

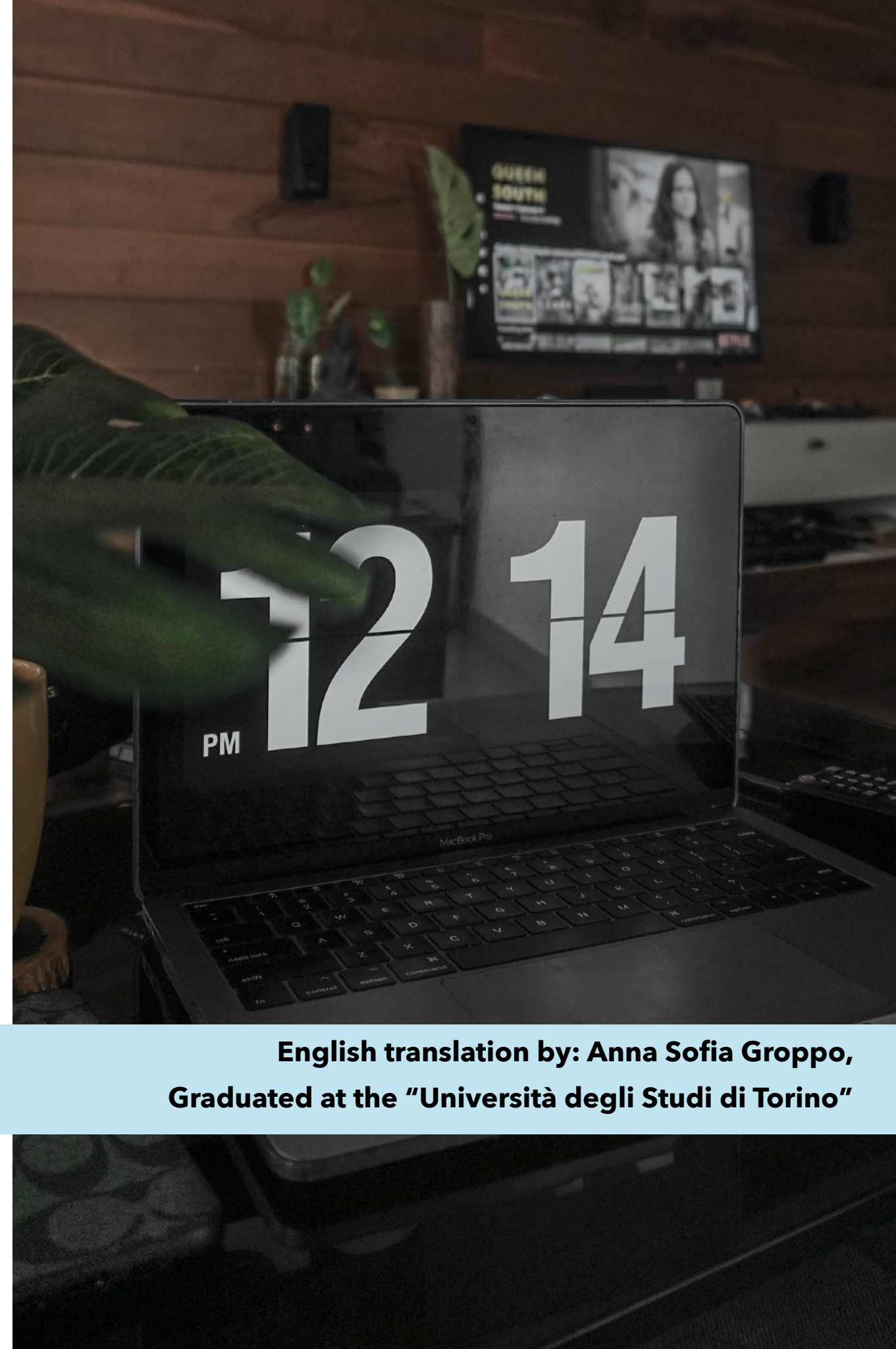
SMART LEARNING

Tips for studying during quarantine



UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI TORINO
DIPARTIMENTO DI PSICOLOGIA

Corso di Laurea Magistrale in Psicologia del lavoro
e del benessere nelle organizzazioni



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INTRODUCTION

Dear Student,

Let us introduce ourselves: we are Irene, Matteo, Lorenzo, Matteo, Maria Sole, Alessandro, Valentino and Alessia. We are a group of Master Students in Psychology of Work and Wellbeing in Organizations at the University of Turin.

In such a peculiar, unexpected and complex time, as the one we found ourselves currently living in, there are many solidarity initiatives that are helping us find again a sense of community we thought lost. As Work Psychology students we would like to put at your disposal our knowledge and skills to help you organize your workload.

This document is divided in specific parts that should satisfy any kind of curiosity you may have from the physical aspects of the environment that may favour at best your concentration to those related to break management, motivation and respect for the boundaries between the different areas of our life.

You must find some time for what you like doing in your day. It is very important to be careful and to prevent any aspect from taking over everything else, even studying!

What you will find here is a systematic analysis of the existing literature on those themes we chose to tell you about and of conversations with some of the professors from our degree course (prof. Daniela Converso, prof. Chiara Ghislieri, prof. Claudio Giovanni Cortese). Our hope/goal is to give you not only common sense advices, but also evidence-based good practices. You will find specific references to the bibliography in the text and in a special section, should you wish to find out more.

Enjoy the read and we wish you a good and productive study session!





GETTING STARTED...

These quarantine days could be an opportunity to reflect on your ways of learning. By experimenting and taking into consideration different possibilities, you could discover new studying techniques more suitable to you and that could be useful to you again in the future.

Try out various ways: with or without music, in the kitchen or in the bedroom, with family (or roommates) or on your own and figure out which ones allow you to maintain the right concentration. Talk about your needs to the people you have to share your studying areas with and make it easier for everyone to respect each others' spaces and timings and to create the best environment possible. Even deciding when to study is important.

If your degree course doesn't include streaming live classes and you can choose when to attend to them, the first possibility could be to follow the same schedule you had at school and to maintain your previous work plan. If you realize that the university schedule does not fit your habits (for example you cannot attend early morning classes), plan a weekly schedule, maintaining the same amount of hours, and try to follow it!

HOW TO PLAN YOUR DAY

In order to manage your study program at best, it could be useful to maintain **ultradian rhythms**. Those are the cycles of activity and rest in our cerebral functions that repeat themselves various times a day. The ultradian activity can be represented by a sinusoidal curve that foresees a turnover of peaks and valleys (Rossi & Nimmons, 1993):

- **PEAK:** activation phase that lasts from 90 to 120 minutes, during which you can express at best your capabilities such as memory, learning and problem solving; it is the period of best performance and highest productivity.
- **VALLEY:** the following 5 to 20 minutes match the disabling phase, during which your brain needs to recharge in order to be ready for the next peak.

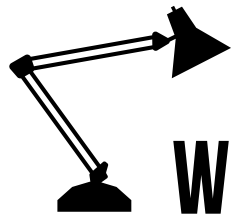
This model works as a trampoline, so “if you want to make the best of it heighten the peaks and scuttle the valleys” (Rossi & Simmons, 1993): when you are in your

activation phase, allow yourself to completely deactivate and take a break.

By respecting these cycles you will be able to express your mental abilities at best (cp. Tomato Technique, in the Motivation section).

So, when you plan your day of study try to keep in mind these simple rules and to organize yourself accordingly: every 90 to 120 minutes program a break of 5 to 20 minutes!





WHERE TO STUDY

If you are used to studying at the library or in a study hall, ask yourself which elements of those environments help you study and find your focus. Try to recreate those elements in the space that is currently available to you.

Choose a **quiet place**; some people find music helpful, others do not: pick what suits you best. It is true that the lyrics may overlap with what you are reading, but you can always listen to instrumental music. It could let your studying be more enjoyable (in the Appendix you will find some links to playlists and audio streams).

As far as music is concerned, you could get a more immersive experience and a decrease in external stimuli by choosing **headphones**. Be careful to use them at a low volume to prevent hearing diseases (follow the rule of 60: the headphones' volume must not be over 60 dB for a maximum of 60 minutes a day, as suggested by prof. Salvatore Iurato, Full professor of Audiology at the University of Bari).

When you work with your PC, be careful to maintain your **back** straight and your knees at a 90° angle, but be careful not to stiff with it. In the long run, an incorrect position may lead to musculoskeletal disorders. Here in Italy there even is a legislative decree on preventive measures in a place of work in regard to this particular field. (D.Lgs. 81/08; Spano, Montagna & Argentero, 2016).

Keyboard and **screen** position (Spano, Montagna & Argentero, 2016): if you use the screen only for watching, you should keep it at eye level in order to avoid straining the **cervical muscles**. The head should be straight. You can use some books to lift the PC to the height more comfortable for you.

Keep some **water** (or any other drink of choice) at hand. It is important to stay hydrated!

Choose a non-glaring light, a natural one with a lateral source would be best. Let us remind you that visual comfort is given by the following conditions: “adequate illumination, balanced lights disposition, constant light intensity, absence of glare, use of colors and color combinations” (Spano, Montagna & Argentero, 2016, p.80).

Screen brightness is equally important: you can activate dark screen settings for several programs. This will also help you to avoid exposure to strong lights that would weaken your eyes.

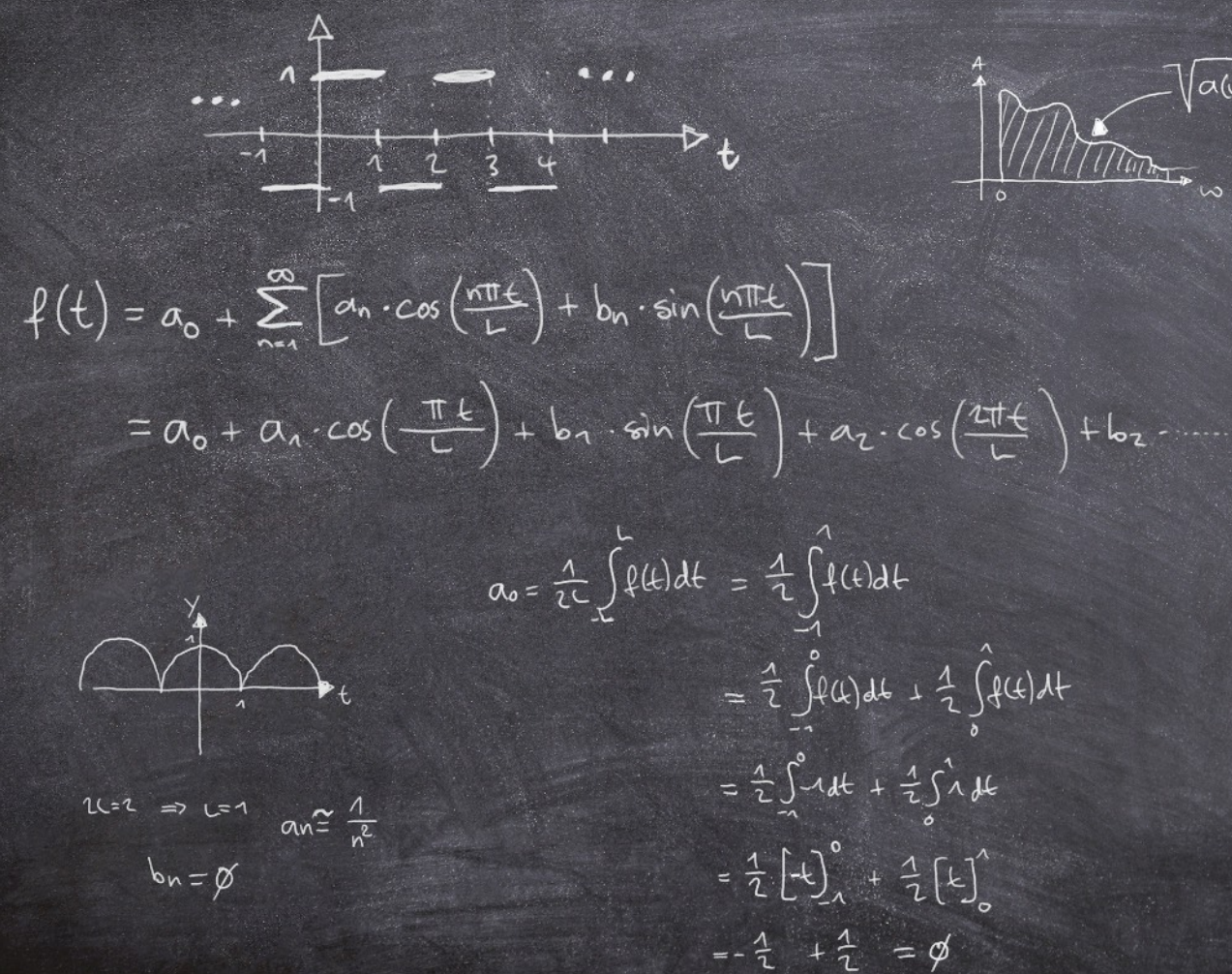
Be careful with home **energetic resources**, especially if they are at your expense, because they could raise your bill a lot. Here are some tips that you can take advantage of.

You can set the hibernation status on your electronic devices you mostly work and study with, this will allow you to keep the work session open without consuming too much energy. A person would normally not be at home for 8 to 10 hours a day, while now quarantine forces a lot of people to stay in a lot more and use higher quantities of energy.

Try **opening the window for 5 or 10 minutes** (preferably in the morning) in the room you find more comfortable to study in. The greater part of pollution is in fact in closed buildings, such as our homes. We should pay more attention to it because today these are the environments that are forced to accommodate a higher and permanently residing number of people and animals. It would be even better to open the window of the room where you mostly live in at regular intervals.

HOW TO STUDY

In these times of quarantine the ways we attend classes is completely different to what we were used to. This is why we may have some trouble managing the workload during the day and this could cause a lack of motivation and concentration difficulties. An organized work station and a well planned daily schedule may be helpful, but there are also other solutions you could try for a better performance.


$$f(t) = a_0 + \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} \left[a_n \cdot \cos\left(\frac{n\pi t}{L}\right) + b_n \cdot \sin\left(\frac{n\pi t}{L}\right) \right]$$
$$= a_0 + a_1 \cdot \cos\left(\frac{\pi t}{L}\right) + b_1 \cdot \sin\left(\frac{\pi t}{L}\right) + a_2 \cdot \cos\left(\frac{2\pi t}{L}\right) + b_2 \dots$$
$$a_0 = \frac{1}{2L} \int_{-L}^L f(t) dt = \frac{1}{2} \int_{-1}^1 f(t) dt$$
$$= \frac{1}{2} \int_{-1}^0 f(t) dt + \frac{1}{2} \int_0^1 f(t) dt$$
$$= \frac{1}{2} \int_{-1}^0 1 dt + \frac{1}{2} \int_0^1 1 dt$$
$$= \frac{1}{2} [t]_{-1}^0 + \frac{1}{2} [t]_0^1$$
$$= -\frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{2} = 0$$
$$L=2 \Rightarrow L=1 \quad a_n \approx \frac{1}{n^2}$$
$$b_n = 0$$

Here are the five elements we will be focusing on and will analyse in depth:

- **SOCIAL NETWORK**
- **MOTIVATION**
- **CONCENTRATION**
- **SFERA MODEL**
- **BREAK MANAGEMENT**



SOCIAL NETWORK

The social dimension is a fundamental element of university and in education in general (Bransford et al., 2000; Smith et al., 2005). When we enter a classroom we are rarely alone and many are the kinds of people we may encounter: professors, colleagues and other staff. This is the reason why now more than ever it is important to recreate your usual social network online: you could find some normalcy again and rely on it.

Keeping in touch with your fellow colleagues could help you make a **shared study plan**, a perfect instrument to establish your priorities:

- Constructive engagement can increase your motivation: **confrontation** is always a good learning mode;
- If you have some exercises that allow it, favour **team work** rather than individual. It could also be a good way to exercise your ability to work in groups, a very appreciated soft-skill these days.
- Relying on a **well-developed social network** (even involving your professors, if they are available) could help you overcome some of your studying issues.

Lastly, use *video-calls* rather than chatting. The conversational rhythm is fast and lighter, and you can also see the other person face-to-face.

MOTIVATION

Motivation is an important factor in solving given or pre-set tasks (Cortese, 2005). First of all identify the force field (Lewin, 1951) that can, in a given moment and context, favour or hinder your level of motivation, by recognizing which environmental factors drive you the most in a certain activity. The noise of ongoing road work outside your window is an example of hostile force, while a neat and tidy post “as well as the desire of memorizing important” concepts can be an incentive.

Clearly not all your exams and courses are equally interesting and entertaining, but they still are a step you must face in order to achieve your academic and/or work goals. There is no universally valid formula to increase motivation, but we will give you some suggestions that could help you study or better attend classes:

- **Plan your activities:** organize every step of the “performance” so that it can be as clear and simple as possible. Make sure it is compatible with your day of studying (also considering future exams as well) and that you can achieve some self-satisfying results. For example, you could:
 - *Predetermine* the amount of hours you will be studying;
 - *Follow* the concentration tips you will find in the following pages;
 - *Decide* how to divide your work from outlining/summarising to attending classes to best suit your needs;
 - *Diversify* different ways of learning to avoid routine;
 - *Create* habits or patterns throughout the day or the week to better take on your pace.

- **Set goals** that are accessible (study one chapter and not the entire book in a day), measurable (e.g. the number of pages you want to study), with a predetermined deadline (short ones are best, e.g. the day) and verifiable. Focus on what you can actually control (e.g. close your books and notes and try to repeat them by heart) (Blanchard et al., 1985; Cortese, 2008)
- **Communication** and relationships with other people that are experiencing similar difficulties is fundamental, as well as confronting and sharing studying strategies, troubles and goals;

- Try to acknowledge the ways you are changing and **learning**, while your courses proceed, both from the knowledge and the relationships point of view;
- A very good habit is to evaluate which are **the most effective methods** for you (e.g. outlining, repeating out loud, both);
- **Attend** all your classes and communicate directly with the professors. We believe that although it is hard to learn how to manage this new situation, it still is fundamental to have a feedback;
- While on break **treat yourself** with something you like.



CONCENTRATION

There are many different strategies that could help you find the concentration you need, here are some:

- **Identify** the activities or subjects that most interest or motivate you: you could engage in them at the beginning of your day to find the right energy and pace, or you could leave them at the end of the day as a “reward” after reaching the goals you have set;
- **Avoid unproductive multi-tasking** and pay attention to one task at a time: before you begin, focus on studying, free your mind from other thoughts and tell yourself that you will study with focus for the time period you have chosen to spend on this particular goal;

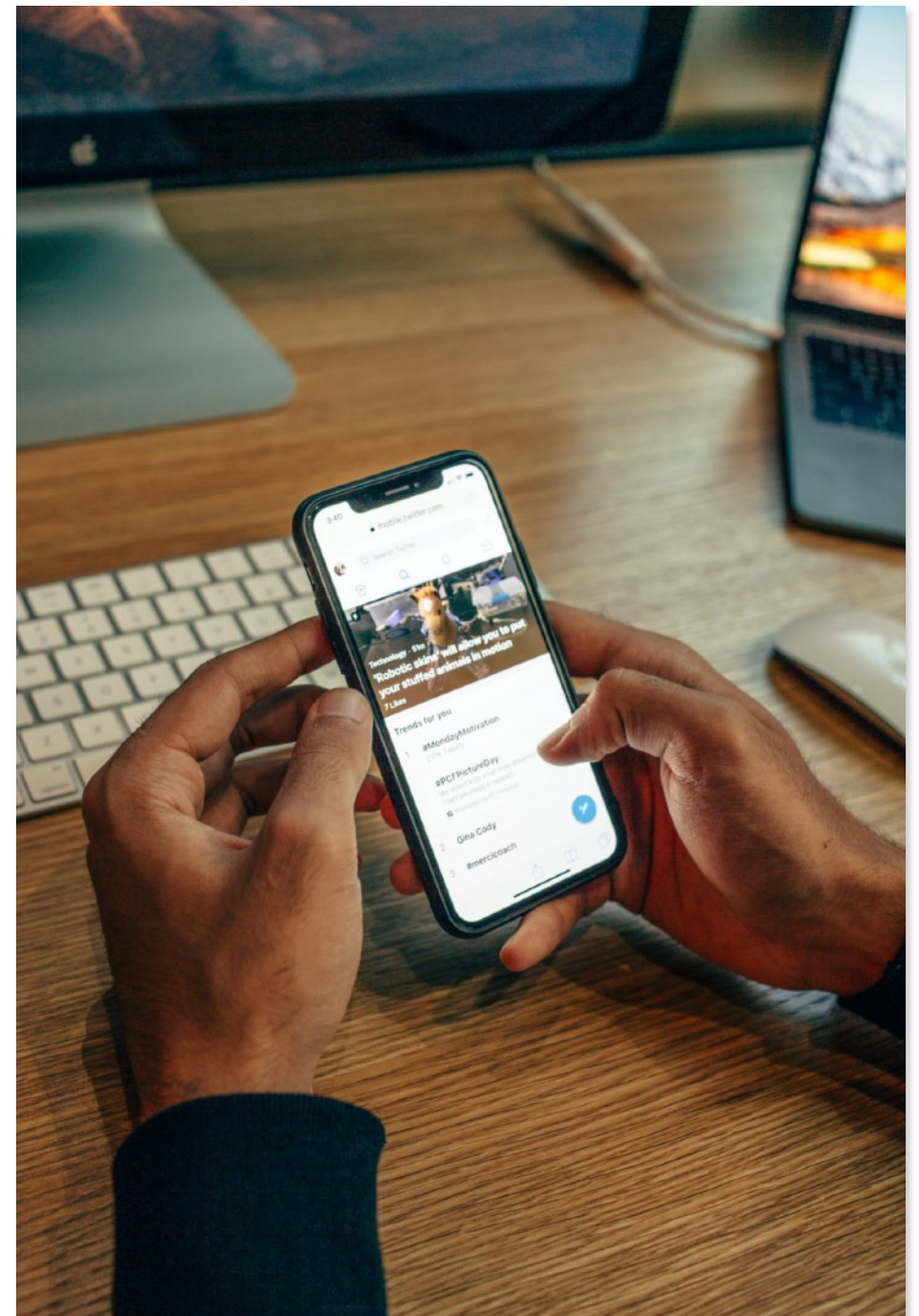


- If you find it difficult to start, try to set a *timer of 25 minutes*. For those 25 minutes no distractions are allowed and you will have to go on staying focused. Then you will make a 5 minutes break and every 4 times you will take a longer break (from 15 to 30 minutes). Breaks are fundamental! Never skip them if you want to give it your best. Oddly enough this technique is called the “**Tomato Technique**” and it was conceived by Francesco Cirillo, an Italian businessman and developer, who used a kitchen timer shaped as a tomato to time the periods of 25 minutes;

- **ForestApp** adds an ethical element to your break from technology: using this app allows you to plant trees all over the world through the virtual money you earn for the amount of time you are not using your smartphone.

If your cell phone timer and some apps can help, everyone knows very well that smartphones are one of the main sources of distractions. Instagram and Youtube keep us glued to the screen for hours. This works to the disadvantage of our concentration and productivity. Here are some little advices to deal with these situations:

- On many smartphones and computers you can see the time you spend on a specific app or site. **Being aware** could be the first step to avoid abuse;
- Temporarily deactivate the notifications that bother you more. Try setting the airplane mode.
- Keep your phone out of reach;
- Colours in photos and screensavers in some apps are very “attractive”. Setting a black and white filter on your device can solve this situation and help you spend less time on our phone;





SFERA MODEL

The SFERA model is a useful tool to analyse and interpret reality. And, above all, it is an instrument of performance optimization. You can use it to achieve your full potential in study sessions (Vercelli, 2006).

- **Sincronia** (Synchrony): it is the ability to be fully present during the performance;
- **Punti di Forza** (Strength Points): it is the awareness of our own abilities and our physical, technical and psychological skills that allow us to feel capable of what we are doing;
- **Energia** (Energy): it is the active use of strength and power. If used in a proper way, they help us make the most of our physical and mental resources to achieve a good outcome;
- **Ritmo** (Pace): it is what generates the right movements' flow, an ordered sequence in periods of time. If energy is the quantity of the action, rhythm is the quality.
- **Attivazione** (Activity): it is the motivational engine, the added value that allows us to overcome the limits. It matches the mental condition we experiment before a performance.

I am not in Synchrony	I am in Synchrony
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I keep reading the same sentence - I am distracted by other things (having little time, there is a lot to do, checking messages) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I understand what I am reading - I can maintain a constant attention
I am not using my Strength points	I am using my Strength points
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I am the only one behind schedule - I am focused on my problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I am confident I will succeed - I am focused on the targets
Not Regulating Energy	Regulating Energy
I feel uncomfortable (back pain, I can't focus)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I feel comfortable - I'm full of energy
I am not keeping up the Pace	I am keeping up the Pace
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I can't keep up (with lessons, slides, books, ...) - I can't manage the breaks (too many, too short, too long...) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I am constant in my routine and I can keep up - I handle well the breaks and I take advantage from them
I am not Active	I am Active
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I am not in the right mood and the goals are not clear - I am not motivated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I want to achieve the goals I set - I feel motivated intrinsically

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If you want, now test yourself with these two exercises:

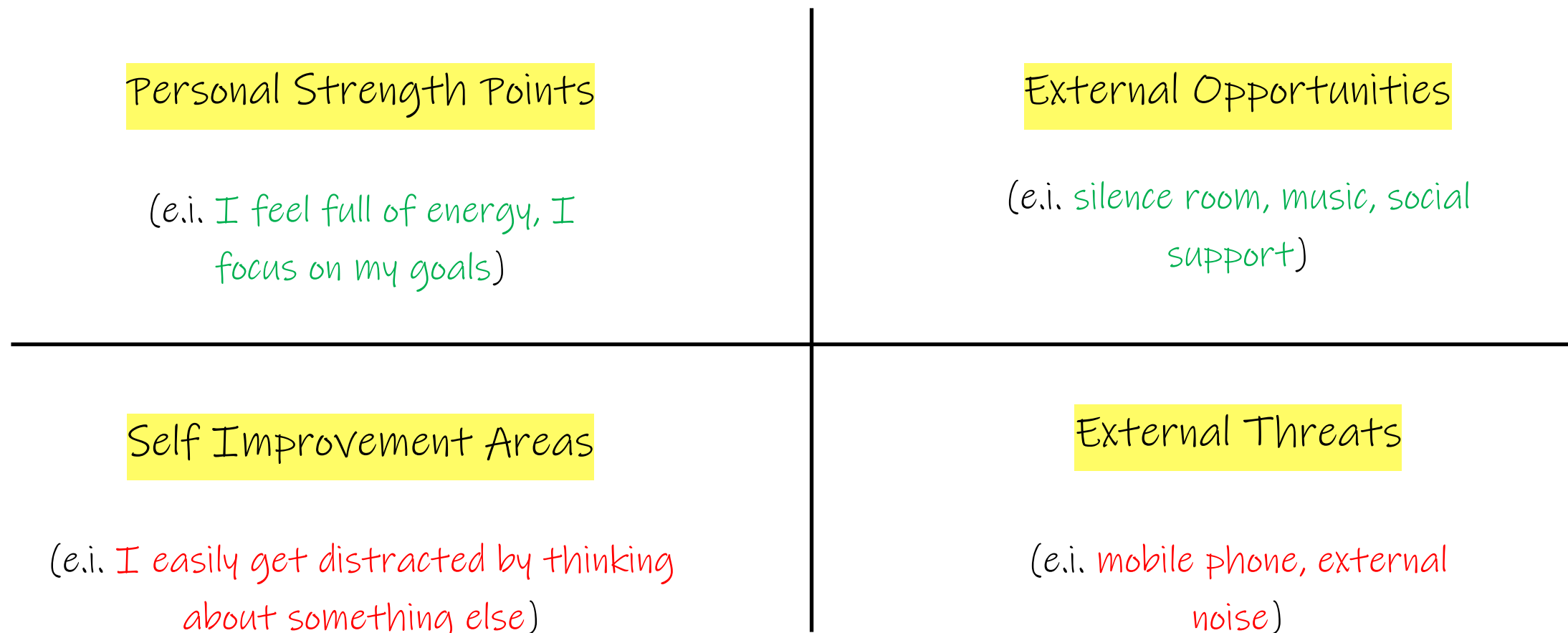
- **Matrix of energy** (Vercelli, 2006): try to think about what gives you and takes away your energy. For each term you include, try to give a control percentage, meaning how much you feel able to manage it personally.

	Personal context	Professional context
Gives me energy	Social support (50%) Good food (75%) Fine weather (0%)	Goal achievement (90%) Tidy room and well-organized personal equipment (100%)
Takes me energy	Laziness (100%) Boredom (60%) Dissatisfaction (100%) Rain (0%) Cold (20%)	Noise (10%) Failed goal achievement (90%) Mobile phone (90%)

From now on you must consider only the entries with a percentage above 49%. These are the elements you can personally manage. If you deal with them well, your performance will improve and your study sessions will be more effective.

- **SWOT** (Strength points, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) Analysis (Humphrey, 2005): let us take into account the SFERA factors mentioned above.

Example: "I often feel **full of energy and I make a detailed study program**, but when I open my books I **get distracted and I can't achieve the goals I set**".



Your strength points will help you deal with the external threats and will reinforce your self-improvement areas. Example: "I can improve my concentration with music and support from my colleagues. My energy and my ability to focus on goals can help me with the excessive use of my mobile phone and external noises".

BREAK MANAGEMENT

First of all, you must occasionally take a break because our attention is volatile and it drops after a certain period of time. Managing your breaks in a smart way will allow you to maximize the time at your disposal and be more productive. There are different ways to take a break, but the main ones are the 4 following: psychological detachment, relaxation, mastery and control (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007; Cortese & Argentero, 2016). In higher detail:

- **Psychological Detachment:** take a break, think of nothing;
- **Relaxation:** meditate, read a book, listen to music;
- **Mastery:** engage in activities that allow you to master new skills and inner assets. This will have a positive impact on your sense of self-effectiveness and will favour positive thinking (learning a new language, playing a musical instrument, cooking or baking);
- **Control:** the simple fact that you can decide how to spend your breaks will make you enjoy them more.



IT'S TIME TO TAKE A BREAK !

Here you will find a few suggestions for activities you can do at home. Be creative... experiment and explore! At the end of this document there are some interesting and useful links, including digital solidarity initiatives!

PHYSICAL EXERCISE

- **Workout/stretching:** either a newbie or a veteran, you can always try some exercises that can help you reactivate your muscles; gyms set online platforms with training sessions you can do at home: find them and start working out! Remember to spare a few minutes a day for stretching, especially since studying forces you to stay still for long periods of time.

CULTURE

- **Read:** dust off those books you have been piling up on your bedside table... now it's the right time to do it!
- **Listen:** to audiobooks/podcasts or music and dance!
- **Cook and bake:** it is the perfect activity that lets you be creative, experiment, shift your focus from your studies and maybe even contact that friend who brought that scrumptious cake at your last party! There are only few things as compelling as the particular scents from mixing the ingredients and the feeling of your hands in the dough: baking is a slow and philosophical craft that absorbs you, but also allows you to wander around in your own thoughts.
- **Hobbies:** drawing, watching a movie, singing or playing a musical instrument; take advantage of these moments to try something new.

WELLBEING

- Use your time to **do those chores** you have been putting off for too long and that have been filling your mind. Doing so will make you feel satisfied and relieved for having faced some unresolved issues;
- If you can, take some fresh air in your garden or balcony, **relax** for 5 to 10 minutes, close your eyes, listen to the sounds around you and maybe stay away from any electronic device that could make you waste your time jumping from one post to the next. Plunge into some positive thinking and free your mind;
- **Talk** about what you have been reading, studying or writing with the people around you and share what you have learned: you could both enrich yourselves from a cognitive and an evaluation point of view. This will allow you to understand the quality of your learning methods in a more relaxed way;
- Even **doing nothing** is a very good way to take a break. Try to find a moment to be with yourself, without interruptions, with nothing to do.

Every activity suggested here can be carried out individually, but also with some company! How? Use video calls to create your network, reach out to your contacts for cooking, working out or even just for some lazing around. Our advice is to create a social network not only for studying, but also for every other one of your interests.





CONCLUSIONS

The situation we currently find ourselves in demands flexibility and openness to change. In this climate of uncertainty we hope that these few pages will help you finding an anchor to manage your way of studying. We hope you will experiment, get to know yourself better, find yourself and treasure everything you are learning so that you could use it in a future with lighter colours. It will not be easy and we imagine it also was not to this day, but with commitment and sharing very good results can be reached... We are here (with you)! If you need any clarifications, if you have questions or want to give us a feedback on our work, you can contact our representative: irene.alfarone@edu.unito.it

If you found this document useful, share it!

Grazie Sofia per la tua traduzione!

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USEFUL LINKS

<https://www.youtube.com/user/blackboxfilmcompany>

<https://www.youtube.com/user/electrickeye91>

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/why-your-mental-health-may-be-suffering-in-the-covid-19-pandemic>

<https://solidarietadigitale.agid.gov.it/#/> o <https://www.co-vida.com/en/co-vida/>

<https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/lavorare-casa-senza-pesare-bolletta-AD57FFF?fromSearch>

http://www.sferacoaching.com/Archivio/SFERA%20e%20IA/Sintesi_SFERA.pdf

https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Analisi_SWOT

<https://www.federvolley.it/sites/default/files/Settore%20Tecnico%20%2B%20Scuola%20%2B%20Antidoping/Vercelli%202018%20ridotto.pdf>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSGyEsJ17cl&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR2p8Jh6ZaMMbFoIOzpPTOLaxDWDSndCwkgkDRyVZdk87l3M8CCXPzoRnTc>

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/37i9dQZF1DX3SiCzCxMDOH?si=IDaYxG2eQBiSzWZZhJtT2w&fbclid=IwAR1g1y0Yg81Tal30RknOfwP8egIRpGh5wn6XEQpC6lBV7u89Or6TEhi6JxY>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FlxM_0S2lA&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3DKXYug0cGkTrxyyAz03FgJ460Tp-1M7rFO6Rt6FQpWO9DRlidbUlrR_E

INSTITUTIONAL LINKS

<https://d66rp9rxjtwy.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/pieghevole-vademecum-coronavirus-CNOP-9-marzo.pdf>

<https://d66rp9rxjtwy.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Guida-anti-stress-per-i-cittadini-in-casa.pdf>

<https://amicopsicologo.ilmiotest.it>

<https://www.psy.it/psicologionline-la-professione-psicologica-a-disposizione-dei-cittadini.html>

<http://www.salute.gov.it/nuovocoronavirus>

<https://www.regione.piemonte.it/web/temi/sanita/coronavirus-gestione-della-situazione-piemonte>

<https://www.epicentro.iss.it/coronavirus/>