

Back to School Newsletter

2026-2027



Start Strong, Stay Connected
Small habits, big year.

📍 Alfaisal University, Riyadh
✉ awo@alfaisal.edu
☎ Ext. 7792 | Room B3-40
🌐 <http://awo.alfaisal.edu>

Welcome back from AWO

A new academic year always arrives with the same mix of feelings. Some of you are returning to familiar corridors and familiar faces. Some of you are walking onto this campus for the very first time, still working out where the good study spots are and which cafeteria queue moves fastest. Wherever you sit on that spectrum, the Alfaisal Wellbeing Office is glad to have you here.

Our theme this year is Start Strong, Stay Connected. It comes from something the research keeps confirming: the students and staff who do well over a long academic year are rarely the ones who made the most dramatic promises in September. They are the ones who built a few small routines early and stayed connected to people around them. That is what this newsletter is built around.

Inside you will find what the latest evidence actually says about sleep, movement, screen time, food and belonging, written for a general reader rather than a specialist. You will also find our full programme for the year, a six week challenge to get you started, campus practicalities that are genuinely useful to know, and the contact details you need if something is not going well.

Join the Alfaisal Wellbeing Community

Registration takes under a minute and gives you access to events, promotions, our wellbeing newsletter and the community itself. Fill in the form at forms.gle/uvdeNeS7sxEvKZ626 or email awo@alfaisal.edu.

Returning this year

Never Too Late to Ride a Bike,

Back for a new cohort



Beans and Buddies

Our reading corner and social initiative



Midday Moves

The walking initiative for faculty, staff and teaching assistants



WeRun

Community runs and Journey to 5K



Speak to The Mind and Soul

series and our Mental Health Lunch Hours



New this year

The AWO First Six Weeks Challenge

A simple week by week starter, no competition and no pressure.



An expanded evidence section

Five findings from latest research, translated into things you can actually do.



A clearer support pathway

One page that tells you exactly who to contact and when.



EVENTS	WHEN	WHO IT IS FOR
Saudi National Day	23 September 2026	Whole community
Speak to The Mind and Soul Series	October , Every other week	Whole community
Wellbeing Talks with Carol Stoffella	To Be Determined	Whole community
Never Too Late to Ride a Bike	October , every Wednesday start on October 14th to the 4th of November from 4:30 pm to 6 pm	Whole community
WeRun Community Runs	October , Every Tuesday 7:30 pm	Whole community
Midday Moves	Mondays 12:15 to 12:45	Faculty, staff and TAs
Wellbeing Community Gathering	Quarterly	Registered members
14th Health Promotion Project Exhibition	December 2026	Whole community
Wellbeing at Work Summit	Early 2027	Faculty and staff
Journey to 5K	Spring semester	Whole community



Wellbeing Talks with Carol Stoffella



Wellbeing Talks with Carol Stoffella

Carol Stoffella returns to Alfaisal this year for a series of wellbeing talks. She is an internationally recognized sports nutrition expert, and led our Fasting is Wellness: Talk and Treat session last year, which covered fasting, metabolic health and longevity alongside InBody assessments and exercise prescription.

Register your interest at awo@alfaisal.edu and we will let you know first.

Stay tuned for the announcement of the location and dates

**COMING
SOON**

What the evidence says: five findings for the year ahead

Wellbeing advice tends to arrive as a long list of things you should be doing. We would rather give you five findings from recent, good quality research and let you decide which one is worth your attention this term

1. Belonging does more for your wellbeing than your grades do



A 2025 systematic review and meta-analysis in The Australian Educational Researcher pooled data from tens of thousands of university students and looked at what a sense of belonging is actually associated with. Belonging showed a small to medium relationship with academic outcomes across roughly 26,800 students, and a considerably stronger relationship with psychological wellbeing across roughly 42,800 students (van Kessel et al., 2025).

What this means for you? Feeling part of the place is not a soft extra that comes after the academic work. For most students it is a stronger predictor of how you feel than your marks are. If you do one thing in your first six weeks, make it joining something. A club, a study group, a Mid-Day Moves session, a run. It counts.



2. Movement helps, and it does not need to be a gym membership

A 2025 meta-analysis in Frontiers in Psychology brought together 34 articles covering 80 studies and just over 8,000 university students. Exercise interventions produced moderate reductions in anxiety, depression and stress, and a meaningful improvement in general wellbeing (Liu et al., 2025). A separate 2025 meta-analysis focused on mindful movement, meaning programmes that combine physical activity with a mindfulness element such as yoga, Pilates or tai chi, and found significant reductions in both anxiety and depression across 19 randomised trials (Xu et al., 2025). There is also growing evidence for what researchers call exercise snacks. These are very short bouts of activity, often under a minute, repeated through the day to break up long periods of sitting. Recent randomised trials and a 2025 systematic review suggest that this format is both feasible and beneficial for people who struggle to find a continuous hour (Wan et al., 2025; Babir et al., 2025).

What this means for you? Stairs instead of the lift between classes. A fifteen minute walk after lunch. One Midday Moves session a week. These are not consolation prizes for people who cannot get to a gym, they are the format the evidence supports.

3. Cutting screen time causes improvement, not just correlates with it text

For years the screen time debate was stuck on correlation. Two 2025 trials moved it forward. A randomised controlled trial in BMC Medicine asked students to limit daily smartphone screen time to two hours for three weeks. Compared with controls, they showed improvements in stress, wellbeing, depressive symptoms and sleep quality (Pieh et al., 2025). A separate trial in PNAS Nexus blocked mobile internet access for two weeks in 267 adults and found improvements in mental health, subjective wellbeing and objectively measured sustained attention, with average daily screen use falling from around five hours to under three (Castelo et al., 2025).

A follow up analysis published later in 2025 found that most of the benefit appeared within the first week, which is encouraging if three weeks sounds like a lot to commit to. We also had a booth in our 10th HPP addressing this.

What this means for you? You do not need to delete anything. Pick two hours a day that are phone free, ideally the hour before you sleep and one block of study time.

4. Sleep is a skill, and it responds to training

A 2025 meta-analysis in PLOS ONE examined 22 randomised trials of psychological sleep interventions in university students, covering nearly 6,200 participants aged 18 to 30. Structured approaches such as cognitive behavioural therapy for insomnia and mindfulness based programmes produced a moderate improvement in sleep quality compared with control groups (Tadros et al., 2025).

Worth knowing: the direct link between sleep and grade point average is real but modest, and social jetlag, meaning the gap between your weekday and weekend sleep schedule, weakens it further.

Sleep matters, but the strongest case for protecting it is mood, immune function and how tolerable the day feels rather than a straight line to a higher GPA.

What this means for you? Anchor your wake time first, including at weekends. It is easier to control than bedtime and it does most of the work.

5. What you eat shows up in how you feel

A 2025 study in PeerJ surveyed 595 university students and found that a higher share of daily energy coming from ultra processed foods was associated with lower health related quality of life and higher mental distress (Ertas Ozturk and Uzdil, 2025). Ultra processed here means industrially formulated products that contain little whole food, typically high in added sugar, refined fat and sodium. A 2025 analysis in Frontiers in Nutrition found that the combination of high ultra processed intake and high sedentary time was associated with more depressive symptoms in young adults than either factor alone (Ren et al., 2025).

What this means for you? Nobody is asking you to give up everything you enjoy. Change one thing. Replace the afternoon packaged snack with fruit, nuts or yoghurt and see whether the late afternoon slump changes.

A note on our own context

A 2025 systematic review in the Saudi Medical Journal found that a substantial proportion of Saudi college students do not meet World Health Organization physical activity recommendations, with barriers that are practical rather than motivational: time, facilities, transport and social support (Bajuaifer and Alrashdi, 2025).

In 2024-2025, we (Dr. Zaidi, Dr. Baraa, Dr. Racha) did a wellbeing assessment study of college students, mapped these barriers by gender and found meaningful differences in what gets in the way. AWO programming is designed around those barriers, which is why so much of it happens on campus, in daylight, and in short blocks.

The AWO First Six Weeks Challenge

The first six weeks of a semester set the pattern for the rest of it. This challenge gives you one small action per pillar per week. There is no scoring and nothing to submit.

WEEK	BODY	MIND	CONNECTION	CAMPUS
Week 1	Take the stairs at least once a day	Set one fixed wake time and keep it	Introduce yourself to one new person	Find the clinic and save the number
Week 2	Walk fifteen minutes after lunch	Choose two phone free hours a day	Sit with someone new at lunch	Join one club or AWO activity
Week 3	Carry a refillable water bottle daily	Note three things that went well this week	Check in on a classmate who has gone quiet	Attend a Mind and Soul session
Week 4	Swap one packaged snack for fruit or nuts	No screens for thirty minutes before bed	Study with a partner at least once	Try reading a book in a corner at uni
Week 5	Try Midday Moves, a bike session or a run	Five slow breaths before an exam or presentation	Thank someone who helped you settle in	Visit a campus space you have never used
Week 6	Keep the one habit that actually worked	Reflect on what changed and what did not	Bring a friend to an AWO activity	Send AWO one idea for the year ahead

1

MINDFUL PRACTICES:



A few minutes of slow breathing or deliberate relaxation lowers stress, sharpens focus and lifts mood. The evidence for brief, repeated practice is stronger than for occasional long sessions.

2

STRETCH AND MOVE:



Long stretches of sitting build muscle tension, stiffen posture and drain energy. Light movement spread through the day supports both physical and mental health.



3

MINDFUL MOVEMENT:

Pilates, yoga and tai chi practised a couple of times a week after study or work hours reduce stress, improve flexibility and support better sleep.



4

READING THERAPY:

Grab a reading buddy, leave the phone somewhere else, and take it outdoors if the weather allows.



LIFE AT AU:

AWO RUNS WELLNESS TALKS ACROSS THE SEMESTER COVERING STRESS MANAGEMENT, HEALTHY LIFESTYLE HABITS AND WORK AND STUDY BALANCE. BETWEEN SESSIONS, THESE ARE THE THINGS WORTH BUILDING IN.

STRESS AND EVERYDAY WELLBEING

Sleep hygiene



Keep a consistent wake time, weekends included

Stop caffeine after mid afternoon

Dim the lights and put screens away thirty minutes before bed

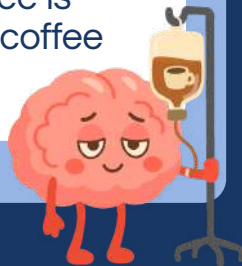
Keep the room cool, dark and quiet

Wind down with reading or gentle stretching rather than scrolling



Caffeine timing

Caffeine has a half life of roughly five to six hours, which means an afternoon coffee is still measurably in your system at bedtime. If your sleep is poor, moving your last coffee earlier is usually more effective than anything you do at night.



Hydration, especially in September



Riyadh in September is still demanding. Water supports focus, energy and thermoregulation, and mild dehydration shows up as fatigue and poor concentration long before you feel thirsty. Keep a refillable bottle with you and top it up between classes. Coconut water and other unsweetened drinks are reasonable alternatives. Juices, sodas and energy drinks are not.

Students cafeteria timings



Females 1:00 to 2:00 PM. Males 12:00 to 1:00 PM. Plan around these, particularly on days with back to back sessions.

LIFE AT AU:

1

PREPARE AT HOME WHEN YOU CAN.

Food you bring is cheaper, faster and usually better than what you can grab between classes.



2

ANCHOR MEALS WITH PROTEIN:

Eggs, tuna, salmon, chicken, dairy, legumes, tofu. Protein at breakfast in particular reduces the mid morning crash.



3

CHOOSE SLOWER CARBOHYDRATES:

Sweet potato, pumpkin, oats, whole grain or higher protein breads.



4

PICK DAIRY CAREFULLY:

Plain Greek yoghurt or kefir supports gut health. Flavoured yoghurts and puddings are usually closer to dessert.



5

WATCH THE ULTRA PROCESSED SHARE

You do not need to eliminate it, just reduce how much of your daily energy comes from it.



SMART AND HEALTHY EATING ON CAMPUS

1

NEVER TOO LATE TO RIDE A BIKE

Our cycling programme returns for a new cohort. It is built for genuine beginners as well as people who have not been on a bike since childhood.



LIFE AT AU:



2

MIDDAY MOVES



Flexible and friendly.

Walk at your own pace or join a volunteer led group.

Pick your spot. Start and end at designated points, or join anywhere along the route that fits your schedule.

Social by design. Catch up with colleagues, meet new faces, or simply get some air.

Faculty and staff exclusive. Sign up through the Midday Moves form circulated by email.

Recognition. Participants are featured in our weekly emails, and those with the highest step counts are celebrated at the next community meeting.

MOVE MORE

3

WERUN AND JOURNEY TO 5K

Our community runs continue through the year, with Journey to 5K running as a structured programme for people building up from nothing.





Life at AU: Authorship

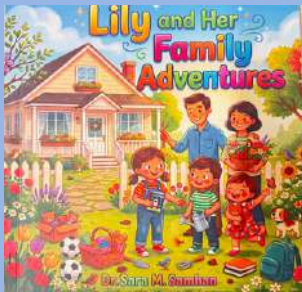
Author Spotlight



THE SAMHAN SISTERS

DR. SARA SAMHAN

VERSATILITY MEETS VISION: AS AN AUTHOR OF THREE DISTINCT BOOKS ; TWO DELIGHTING YOUNG MINDS THROUGH STORIES AND COLORING, AND ANOTHER OFFERING SPACE FOR REFLECTION . THREE BOOKS. THREE JOURNEYS. ONE DREAM-TO CREATE WITH PURPOSE AND LEAVE SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL BEHIND..



LILLY AND HER FAMILY ADVENTURES



DAILY JOURNAL

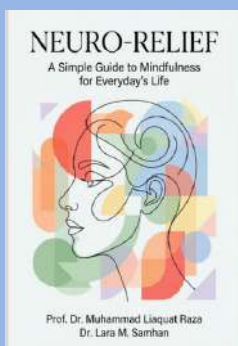


THE GIGGLES & CRAYONS

DR. LARA SAMHAN

DRIVEN & DYNAMIC: BALANCING A BROAD RANGE OF IMPRESSIVE CAREER ACHIEVEMENTS WITH HER WORK AS A MOTIVATIONAL AUTHOR, SHE IS DEDICATED TO HELPING OTHERS SUCCEED.

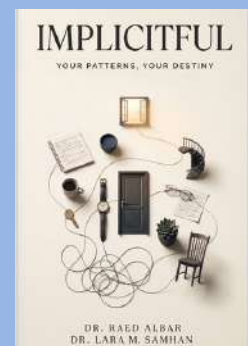
RETURNING AUTHOR



NEURO-RELIEF



MOMENTUM



IMPLICITFUL

SHARED SPACES AND EVERYDAY ETIQUETTE

IN THE LIBRARY



- 01 Keep it clean. No food in the library.
- 02 Respect the noise levels. Whisper on floors one and two, absolute quiet on floor three.
- 03 Treat books properly. Return materials on time and in good condition.
- 04 Study rooms are shared. No reservations and no leaving personal belongings behind to hold a space.
- 05 Use what is there. Print and electronic materials, printers, databases and staff who can genuinely help you find things.

AROUND CAMPUS



- 01 Follow the university dress code, which keeps the campus atmosphere respectful and professional
- 02 A smile costs nothing and does more for the atmosphere than most policies
- 03 Maintain good hygiene, in shared spaces it is a courtesy to everyone around you
- 04 Clean up after yourself in public areas and in the toilets
- 05 Sort your waste properly into plastics, recyclables and general waste



TWO REMINDERS WORTH REPEATING



- 01 Smoking and vaping are strictly prohibited across all areas of campus, including outdoor spaces.
- 02 For new students: join a club early. It sharpens your communication, connects you across batches and cohorts, and makes the academic side more manageable rather than less. The evidence on belonging in this newsletter is not abstract, this is what it looks like in practice.



TIPS AND MUST KNOWS

PARKING

- Basement parking is available to all, but expect congestion between 10 AM and 1 PM
- Arriving before 9:00 AM usually means easier access to spaces
- Parking is available outside the university. Observe all restrictions to avoid fines
- Park responsibly and avoid blocking other vehicles. If unavoidable, leave a contact number on your dashboard
- **Smart tip:** Park a little further out and walk. You avoid the rush and you get your movement for the day at the same time.

OFFERS AND PROMOTIONS

- As part of the Alfaisal Wellbeing Community, AWO negotiates discounts with partner venues. Members can claim these by presenting an Alfaisal ID at the premises. Current partners and any new additions for this year are circulated by email and listed on the AWO website under Offers and Promotions.



METRO SHUTTLE, WEEKDAYS



- Morning Pick-Up (Metro Station → University):
 - 7:30 AM
 - 8:00 AM
 - 8:30 AM
 - [Pick-up Location: <https://maps.app.goo.gl/YH6nYc25V6tDTXdR7>]
- Afternoon Drop-Off (University → Metro Station):
 - 3:00 PM
 - 4:00 PM
 - 5:00 PM
 - 5:30 PM
 - [Pick-up Point: Behind Kudu; <https://maps.app.goo.gl/BjM1JY6jHL9XvkmA6>]

Please note: The shuttle will leave the Metro Station on time, so please be there at least 5 minutes before the scheduled departure.

Campus clinic and getting support

SERVICE	DETAILS
MALE STUDENTS CLINIC	2ND FLOOR, OPPOSITE THE FEMALE THEATRE
FEMALE STUDENTS CLINIC	BESIDE THE MASJID, AT GATE 2
SERVICES PROVIDED	GENERAL CHECK UPS, FIRST AID, HEALTH CONSULTATIONS AND REFERRALS
EXTENSIONS	7484 FOR FEMALES, 7485 FOR MALES
EMERGENCY CONTACTS	0540602600 AND 0503011309
WORKING HOURS	8AM -9 PM EXCEPT FOR FRIDAY AND SATURDAY

If things are not going well

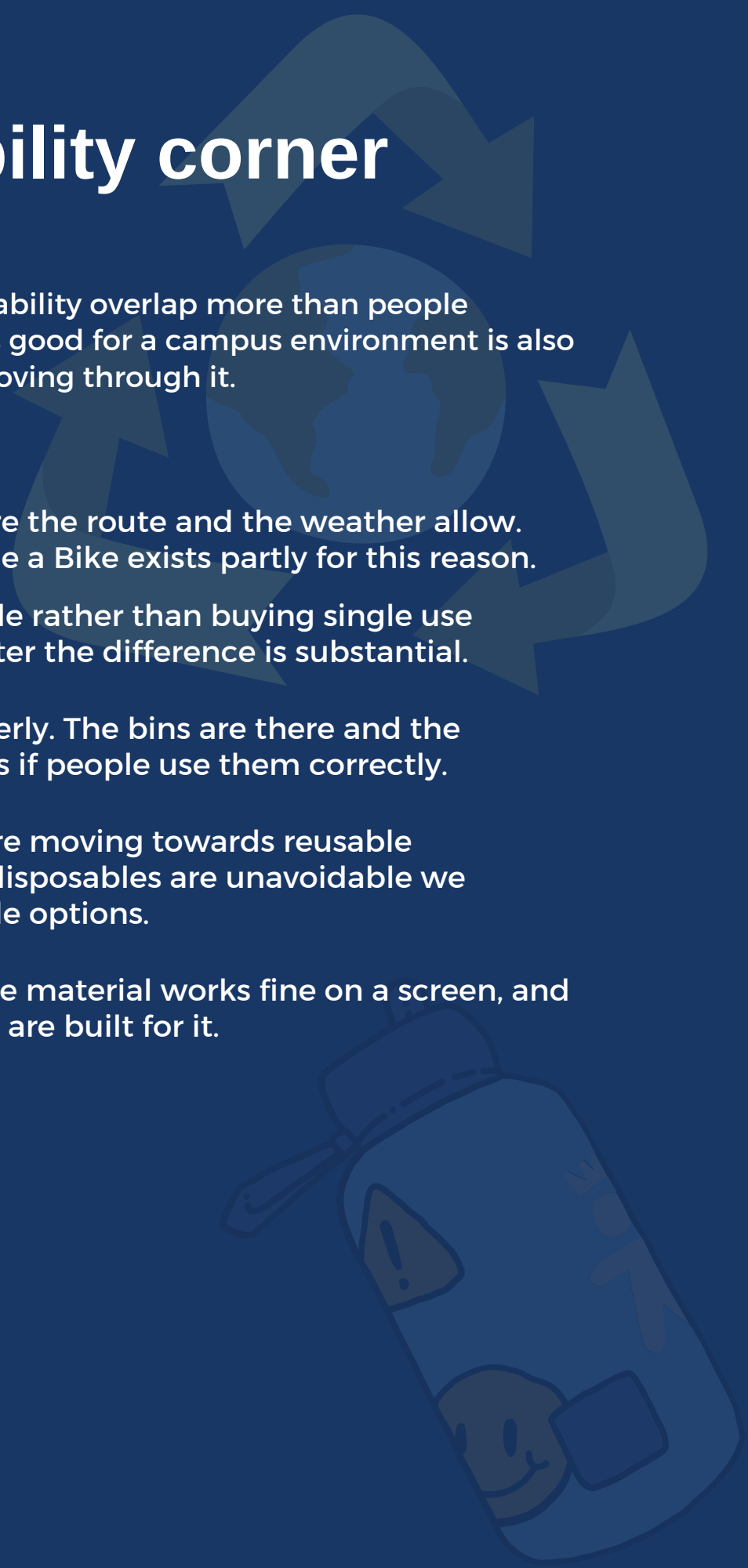
Academic years are long, and most people hit a stretch where it stops feeling manageable. That is ordinary rather than exceptional, and it is worth saying plainly: asking for help early is far easier than asking for it late.

If you are struggling with your mood, your sleep, your workload or anything else, start with one of these:

- The on campus clinic, for anything physical or where you are not sure what is going on
- The Counseling and Skills Development Unit, for confidential psychological support. The unit covers low mood and anxiety, adjusting to university, exam anxiety, study skills and support for students with a medical, psychological or accessibility need. Details at <http://admissions.alfaisal.edu/en/counseling-and-skills-development-unit-csd> 011 215 7847
- Your academic advisor, if the pressure is coming from the workload or your programme
- AWO at awo@alfaisal.edu, if you are not sure where to start and want to be pointed in the right direction



Sustainability corner

A large, faint background graphic on a dark blue background. It features a globe in the center, surrounded by three curved arrows forming a circular path, which is a common symbol for recycling or sustainability. In the bottom right corner, there is a stylized illustration of a blue water bottle with a smiling face and a small square button on its side.

Wellbeing and sustainability overlap more than people expect. Most of what is good for a campus environment is also good for the people moving through it.

- Cycle or walk in where the route and the weather allow. Never Too Late to Ride a Bike exists partly for this reason.
- Carry a refillable bottle rather than buying single use plastic. Over a semester the difference is substantial.
- Sort your waste properly. The bins are there and the separation only works if people use them correctly.
- At AWO events we are moving towards reusable serviceware. Where disposables are unavoidable we choose biodegradable options.
- Print less. Most course material works fine on a screen, and the library databases are built for it.

References

1. Babir, F. J., Islam, H., McCreary, S., et al. (2025). Technology-enabled exercise snacks are feasible to perform in a real-world setting: A randomized controlled trial. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine and Science in Sports*, 35(8), e70117. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sms.70117>

2. Bajuaifer, S. S., and Alrashdi, N. Z. (2025). Physical activity levels among college students in Saudi Arabia. *Saudi Medical Journal*, 46(6), 587 to 607. <https://doi.org/10.15537/smj.2025.46.6.20240073>

3. Castelo, N., Kushlev, K., Ward, A. F., Esterman, M., and Reiner, P. (2025). Blocking mobile internet on smartphones improves sustained attention, mental health, and subjective well-being. *PNAS Nexus*, 4(2), pgaf017. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgaf017>

4. Ertas Ozturk, Y., and Uzdil, Z. (2025). Ultra-processed food consumption is linked to quality of life and mental distress among university students. *PeerJ*, 13, e19931. <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.19931>

5. Liu, L., Xin, X., Wang, H., and Zhang, Y. (2025). Effectiveness of physical exercise on mental health among university students: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, 1612408. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1612408>

6. Pieh, C., Humer, E., Hoenigl, A., et al. (2025). Smartphone screen time reduction improves mental health: A randomized controlled trial. *BMC Medicine*, 23, 107. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12916-025-03944-z>

7. Ren, J., Zhou, L., Li, Y., et al. (2025). The independent and combined associations between the intake of ultra-processed foods, sedentary behavior, and depressive symptoms in young adults. *Frontiers in Nutrition*, 12, 1675892. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnut.2025.1675892>

8. Tadros, M., Newby, J. M., Li, S., and Werner-Seidler, A. (2025). A systematic review and meta-analysis of psychological treatments to improve sleep quality in university students. *PLOS ONE*, 20(2), e0317125. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0317125>

9. van Kessel, G., Ryan, C., Paras, L., Johnson, N., Zariff, R., and Stallman, H. (2025). Relationship between university belonging and student outcomes: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 52(3), 2511 to 2534. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-025-00822-8>

10. Wan, K. W., Dai, Z. H., Wong, P. S., et al. (2025). Effects of exercise snacks on cardiometabolic health and body composition in adults: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine and Science in Sports*, 35(8), e70114. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sms.70114>

11. Xu, X., Abdullah, B. B., Samsudin, S. B., and Tan, Y. (2025). Integrating mindfulness and physical activity: A meta-analysis of mindful movement interventions for symptoms of anxiety and depression among university students. *PeerJ*, 13, e19640. <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.19640>

Previous editions
Catch up on earlier newsletters, all available through the AWO archive.

EDITION	LINK
Back to School Newsletter 2025 to 2026	https://auwho.alfaisal.edu/storage/app/media/pdf/AU-WHO-BacktoSchoolNewsletter.pdf
Ramadan Newsletter 1447 / 2026	https://auwho.alfaisal.edu/storage/app/media/pdf/Ramadan-Newsletter-2026.pdf
Fasting is Wellness Newsletter 2025	https://auwho.alfaisal.edu/storage/app/media/pdf/AU-WHO-RamadanNewsletter2.pdf
Fasting is Wellness Newsletter 2024	https://auwho.alfaisal.edu/storage/app/media/pdf/AU-WHO-RamadanNewsletter1.pdf
Full AWO newsletter archive	https://auwho.alfaisal.edu/awo-newsletter

Closing note

However this year goes, it will not be decided in the first week. It will be decided by what you keep doing in week nine, week fourteen and the week before finals. Start small, stay connected, and use what is here.

We would like your feedback on this newsletter and your ideas for the year. Both shape what we do next. Write to awo@alfaisal.edu or come and find us in B3-40.

Wishing you a healthy and steady year ahead,

The AWO Team

A.W.O.

Alfaisal Wellbeing Office



With thanks to Dr. Abdul Rehman Zia Zaidi for the literature review and content development behind this edition.

We also thank Dr. Rand Tayyem for helping design this edition of the newsletter.

Alfaisal Wellbeing Office | Room B3-40 | awo@alfaisal.edu | Ext. 7792 | awo.alfaisal.edu