An inconvenient truth in health research: science is always political

Fabio Balli, lead openvillage.ch

Can 'health' be imposed to someone without their consent?

"autonomy [...] promotes better mental and physical health."

Ng, Ntoumanis, Thøgersen-Ntoumani, Deci, Ryan, Duda, Williams 2012

Today's challenges in society

"Autocratization turns viral"

"The level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2020 is down to levels last found around 1990. [...] Ruling governments [...] polarize societies by disrespecting opponents."

V-Dem Institute 2021

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"Trust in government declined"

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"The pandemic exacerbates pre-existing tensions and vulnerabilities"

"The general population is showing signs of fatigue; the 'passive hold-out mode' of the crisis has taken its toll. [...] Child psychiatry experts also observe a clear increase in treatment needs for suicidal thoughts and attempts."

Swiss Federal Office of Public Health 2021

Is today's medical research empowering people?

"Method, then, unavoidably produces not only truths and non-truths, [...] but also arrangements with political implications."

John Law 2004

Different perspectives embedded in medical research

Self-management

– Patient follows a self-management plan
– Medical professional is a trainer
– Success: **compliance** to treatment

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Adapted from Trish Greenhalgh 2009

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– Patient achieves holistic care, supported by community
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Critical public health

– Patient challenges structural barriers to health
– Medical professional as potential oppressor or radical ally
– Success: **change in social and political structures**

Adapted from Trish Greenhalgh 2009

Is the scientific culture up-to-date?

"In modern research, false findings may be the majority
 or even the vast majority of published research claims."

John Ioannidis 2005

Some perspectives embedded in research questions

Collection method
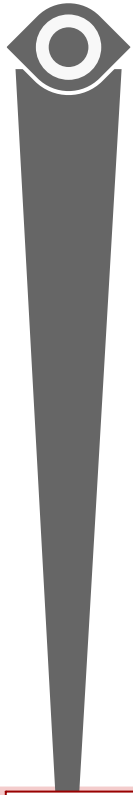– historical data on diseases (quanti)
– co-creation + surveys (quali, quanti)

Collection method

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Rule of law
– Civil code → excluding property, academic competition
– local customs → shared use rights, knowledge commons

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Social contract
– universal rules by experts (Westphalian constitutions)
– collectively lived, local customs (Indigenous oral tradition)

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Next steps?

What about taking time to improve how we cooperate?

"public policy should [...] facilitate the development
of institutions that bring out the best in humans."

Elinor Ostrom 2009
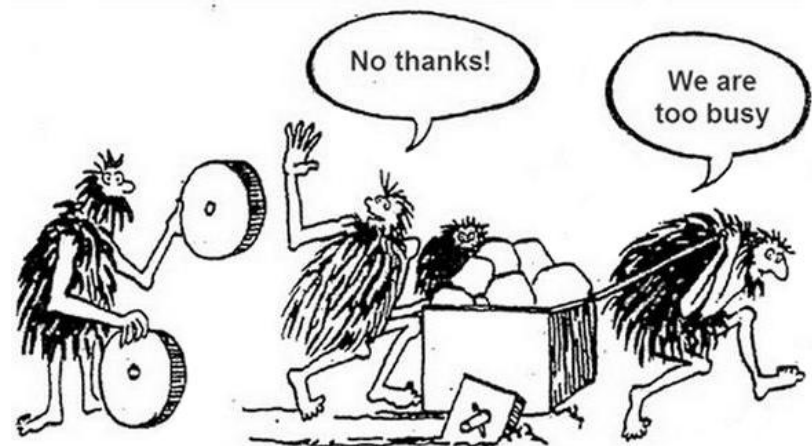
An exercise

Imagine you want to know your stress level by checking your heart rate. You:

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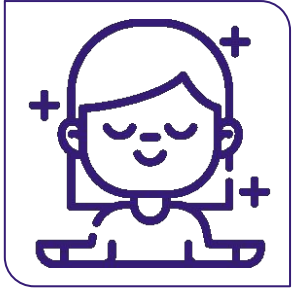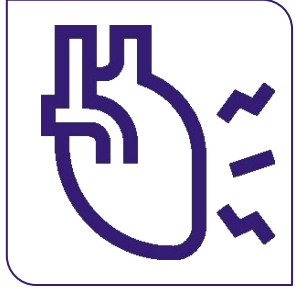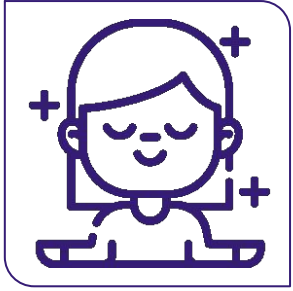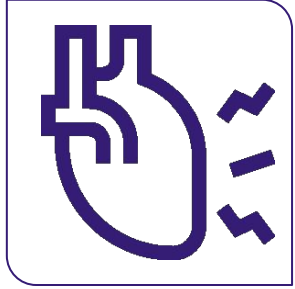

close your eyes
and observe
your **sensations**

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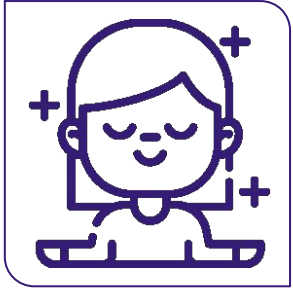
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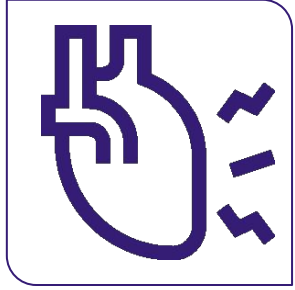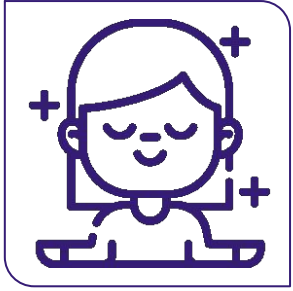
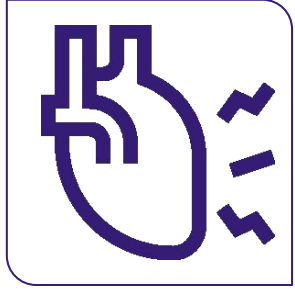**count** the beats you feel on your wrist using a watch

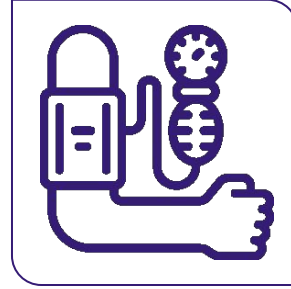# Imagine you want to know your stress level by checking your heart rate. You:
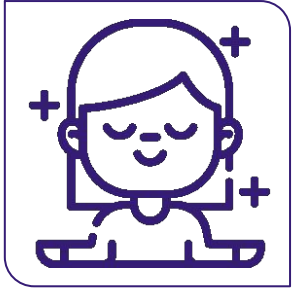
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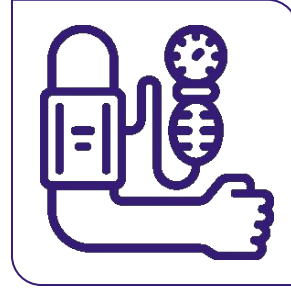
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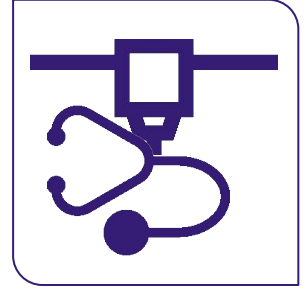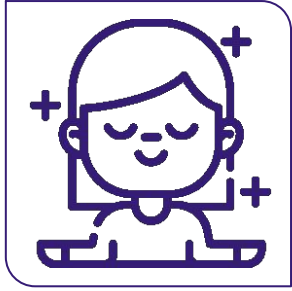close your eyes and observe your **sensations**

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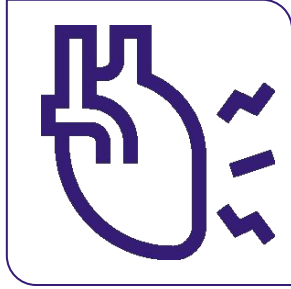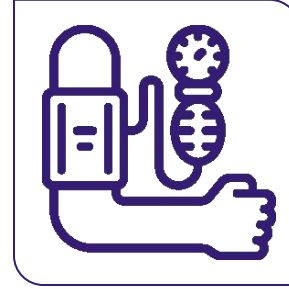
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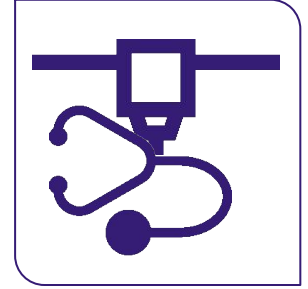

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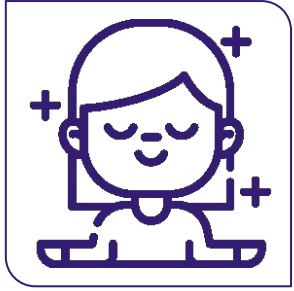
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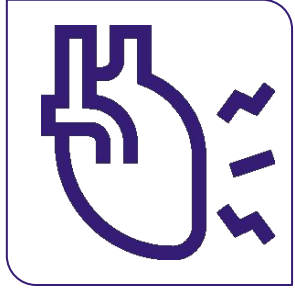use a blood pressure monitor at the **pharmacy**

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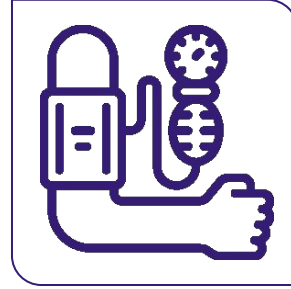Imagine you want to know your stress level by checking your heart rate. You:

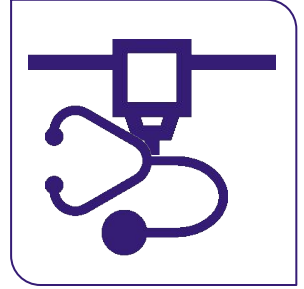close your eyes
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→ which options provides you with the *minimal* required information?
→ which option enables you to *significantly* develop your skills?

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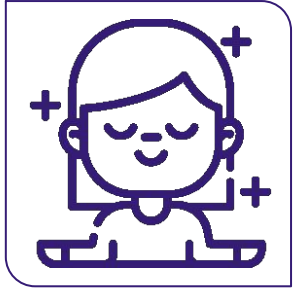
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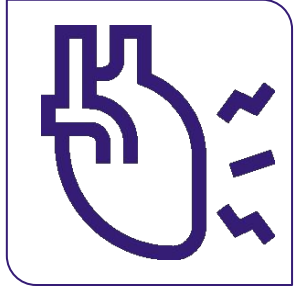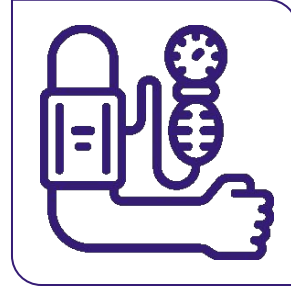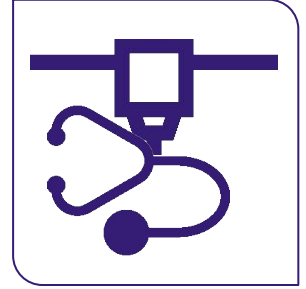use a blood pressure monitor at the **pharmacy**

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→ which options provides you with the *minimal* required information?
→ which option enables you to *significantly* develop your skills?
→ what are the *implicit beliefs* embedded in each option?

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Additional resources

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Thank you