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Anti–stress games and forest workshops in work with students. Reflections of a practitioner

Abstract

The article presents an original model of anti–stress classes implemented in the academic environment, based on non–formal education methods. The aim of these activities is to support students’ mental well–being through the reduction of tension, the development of mindfulness, and the building of social relationships. As part of the classes, four card games were used: STRESmisja, Qalmio, MOC LASU [the Power of Forest], and Leśne Medytacje [Forest Meditations]. The classes took place both in a classroom and in a park, enabling contact with nature. The author emphasizes the importance of biophilia in the learning process and the role of the facilitator as an agent of change. The article fits into the current of humanistic education focused on the learner and points to the need to implement systemic solutions supporting mental health in higher education. It is a practical proposal combining gamification, contact with nature, and reflective teaching, in the spirit of transcending the boundaries of traditional didactics.

Keywords: mental well–being, non–formal education, card games, forest bathing, biophilia, mindfulness, higher education, gamification

Introduction

A high level of stress accompanies both students and lecturers almost constantly. This phenomenon, although widespread, is often ignored or treated as an inseparable element of academic life. Meanwhile, chronic stress negatively affects the quality of teaching, cognitive processes, and social relations.

When analyzing the effectiveness of teaching in higher education, one can observe a tendency toward passing courses under conditions of tension and stress, yet without deeper reflection. Such a model of education does not foster the development of competences or intrinsic motivation. In response to these observations, I began testing tools that support effective work while simultaneously lowering cortisol levels, both among learners and among those conducting classes.

As part of the search for effective methods, I implemented in my teaching practice a combination of nature, mindfulness, and anti–stress games. The aim was to create an educational

space in which not only knowledge is transmitted, but also the psychophysical well-being of participants is supported.

Implementation of anti-stress games

The first stage involved introducing card games thematically related to stress reduction and the development of mindfulness. The classes were facultative (voluntary on my part) and took place on university premises. Students had the opportunity to see that games do not have to be based on rivalry and pressure; they can be tools supporting well-being, even within the enclosed space of a lecture hall.

The classes were enriched with anti-stress music (sounds of nature & forest from YouTube), which additionally supported an atmosphere of relaxation. Despite initial distraction, participants began to share their experiences, noting an improvement in well-being and a decrease in tension. In the next stage, I invited students to a park, where we continued working with anti-stress games as part of forest bathing.

The specificity of anti-stress games

Many anti-stress games are available on the market; however, in my teaching practice I decided to test those which, in my assessment, best meet students' needs and demonstrate the greatest effectiveness in stress reduction.

The first game I implemented is "STRESmisja" [STRESSmission], a card game designed to lower participants' cortisol levels. Its structure is based on three categories of cards: PSYCHE, which includes tasks related to working with the mind and senses; SOMA, comprising physical exercises supporting the regulation of tension; and POLIS, focusing on social activities that develop empathy and the practice of gratitude.

An example task from the SOMA category is "Yoga forward bend," which involves performing a simple stretching exercise that engages the body and promotes relaxation. The POLIS category includes tasks encouraging the sharing of experiences, such as telling a story about one's most recent act of helping another person and reflecting on the emotions that accompanied it. Cards from the PSYCHE category invite mindful exploration of the senses, for example through contact with an object—its smell, texture, sound, or taste—and sharing one's sensations after completing the task.

"STRESmisja" can be played both in teams and individually. In the group mode, participants divide into two teams, each receiving five task cards. The teams read tasks to one another, and the game ends after all tasks have been completed. In the solo version, the player draws one card daily and analyses its impact on stress levels (this can already be applied privately, and the students were, in fact, very interested in this).

Before starting the game, each participant marks their current stress level on a special STRESometer using a pink marker. After finishing the game, the stress level is marked again, this time

with a green marker, which allows for observation of changes and reflection on the effectiveness of individual tasks.

The aim of the game “STRESmisja” is not only to reduce stress levels, but also to develop self-awareness and to learn proven anti-stress techniques. The game contains 54 task cards, divided into the three aforementioned categories, which allows for a holistic approach to stress, taking into account its physical, psychological, and social dimensions. Thanks to its flexible structure, it can be used both as an integration tool and as a form of anti-stress training in academic education.

Another game that I introduced into my work with students is “Qalmio Mindfulness.” Its mechanics is based on drawing cards that indicate the direction of mindfulness practice. At the beginning, the participant chooses or draws a Foundation card that determines the attitude adopted during the exercise, for example “Beginner’s Mind,” which encourages a fresh view of everyday experiences. Then an “Exercise” card is drawn, containing a specific task, such as mindful tea drinking with full engagement of the senses. Optionally, an “Observation” card may also be drawn, which deepens reflection on internal reactions, tension, and emotions. The practice may last from 5 to 45 minutes and includes various paths: breath, body, senses, mind, and heart. The game supports the development of acceptance, presence in the moment, and the ability to pause in everyday rush.

In fieldwork, especially during forest bathing, I also use the “Leśne Medytacje” [Forest Mediations] set. These are cards designed for meditation and mindfulness in contact with nature. Each card contains a simple task to be performed in a selected place in the forest. Participants are encouraged to observe, focus on breath and silence, without judgment or competition. The game promotes gratitude and full immersion in the “here and now,” making it a valuable therapeutic and educational tool.

The newest tool that I have included in my practice is the game “MOC LASU [The Power of Forest].” Its tasks are based on the metaphorical connection of nature and the body. One example exercise involves finding small stones, examining their texture, and comparing them to one’s own scars, freckles, or birthmarks. The participant is invited to reflect on the stories that these elements of the body may tell.

Another task encourages touching tree bark, observing its structure, and comparing it to one’s own skin, which ends with a gentle massage as a symbolic gesture of care and mindfulness. The game “MOC LASU” combines elements of therapy, mindfulness, and contact with nature, supporting emotional processes and the personal development of participants.

Forest bathing as a tool for stress reduction in academic education

The high stress level in the academic environment, both among students and teaching staff, requires the search for effective and natural methods of support. One such method is forest bathing. It is a form of conscious, mindful presence in nature that not only improves well-being but also supports cognitive and emotional processes.

Scientific research and medical observations confirm that systematic contact with the forest has a positive impact on the human body. Trees act multidimensionally through oxygen-rich air, the

presence of phytoncides, and a wealth of sensory stimuli – they comprehensively affect the nervous and emotional systems.

In my teaching practice, I implement forest bathing as a form of elective classes supporting students' well-being. The classes begin in silence to enable participants to enter a state of mindfulness. We focus on breathing and the air leaving the body, pay attention to smells, temperature, and humidity. Subsequent exercises include focusing on air entering and leaving the body with closed eyes, listening to the sounds of nature, imagining that we are one with nature, concentrating on surrounding sounds, and then on touching natural objects (for example leaves or stones) and analyzing their texture with closed eyes. A mindful, slow walk with full presence, including contact between feet and the ground, ends with drawing reflective cards (e.g., "Leśne Medytacje" or "Qalmio"), which become a starting point for individual reflections. The walk takes place at a slow pace, with pauses and contact with plants, and ends with a reflection ritual, with questions about sensations, conclusions, and emotions.

Participants in my optional nature-based classes indicate a clear improvement in well-being and a reduction of tension. Everyone who participates in the walks leaves the forest or park significantly calmer and more relaxed and declares a marked decrease in stress levels (which is also visibly noticeable). In post-forest bathing questionnaire surveys, all participants declare their willingness to take part in such walks again. The most frequently mentioned elements of positive impact are the smell of trees, mindfulness of what is happening here and now, and time for regeneration in silence and peace.

Students emphasize the importance of conscious contact with nature using all senses: sight, hearing, smell, and touch. Participants stress that they had never taken part in such exercises before and had no idea that forests, parks, and even urban green spaces could be used in this way.

Students noted that it is very easy to calm down if one knows appropriate work techniques or even has suitable anti-stress games at home. Some live close to forests yet had never considered focusing on the here and now in forest space. Usually, the forest was associated with quick walks and possibly mushroom picking, physical fatigue after covering many kilometers. During our classes, students themselves felt that we were returning to foundations that are very important for human beings.

Inspiration to go beyond established patterns

During the walks, I openly tell my participants that for many years I myself had no idea how important for human health contact with nature practiced in a very mindful way is. Yet we are constantly exposed to successive sources of stress, individually and collectively, for example through information overload; we are psychologically and physically very exhausted by recurring stimuli.

Only thanks to participation in the project "Zaopiekowani w stresie – natura jako źródło zdrowia psychicznego" ("Cared for in stress – nature as a source of mental health"), funded by the National Institute of Freedom under the NOWEFIO 2024 program and implemented by the Foundation Institute of Stress Psychology, was I able to learn the principles of conducting forest bathing and the necessary theory and practice. During training conducted in a forest near Zgierz (central Poland), I

learned how far we have moved away from our sources and how crucial it is to return to the calm and silence offered by nature.

A very important element of the training was the presentation of the concept of biophilia introduced by Edward Wilson, which concerns the innate human tendency to establish relationships with nature. Our brains and bodies evolved in a natural environment, and its absence may lead to psychological and physical discomfort. The concept of biophilia proposed by Wilson is confirmed in my teaching practice. Students who participate in forest bathing regain the ability to concentrate, calm down, and reflect. Research by Roger Ulrich and Stephen Kaplan indicates that contact with nature lowers cortisol levels, improves cognitive functions, and supports emotional processes. My observations confirm these conclusions: students leave the forest calmer, more present, and ready to learn.

In turn, Gert Biesta emphasizes that education should enable the learner to come into being as a person, not merely as a recipient of content. In my classes, I strive to create a space in which the student can be themselves, not only in the role of a listener, but as a participant in the process of regeneration. Jack Mezirow, the creator of the concept of transformative learning, points out that adult education should lead to a change in the way experiences are interpreted through reflection. The anti-stress games and forest bathing that I conduct are precisely such a space: they allow students to look at themselves and their emotions from a new perspective.

David Kolb describes learning as a cycle that begins with experience, moves through reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation. My classes fit into this model: students experience, reflect, and then implement new ways of coping with stress.

Scientific literature indicates a reduction of symptoms of depression and anxiety thanks to forest bathing, as well as an increase in creativity. It has been proven that short walks in nature improve working memory and executive functions (e.g., planning, problem-solving, or initiating activity). For years, scientists have therefore appreciated the power of nature, the possibilities of relieving stress through nature, and the regeneration of vital forces.

Importantly, forest bathing does not require physical exertion, because it is based on sensing: smell, sound, touch, presence. There is no need to cover many kilometers to feel the power of influence of a forest, park, or even an urban green square. It is a form of education in movement, without screens, in a neutral and non-judgmental space. Nature becomes an ideal environment for workshops, mindfulness sessions, and meditation, also as part of classes at higher education institutions.

The combination of anti-stress games, reflective cards, and forest bathing creates a coherent, natural method of stress prevention in academic education. Education can be humanistic, tender, and mindful. This is exactly what is needed today. We do not always have to fight stress. Sometimes it is enough to stop rushing, pause, sit under a tree, and remember that we are part of nature.

My teaching experiences with anti-stress games and forest bathing not only support students' well-being but also redefine my understanding of the role of the academic teacher. I notice that education can be a space of regeneration, not only of knowledge transfer. In the forest, in silence, in the rhythm of mindfulness, students regain contact with themselves, and I with the meaning of

teaching. The educational relationship does not have to be based on control or pressure. It can be an encounter in which presence and trust become the foundation of the learning process. Contemporary academic didactics, overloaded informationally and emotionally, needs such spaces not as an addition but as a response to the real needs of participants. For me, as an academic teacher, these classes are not only a method but also a form of self-reflection. I learn to listen, observe and be. I learn that education is not only a curriculum but also the rhythm of relationships.

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