

Thoughts, Feelings & Behaviours

What we think affects the way we feel and behave. Understanding this cycle is important in protecting and nurturing wellbeing, because while we cannot be positive or happy all the time our thinking patterns can cause unnecessary distress and lead to behaviours that do not serve us well.

Some thoughts are helpful, these thoughts are based on facts and lead to appropriate feelings and behaviours. For example if a child or young person thinks 'I can't wait to see my friends', it is more likely that they will feel happy going to school and will not fuss when getting ready for school. However, some thoughts are unhelpful, these thoughts are based on our feelings/emotions (e.g. worry, fear) around the facts and can lead to unnecessary distress and behaviour that does not serve us well. This distress can lead to unpleasant body sensations such as pains, tightness etc. For example if a child/young person thinks 'I have forgotten everything I have learned, I won't be able to keep up in school', it is likely that they will feel worried about going to school and may try to avoid school.

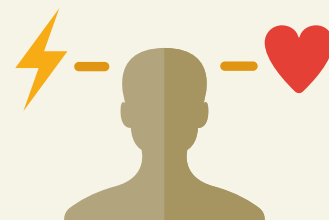
While all children and young people can at times engage in unhelpful thinking if this becomes a pattern it is best to challenge the unhelpful thought cycle. For example, they could say 'Is this really true?', 'Could there be another explanation?'.

Challenging unhelpful thoughts creates a space where a more helpful perspective can be explored. Distress is reduced and a response that serves the child/young person well is made.



The link between thoughts, feelings and behaviours can go unnoticed. Children and young people need help to notice and understand this link and to break unhelpful thinking cycles. School staff can support this process in the following ways:

- Listen to what children/young people say about their thought and their feelings
- Acknowledge and normalise their thoughts and feelings
- Model a helpful thinking style
- Encourage children and young people to notice and challenge unhelpful thoughts
- Encourage them to notice unpleasant body sensations and support them to use relaxation strategies to calm the body
- Consider giving the child/young person a distraction tactic/activity to prevent a them engaging in a behaviour that does not serve them well
- Redirect behaviour resulting from a negative thinking cycle to a behaviour that serves the child/person well
- Acknowledge and praise efforts at every step in the process to reinforce awareness of the link between their thoughts, feelings and behaviours
- Remind them of their strengths
- Admire their persistence and perseverance



Breathing Exercises

An important part of emotional regulation involves bringing our bodies to a calm or relaxed state. When calm, we manage our emotions more effectively and are better able to focus on cognitive tasks, such as learning. When calm, we are more present in social situations and are more able to engage in social activities in appropriate ways. There are many ways that you can help children and young people to calm their bodies. One of the easiest ways is to teach them how to control their breathing. Four simple, yet effective methods are explained below. The first two methods are suitable for younger children, while the last two may be more appropriate for older children or young people. In all of these exercises encourage them to inhale through their noses and exhale through their mouths.

Butterfly Breathing

Stand or sit comfortably with your arms by your sides. Pretend that you are a butterfly and that your arms are beautiful wings. You are going to raise and lower your arms slowly, imitating how a butterfly opens and closes its wings. Slowly raise your arms while inhaling to the count of 1, 2, 3. Slowly lower your arms back down by your sides while exhaling to the count of 3, 2, 1.



See the You Tube Video, Butterfly Breathing Conscious Discipline
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1VXknVjy1T0>



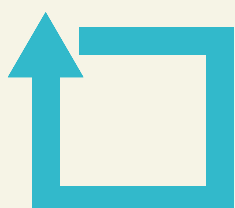
Blow Out the Candles

Imagine that a birthday cake with candles is placed in front of your face. You are getting ready to blow out the candles. Inhale deeply and hold for the count of 1, 2, 3, 4. Exhale to blow out the candles to the count of 1, 2, 3, 4. Repeat.

5 Finger Breathing

Stretch out the fingers of your dominant hand like a star fish in front of you. Place the index finger from your other hand at your wrist at the base of the thumb. Inhale to the count of 3 as you trace your finger up along the outer side of the thumb. Hold to the count of 2 while pausing at the tip of your thumb. Exhale to the count of 3 as you trace down the inner side of the thumb. Hold to the count of 2 while pausing at the inner base of the thumb. Continue to inhale, hold and exhale as you trace up and down the other fingers in a similar way.

See the You tube Video, Five Finger breathing a simple guided breathing exercise for kids.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HQVZgpyVQ78>



Square Breathing

Visualise a square in front of you. Let your breathing follow the shape of the square. Breathe in 1, 2, 3, 4 as you travel up the left-hand side of the square. Hold for 4 as you travel across the top of the square. Exhale for 4 as you travel down the right-hand side of the square. Hold again for 4 as you go across the bottom of the square. See the You tube Video, Kids meditation Square Breathing (Focus and Calm) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YFdZXwE6fRE>

EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Children and young people vary in the intensity with which they experience and express their feelings or emotions. They vary in their ability to regulate their emotions.

Emotional regulation refers to our ability to manage emotional reactions effectively so as to cope with the varying demands of everyday life. Like many other skills, most children and young people develop appropriate emotional regulation skills independently however, some require explicit teaching and support to learn and practise these skills.

Teachers can help children and young people to learn and improve emotional regulation skills in four ways:

Teach them to recognise body cues that are the early physiological signs of intense feelings



Teach them to identify and label how they are feeling so as to develop their self-awareness and expand their emotional literacy.

Teach them how to rate the intensity of their feelings so as to enable them to develop more self-control.



Empower them by teaching them to identify a range of tools and strategies that they can use to self-regulate and that assist in the healthy expression of emotions.

Emotion Coaching

Emotion Coaching provides a simple yet effective way to help children and young people to understand the different emotions they experience, why they occur and how they can manage them. It is a four-step communication strategy which supports them to self-regulate.

Emotion coaching can support children and young people to experience an intense emotion in a safe and secure way, to understand the reason behind their emotion and to discover ways to express their emotions in a healthy, prosocial manner. Scientific research indicates that labeling feelings leads to changes in the body which help calm the nervous system.

Coaching Involves:

- Entering the child/young person's world
- Listening attentively
- Building on their knowledge with enthusiasm
- Using comments rather than questions
- Indirectly guiding interactions
- Optimising the learning environment



Step 1: Recognise *"I understand how you feel, you are not alone"*

Recognise emotional times as opportunities for connection and learning. Be aware of and recognise the child/young person's emotions and empathise with them. Help the child/young person to verbally label their emotion. This helps soothe the nervous system and promote recovery.



Step 2: Validate *"I think that this is what is happening and this is how you are feeling"*

Observe, listen empathetically and validate the child/young person's emotion. Recognise all emotions as being natural and normal. Understand that they are not always a matter of choice. Look for physical and verbal signs of the emotion being felt. Try to understand the child/young person's perspective.



Step 3: Set Limits (if necessary) *"Situations don't always go our way and we cannot always get what we want"*

Sometimes when children/young people are having difficulty self-regulating they can experience a "Fight - Flight - Freeze" response, from which behaviours that are not acceptable can emerge. Separate the child/young person from the behaviour and recognise their behaviour as communication of a need. Be prepared to gently set and maintain limits.



Step 4: Problem Solve *'We can work together to find a solution'*

Support the child/young person to become calm. Then help them to identify the emotion that was behind the behaviour. Jointly identify appropriate prosocial solutions to the situation. Anticipate the outcomes of each solution. Encourage the child/young person to choose the best solution. Support them to try it out. Reflect on and evaluate the outcome.

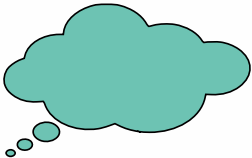
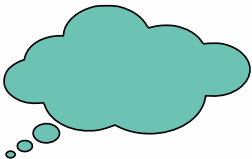
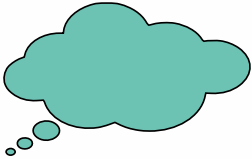


Self-Talk

Children and young people often engage in self-talk. This can be either positive self-talk, where they recognise what is positive about themselves and their situation, or negative self-talk, where they are self-critical or focus more on negative aspects of their situation.

If you notice children or young people engaging in negative self-talk, alert them to the importance of becoming aware of their negative self-perceptions. Give them opportunities to practise changing their thinking.

This exercise involves encouraging children or young people to write down the situation that is causing them to engage in negative self-talk, to identify negative self-talk statements, and to practise changing these negative statements into more positive, hopeful and calming self-talk statements. Children and young people may need much encouragement and practice to persist with this work before positive self-talk becomes a habit.

Situation	Negative self-talk	Positive self-talk
		
		
		

Self-Talk

Slituation	Negative Self-Talk	Positive Self-Talk
		
		
		
		
		
		

Thoughts Log

Helpful thoughts are based on facts and lead to appropriate feelings and behaviours. Unhelpful thoughts are based on our emotions (e.g. fear, worry) around the facts, which leads to unnecessary unpleasant feelings (sadness, worry, fear) and behaviours (avoidance, aggression). Unhelpful thoughts have the potential to overshadow helpful thoughts, which often lead to unpleasant feelings and inappropriate behaviour.

If you notice a child or young person engaging in unhelpful thinking, encourage them to challenge these thoughts. Challenging unhelpful thoughts gives a child or young person the necessary space to see a situation differently, leading to a more measured response. This exercise, involving use of a thoughts log, comprises three components:

1. Encouraging children or young people to write down their unhelpful thoughts
2. Supporting them to counter their negative thinking by asking thought challenger questions e.g.,
Where is the evidence? What would I tell a friend in this situation? How did I cope in the past? Is thinking like this helping me or making me feel worse?
3. Helping them to replace their negative thoughts with more positive and reassuring ones.

Unhelpful Thought	Thought Challenger	Helpful Thought

Where is the evidence?

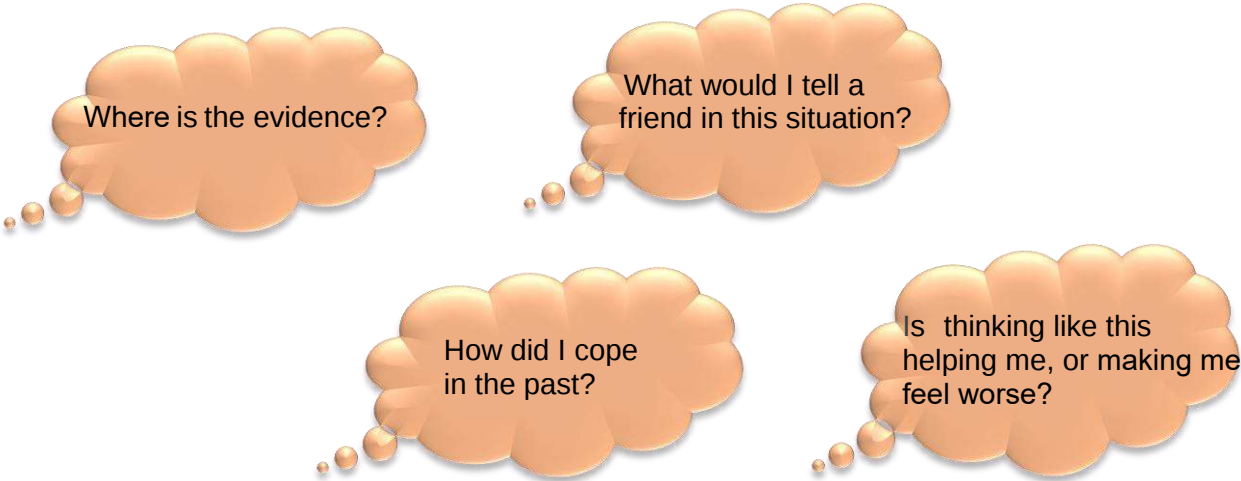
What would I tell a friend in this situation?

How did I cope in the past?

Is thinking like this helping me, or making me feel worse?

Thoughts Log Activity

Unhelpful Thought	Thought Challenger	Helpful Thought



Problem-Solving Steps

Children and young people often find it difficult to think about ways to handle challenging situations or deal with conflict. Teaching them the steps involved in effective problem-solving helps them to feel more confident about dealing with everyday problems. Teachers can support children and young people to learn and practise the key steps involved in effective problem-solving. Outlined below is a six-step problem-solving model. The six key steps involve:

1. defining the problem
2. identifying possible solutions to the problem
3. anticipating the outcome of each solution
4. selecting the best solution
5. implementing the solution
6. evaluating the outcome.



Problem Solving Steps

1. What is the problem?



2. What could I do?



Think of lots of possible different ideas.



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3. What might happen for each of these ideas?



or



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4. Tick the best solution...



5. Do it! Put your plan into action!



6. Did it work? Think about what went well and what you could do differently next time



or



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