



Constellation of care by Caseinova

A few tips we picked up along our way to help ensure effective communication, balance and well-being. Because we know - it can be hard.

Why Team Sustainability Matters

iGEM is not just about science — it is about people. A single star doesn't shine alone, and no project can succeed without a constellation of teammates supporting one another.

We created this guide because we want to help you build not only a strong project but also a strong team, and to avoid the all-too-common risks of exhaustion and burnout. Here, we offer exercises and practices that worked for us, tested during the ups and downs of our own iGEM season.

Why the space analogy? Firstly, because of our name — and yes, we admit it's a lovely pun. But also because space is something that surrounds us all the time: visible, grounding, and humbling. Much like in mindfulness exercises where you pause to notice what's around you, we invite you to use this framework to pause, reflect, and care for each other.

Team sustainability matters because iGEM is a marathon, not a sprint. Projects evolve across many months, through excitement and setbacks. By making responsibility, communication, trust, well-being, and reflection explicit parts of teamwork, you not only strengthen your project's outcome but also protect your team's energy, motivation, and relationships.

And beyond iGEM, these are skills you will take with you — into labs, companies, and communities. We hope this guide helps you see teamwork as more than just dividing tasks, but as building a constellation where every star can shine.

The Five Cosmic Pillars



I Gravity

Responsibility & Balance

Concept: gravity holds planets in orbit just like responsibility keeps a team together

Risks: imbalance in workload, hidden stress

Exercises:

Responsibility mapping

Team Checkpoint (Did I deliver what I promised)



II Orbit:

Communication

Concept: orbits are regular and predictable just as communication should be consistent

Risks: silence, misinterpretation in written-only formats

Exercises:

Weekly stand-up (what I did, what I'll do, what I need)

Feedback-Ratio rule (1 critique mandates 5 positives)



III Fuel:

Well-being & Burnout prevention

Concept: stars burn fuel just as people need energy and rest

Risks: overwork, ignoring emotional needs

Exercises:

Burnout Self-Test (adapt WHO-5 Well-being index)

Supervision Groups (with external mentor or alumni facilitator)

Mindfulness minute before meetings



IV Stars:

Trust & Connection

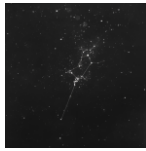
Concept: a constellation is only visible when stars are connected

Risks: low openness, people hiding struggles

Exercises:

1:1 trust-building (schedule individual check-ins)

Emotional Needs Cards



V Constellation:

Reflection & Growth

Concept: Reflection lets us see patterns, not just single dots

Risks: repeating past mistakes, lack of adaptation

Excercises:

After-Action Review (what went well, what to improve, what to stop)

Weekly Reflection Journal (short prompts)

Emergency Protocols. What If a Star Flickers?

What to do if someone shows signs of burnout?

Recognize the signs:

- persistent fatigue or disengagement
- missing meetings or deadlines without explanation
- irritability, withdrawal or silence in discussions
- expressing feelings of being overwhelmed or hopeless

How to respond:

- Reach out 1:1. Use gentle, supportive language.
 - *“I’ve noticed you seem stressed lately — how are you doing?”*
 - *“I’m concerned because you’ve been quieter than usual. Is there anything I can do to support you?”*
- Listen without fixing. Sometimes biggest help is simply being heard.
- Encourage sharing. Remind them of the team’s emotional check-ins or supervision spaces.
- Redistribute tasks. If overload is the issue, rebalance responsibilities immediately.
- Protect confidentiality. Don’t share personal struggles outside the conversation unless the person agrees.

When to escalate?

- if stress continues for several weeks despite support.
- If someone reports burnout symptoms that interfere with daily life.
- If there are any indications of severe distress (e.g., panic attacks, depressive symptoms).

In such cases, encourage them to contact a university counselor or psychologist, a trusted mentor/supervisor/alumni or professional support services if needed.

Golden rule: Every star matters to the constellation. If one flickers, the others shine a little brighter to help them regain strength.

Quick “first aid” conversation guide.

1. Notice & Name

“I’ve noticed you’ve seemed quiet/overworked lately...”

Keep it factual, not judgmental.

1. Express Concern

“...I’m concerned because I care about how you’re doing, and I don’t want you to feel alone in this.”

Show care, not pressure.

1. Invite Sharing

“How are you feeling?”

“What do you need right now?”

“Is there something we can adjust as a team to support you?”

Other Suggestions & Resources to Turn To:

Check your basics first. Ask yourself: *Have I eaten a warm meal today? Drank enough water? Slept at least a little?* These simple needs matter more than we often admit.

Extend that check-in to others. If you notice a teammate looking tired or quiet, gently ask how they are doing. Sometimes a small question is enough to open a door.

Turn meetings into safe spaces. If the science feels overwhelming, make the meeting about well-being too — bring snacks, take five minutes to breathe together, or share what went well that week.

Normalize talking about limits. It is not weakness to say *“I can’t take on more right now”* — it is responsibility. Encourage each other to be honest about workloads.

Celebrate the small wins. For every critique, share five positives. This keeps motivation alive even in the hardest weeks.

Mental Health & Well-Being

- *International:* [International Association for Counselling](#) — directory of counselling services worldwide
- *Europe:* [Mental Health Europe](#) — national helplines and organizations by country
- *Global Crisis Line:* [Befrienders Worldwide](#) — find a helpline in your country
- *Emergency:* If someone is in immediate danger, call **112** in Europe or your local emergency number

Academic & Team Support

- University counseling services (usually free for students — check your university’s website)
- Student unions or associations, which often offer peer-support programs
- iGEM After iGEM Network — alumni who can share experiences about sustainability and well-being in teams

Our Contribution to the Next Generation:

Building an iGEM project means building a team — and that is both the greatest challenge and the greatest reward. Along our journey, we discovered that responsible research culture is not only about safety or compliance, but also about how you care for one another.

When the deadlines pile up and the stress rises, remember: **a constellation shines because every star is connected**. Your strength as a team comes from balance, communication, trust, and reflection. Use the tools we've shared not as rigid rules, but as options to pick from when you need them most.

Above all, don't be afraid to adapt. Projects, like people, grow through change. Care for your teammates as much as you care for your science, and you'll find that both will shine brighter.