counting" technique — slowly count backward from 100 to 1, focusing on the numbers.

4. Physical Relaxation

- Perform light stretching or progressive relaxation: tense and then relax your muscles from your feet up to your head.
- Take a warm shower or bath 1–2 hours before bedtime — it helps relax the body and signals that it's time to rest.

5. Controlling the Environment

- Ensure your bedroom is comfortable: keep it dark (use curtains or a sleep mask), quiet (earplugs if it's noisy), and cool (18–20°C).
- Use your bed only for sleep and rest so that your brain doesn't associate it with work, wakefulness, or eating.

6. Limit Stimulants

- Avoid coffee, tea, and energy drinks after lunch — caffeine can remain active for 6–8 hours.
- Refrain from eating heavy foods (fatty, spicy) 2–3 hours before bedtime, but don't go to bed hungry either. A light snack, such as a banana or yogurt, can be a good option.

7. Daytime Habits

- Incorporate physical activity during the day (at least a 20-minute walk) — this improves sleep quality. However, avoid exercising late in the evening.
- Spend time in natural daylight, especially in the morning, as it helps regulate circadian rhythms.

8. Coping with Nighttime Awakenings

- If you wake up and cannot fall back asleep, avoid looking at the clock — it can increase anxiety.
- Focus on your breathing or visualize a peaceful place (such as a forest or the sea) to distract yourself from the difficulty of falling back asleep.

IMPORTANT! These steps help to improve sleep gradually. However, if problems persist for more than a month or significantly disrupt your life, it is advisable to consult a doctor or psychotherapist. Do not force yourself to sleep — this only increases stress.

3.5. Self-help with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Practice and repeat these exercises whenever you experience panic or flashbacks.

1. "Square" Breathing - with an imaginary square in front of your face

- Inhale through your nose, imagining drawing air from the top-left corner of the square (counting to 4).
- Hold your breath (counting to 4) while focusing on the top-right corner of the square.
- Exhale through your mouth (counting to 4), moving toward the bottom-right corner of the square.
- Hold your breath again (counting to 4), concentrating on the bottom-left corner of the square.

2. Relaxation - Progressive Muscle Relaxation

- Tense and then relax each muscle group in turn (e.g., starting from your feet and working your way up to your head) to help release tension.

3. "Grounding"

When anxiety overwhelms you, redirect your focus to reality by trying the following methods:

1) or Identify:

- 5 things you can see;
- 4 things you can touch;
- 3 things you can hear;
- 2 things you can smell;
- 1 thing you can taste (e.g., take a sip of water).

2) or Hold something in your hands (a ball, keys).

3) or Place your palms on a cold surface.

4) or Put a sour or spicy candy in your mouth, such as one with ginger or chili pepper.

The key to all these methods is finding a vivid sensation to focus on, helping you shift your attention. However, always act with care to avoid harming yourself or others.

4. Managing Triggers (events, thoughts, smells, sounds that make you relive a traumatic event)

- Try to identify in advance what strongly triggers reactions (e.g., noise, smells, places), and prepare a coping plan: (1) walk away, (2) do a breathing exercise, or (3) redirect your attention.
- Don't fear or avoid triggers. Learn to manage them and reduce their intensity. However, do not force yourself to face triggers. Approach them gradually when you feel ready.

5. Physical Activity

- Simple activities like walking, jogging, or yoga can help release tension and reduce stress levels. Even 15–20 minutes of movement a day can improve your condition.
- Physical exercise helps "burn off" the excess adrenaline produced during Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

6. Maintaining a Routine

- Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, even if your sleep quality is poor.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol, and heavy meals before bed — they increase anxiety.
- Establish a calming bedtime ritual, such as tea, music, or reading, to help prepare for sleep.

7. Expressing Emotions

- Keep a journal: write down your thoughts and feelings, especially after difficult moments. This helps "unload" them from your mind.
- Draw, write poetry, or simply reflect aloud — any form of expression can help reduce inner tension.

8. Social Support

- Talk to someone you trust. Open up, even if it feels difficult. Simply say, "I'm struggling, can you just listen?"
- Avoid isolating yourself, even if you feel like it — any small interactions with people can help you stay connected and not withdraw into yourself.

9. Distraction

- Engage in activities that require focus, such as puzzles, cooking, or watching a light-hearted series. This helps divert attention from intrusive thoughts.
- Avoid content with violence or stressful scenes (in movies, books, or conversations), as it may intensify symptoms.

IMPORTANT!

- ***If symptoms are very severe (suicidal thoughts, unrelenting panic), self-help cannot replace a professional. Seek assistance from a psychologist or psychiatrist.***
- ***Do not blame yourself for "weakness." Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is not about willpower; it is the brain's response to trauma.***
- ***These methods will not completely eliminate Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder but can ease your condition and provide a sense of control.***

INSTEAD OF AN EPILOGUE

Smile for the new day!

We hope you've read this guide. Perhaps you're already actively trying to help yourself and practicing some of the exercises. And this gives you HOPE!

However, you might still feel sad and joyless, far from your Homeland.

From the bottom of our hearts, we encourage you — **SMILE** at each new day! Despite the challenges, real or imagined. No matter what!

Know this — you are unique!!!

And this means that you have your own unique path to emotional balance, recovery, and new successes. Despite all the losses you may be experiencing during these challenging times.

Keep moving forward, step by step. **You are stronger than you realize!**

Know this — each of us has countless hidden resources and opportunities. Find them! Unleash them!

Know this — no matter what, everyone has their chance, and in any situation, it is always possible not only to restore "old" opportunities but also to gain "new" ones. In other words, there is always a way out!

Remember that in difficult times, you should not keep your feelings to yourself. Seek support, don't be afraid to share your experiences, and genuinely strive for healing.

Be kind to yourself, take care of your inner world!

Believe in yourself and your strength! Smile at each new day!

Best regards,

Dr. phil. Anna Sergiienko, Prof. Dr. phil. Svenja Taubner

For additional questions related to assistance from mental health professionals, you can reach out to the responsible person:

Dr. phil. Anna Sergiienko
Institut für Psychosoziale Prävention
Bergheimer Str. 54, 69115 Heidelberg
Anna.Sergiienko@med.uni-heidelberg.de