

CARE + CONNECT

Delivering Mental Health Supports in Higher
Education Institutions across Europe



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From Worried Thoughts to Small Steps: Inside the Practical Tools CARE + CONNECT Is Teaching Europe's Students

Knowing that student mental health is in crisis is only half of the story. The harder question is what to actually do about it on an ordinary Tuesday evening, when a deadline is closing in and the anxious thoughts will not switch off. Across our partner countries, students rarely lack good intentions; what they tend to lack is a clear, evidence-based way of working through the moment of pressure itself.

This is the gap the CARE + CONNECT digital programme is designed to close. Behind the friendly interface of our iCBT modules sits a structured set of psychological techniques, adapted directly from cognitive behavioural therapy and tested with real students in Spain, Germany, Ireland, Romania and Cyprus. In this article, we open up three of these tools to show exactly what students are learning, step by step.

Catching the Thought Before It Spirals

Much of academic stress begins with a single, fast thought rather than the situation itself. A student who receives critical feedback on an essay can move, almost instantly, to the thought that this means failing the entire course. Our modules call these automatic thoughts, and the first skill we teach is simply noticing them, since most students have never been asked to pay attention to the sentence running through their own mind in a stressful moment.

Once a thought becomes visible, students learn to check it against the evidence rather than accept it at face value, and to recognise common patterns such as catastrophising, mind-reading or all-or-nothing thinking that quietly distort how a situation is read. The exercise is not about forcing positive thinking; it is about replacing a thought such as “they must be ignoring my message on purpose” with one that fits the available facts, for example “there are several ordinary reasons why a reply might be delayed.” That small shift is often enough to lower the emotional weight of a difficult moment.



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Telling Helpful Coping Apart from Comfortable Avoidance

Every student already copes with stress somehow; the question our programme asks is whether that coping actually helps. Two students facing the same overwhelming assignment may respond in very different ways: one breaks the work into smaller steps and begins, the other closes the laptop and avoids opening the document for another week. Both are forms of coping, yet only one of them tends to reduce stress over time.

We are careful not to frame this as a question of willpower. Avoidance offers real, immediate relief, which is exactly why it is so easy to rely on, and exactly why it needs to be named for what it is rather than judged. By giving students a simple shared vocabulary – problem-focused coping, emotional support seeking, avoidance coping – we help them recognise their own patterns and begin building a more flexible personal toolkit, rather than defaulting to whichever strategy feels easiest in the moment.

Turning Insight into Small, Doable Action

Understanding a thought or a coping pattern only goes so far if nothing in daily life actually changes. This is where the programme introduces behavioural activation, a deceptively simple idea: low motivation is not solved by waiting to feel ready, but by taking one small, concrete action and allowing motivation to follow. A twenty-minute review of lecture notes is often enough to make an entire assignment feel possible again.

Students practise breaking an overwhelming task into two or three manageable steps and choosing one they can start the same day, then scheduling a few realistic activities for the days ahead. None of this requires a complete change of routine; it relies on the same logic that runs through the whole programme – that a small, well-chosen action, repeated consistently, tends to change how a student feels far more reliably than a single moment of insight.

Taken together, these three tools follow the same thread that runs through cognitive behavioural therapy itself: how we think, how we feel and how we act are closely connected, and a change in any one of them can ease the other two. As CARE + CONNECT continues to roll out across our partner universities, our aim is for every student who needs this kind of support to be able to reach it for free, at the moment it is actually needed, rather than weeks later in a waiting room.



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