




Emotional Wellbeing 1

Activities to
support the
teaching of the
updated Junior
Cycle SPHE
Curriculum 2023



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta
Síceolaíochta Oideachais
National Educational
Psychological Service



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Introduction

The aim of the SPHE as set out in the NCCA SPHE specification for Junior Cycle is to:

“build students’ self-awareness and positive self-worth; to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will enable them to lead fulfilling and healthy lives: empower them to create, nurture and maintain respectful and loving relationships, with self and others; and enhance their capacity to contribute positively to society”.

It is now understood that certain skills and practices can nurture wellbeing, and these skills and practices are presented in social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes. SEL programmes typically comprise five key elements of social competencies: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness. The first two elements, self-awareness and self-management, are addressed in this unit. For more information see <https://casel.org>.

This unit of learning is linked to Strand 4: Emotional wellbeing and focuses on nurturing emotional wellbeing and promoting positive mental health. The learning in this unit is underpinned by approaches used in cognitive behavioural therapy, such as recognising the link between our thoughts, feelings and behaviour and approaches in positive psychology, such as, gratitude and mindfulness techniques. More information on CBT is available see: <https://positivepsychology.com/cbt-cognitive-behavioral-therapy-techniques-worksheets/> and for more information on positive psychology see <https://positivepsychology.com/what-is-positive-psychology-definition>.

These activities are designed to be taught with reference to the SPHE/RSE Toolkit, developed by the NCCA. It includes guidance on teaching SPHE in a safe and effective way and includes an explanation of the experiential learning cycle that is recommended for use in SPHE and is the framework used in the activities in this resource. <https://www.curriculumonline.ie/Junior-Cycle/Short-Courses/SPHE/SPHE-RSE-toolkit/Teaching-SPHE-RSE/>

All learning in SPHE is underpinned by three cross-cutting elements that are foundational for effective teaching and learning in SPHE; awareness dialogue and reflection and action. It is important that the teacher is consciously creating opportunities for the students to become more self-aware and aware of others; creating lots of opportunities for classroom dialogue and prompting students to reflect on what they are learning and what it means for their lives now or in the future.



The activities presented here are a guideline only. Every classroom is different and teachers are best placed to decide on what will be most effective in their classroom.

Some of the activities presented include mindfulness, reflection, relaxation and visualisation exercises. While many people find these exercises beneficial some children and young people may have difficulty with them. For example if a child is feeling stressed, anxious, emotionally raw or has experienced a trauma, a mindfulness activity may be experienced as overwhelming as they sit with unpleasant emotions and another activity may therefore be more suitable. Also some children and young people may struggle to sit still and may need a movement activity to help relax their bodies. It is useful to try a number of mindful, reflection, relaxation and visualisation activities that give students the option to have an alternative if they struggle with a particular activity at a given time. For more information see the [List of Relaxation Techniques](#), published by NEPS.

If a student becomes upset during an activity or if you become concerned about a student you can seek advice through the normal student support structures. You may find "[The Response to Stress - Information for School Staff](#)" document published by NEPS a useful source of information on the stress response and how to support a child to regain calm.



Strand	Learning outcomes (LOs)
1. Emotional Wellbeing	<p>4.1 discuss the fluid nature of emotional wellbeing and ways to nurture and protect it</p> <p>4.2. recognise and acknowledge their emotions and recognise the links between thoughts, feelings and behaviour</p> <p>4.3 consider the impact of stress and can draw upon a variety of techniques to help self-regulate emotions and cope with the day-to-day stresses of life</p> <p>4.4 discuss ways to support themselves and others in challenging times and where/how/when to seek support, if needed</p> <p>4.5 explore how emotional wellbeing can be affected by factors within our control (such as sleep, diet, exercise, substance use and online exposure) and factors beyond our control</p> <p>4.9 demonstrate how to access and appraise appropriate and trustworthy information and services aimed at supporting young people's emotional wellbeing and mental health.</p>



Learning activities

- **In activity 1, Minding your emotional wellbeing**, (LOs 4.1, 4.4, 4.5, 4.9) students reflect on the definition of wellbeing and are asked to identify skills that they use to cope with some of the typical challenges of life. Students complete their personal Wellbeing workout, which they will refer to in subsequent activities.
- **In activity 2, Recognising emotions**, (LOs 4.2, 4.3) students are introduced to the ‘body scan’ technique. This technique involves scanning the body and noticing how it feels. It is a helpful technique to notice tension or other sensations in the body which may give insight into how the person is feeling emotionally. With the busyness of life, people’s physical sensations and emotional states often go unnoticed. The body scan helps us notice these things, and by noticing them we can begin to resolve what is concerning us.
- **In activity 3, Thoughts, feelings and behaviours**, (LO 4.2, 4.3) students are introduced to the link between thoughts, feelings and behaviour. Students look at four scenarios and consider what thoughts and feelings a character might have had that led to the behaviour described.
- **In activity 4, Pressing pause**, (LOs 4.2, 4.3, 4.4) students learn the ‘pressing pause’ technique. It involves noticing when you are about to have an emotional reaction and pausing before you react. This pause allows you to respond rather than react. This activity builds on activity 3, where students learned the link between thoughts, feelings and behaviour.
- **In activity 5, Helpful and unhelpful thoughts**, (LOs 4.2, 4.9) students learn that when we press pause and calm our bodies, we can start to notice what thoughts might have led to our emotional reaction. In this activity, students learn to differentiate between helpful and unhelpful thoughts. Helpful thoughts are based on facts, whereas unhelpful thoughts are based on our feelings in relation to facts. Helpful thoughts lead to appropriate feelings and behaviours whereas unhelpful thoughts can lead to unnecessary, unpleasant feelings and unhelpful behaviours. This activity builds on activity 4.
- **In activity 6, Challenging unhelpful thoughts**, (LOs 4.2, 4.3, 4.4) students devise thought challenger statements in response to unhelpful thoughts. This activity follows on from activities 3, 4 and 5, so it is important that those activities are completed before activity 6.
- **In activity 7, Gratitude**, (LOs 4.1, 4.5) students are introduced to the practice of gratitude. Training the mind to find the good, however small, helps to lay neural networks in the brain that orient people towards positivity, and helps us see more small positives that often go unnoticed. When we express our gratitude to others, we strengthen our relationships with them. In short, gratefulness and living gratefully causes us to experience more happiness.



- **In activity 8, Mindfulness**, (LOs 4.1, 4.3) students practise mindfulness and reflect on and discuss their experience. Mindfulness is a mental state achieved by noticing the sensations in the present moment while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts and bodily sensations.

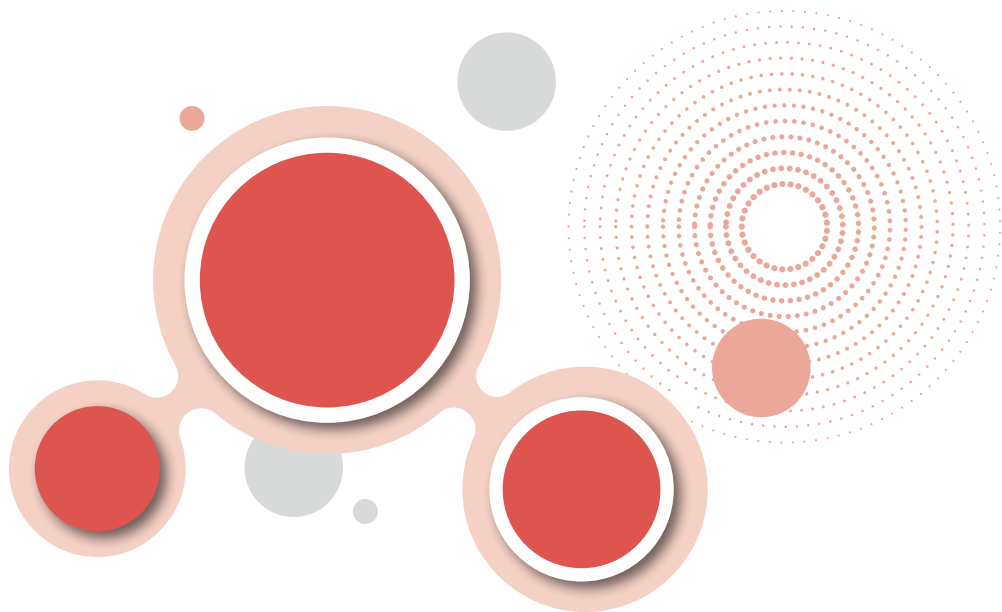
Suggestions for assessment

The Wellbeing Workout

Students develop their own personal daily wellbeing workout based on the activities researched and the practices taught in this unit. The wellbeing workout includes relaxation techniques, ways to build resilience and coping skills. Suggest that they keep their wellbeing workout in a prominent place in their bedroom/where they study so that they remember to do a daily wellbeing workout.

Thoughts, feelings and behaviours

Working in groups, students can design a storyboard, create a short video, or write an essay, story or script showing the links between thoughts, feelings and behaviours.



Activity 1 – Minding your emotional wellbeing (LOs 4.1, 4.4, 4.5, 4.9)

In this activity, students reflect on the definition of wellbeing and write their own personal **Wellbeing workout** – a list of ways to support wellbeing – with reference to their own experience and evidence-based strategies from online sources.

Step 1: Defining emotional wellbeing

In pairs, invite the students to come up with their own image or word that sums up what wellbeing means for them, and then turn to the person beside them and share it.

Facilitate a short discussion on what wellbeing means to the students. Acknowledge that wellbeing is a term that is widely used and that it can mean different things to different people. Show the students the following definition of wellbeing, with the brief explanation note below.

“Wellbeing is present when a person realises their potential, is resilient in dealing with the normal stresses of their life, takes care of their physical wellbeing and has a sense of purpose, connection and belonging to a wider community. It is a fluid way of being and needs nurturing throughout life.”¹

What this means is that we experience wellbeing when we are the best we can be, get enough exercise and sleep, and feel that we are part of a group. Everyone has ups and downs and we need to mind our wellbeing during our good times and bad times.

Step 2: Website search

Invite the students to write down the things they use to support their own wellbeing. If the students are allowed to use their mobile phones, divide the class into three groups; ask one-third of the students to look up www.mentalhealthireland.ie, one-third to look up www.yourmentalhealth.ie, and one-third to look up www.walkinmyshoes.ie. These websites provide appropriate and trustworthy information aimed at supporting young people’s emotional health and wellbeing.

Ask them to decide on three strategies that they think would best support their own wellbeing and to share their strategies in pairs.

Invite the students to share a strategy, why they chose it, and the website they sourced it from if relevant. Ask for others with the same strategy to put up their hands and, if they have a different source or a different reason for choosing it, to share that with the class.

Show the following clip from Mental Health Ireland on the five ways to wellbeing. (Duration: 2 minutes, 40 seconds).



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsc2QkCC3uI>

¹ DES Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018)



Teacher's note

The five ways to wellbeing are simple actions to practise each day in order to maintain or improve our wellbeing. The five ways to wellbeing are based on research actions proven to help us to feel good and function well. They are:

1. Connecting with others
2. Keeping active
3. Learning new things
4. Giving to others, and
5. Noticing the world around us.

More information on the Five Ways to Wellbeing is available on the Mental Health Ireland website <https://www.mentalhealthireland.ie/five-ways-to-wellbeing/>

The following websites may be useful for this activity:

- www.mentalhealthireland.ie – under **Resources**, click on **The Five Ways to Wellbeing**.
- www.yourmentalhealth.ie – click on **Looking after your mental health**.
- The [Mind Monsters campaign](#) which was developed by the HSE and is based on research with young people. The campaign aims to help adolescents and young adults through tough times and gives some guidance on how to look after their mental health. It highlights the benefits of taking regular study breaks, getting enough sleep, spending less time on devices and sharing a problem with someone you trust, can have on your mental health.
- Walk in My Shoes is a mental health awareness campaign developed by St Patrick's Mental Health Services. Its website www.walkinmyshoes.ie provides resources for young people such as the Wellbeing Action Calendar, Wellness Journals and Mindful Colouring Sheets.
- The Mind Yourself reading guide is a resource that can be used by adults - parents, guardians, caregivers, teachers - to support and educate young people in relation to mental health and wellbeing. It contains review and recommendations for over 400 books and is designed as a 'first-aid kit' for worries, sadness, loneliness, anxiety and other feelings a young person may want to explore. The guide is available free of charge through every library authority and a digital version can be downloaded here. https://childrensbooksireland.ie/sites/default/files/2021-08/CBI_ReadingGuide_MindYourself_2020.pdf.

Suggested discussion points

- Why do we all need to look after our wellbeing?
- How often might we need to use these strategies?
- How do we know what strategies work best for us? (*Try them and see if they make a difference to how you feel.*)
- How can we support the wellbeing of other people? (*Connecting with others, spending quality time with others, doing something kind for another person, being active with others.*)
- When might young people need to get help and support from an adult, as opposed to their friends? (*If a young person is very stressed, anxious or worried about something, it is important that they talk to an adult they trust. It can be a member of their family or extended family, or a teacher in school.*)

Teacher's note

The practices outlined in this activity are important for our overall wellbeing, as well as for coping in more difficult times. It should also be made clear to the students that young people are not expected to deal with significant stress or anxiety on their own and should be encouraged to talk to a trusted adult. Should this trusted adult be you, it is important to listen empathetically and non-judgementally, and also to seek support from school support structures, such as the student support team. NEPS provides a document on psychological first aid called [Look Listen Link](#) that may support you in these conversations with your students. This may be a good opportunity to talk about the student support structures, such as the student support team/pastoral care team and the guidance counsellor in the school, and how students are referred to these services. Issues regarding child protection should always be referred to the principal or designated liaison person.

Step 3: Wellbeing workout

Invite the students to start work on their own personal Wellbeing workout using some of the strategies discussed (e.g. reading a book they enjoy, having a bath, participating in a sport they enjoy, talking to a friend/family member, etc.).

Suggest that they keep their Wellbeing workout in a prominent place in their bedroom/where they study so that they remember to do a daily wellbeing workout using these strategies.

One of the five ways to wellbeing is 'noticing the world around us'. In this audio clip (duration: 4 minutes, 15 seconds), students are introduced to mindfulness practice through focusing on the breath.



Walk in my Shoes - Mindfulness of the breath

https://www.walkinmyshoes.ie/media/2950/mys_mindfulness_ex1.mp3



Activity 2 – Recognising emotions (LO 4.2, 4.3)

In this activity, students are introduced to the ‘body scan’ technique. This technique involves scanning the body and noticing how it feels. With the busyness of life, people’s physical sensations and emotional states often go unnoticed. Being able to identify and acknowledge our emotions can make it easier to manage them and respond in more helpful ways.

Teacher’s note

Students should be given the option to opt out of the body scan exercise. It may not be suitable for someone to take part in a body scan in a classroom if they have experienced trauma. Those who do not wish to take part can be given the option to engage in an alternative relaxation technique, or simply to sit quietly and relax. A [list of relaxation techniques](#) have been developed by the National Educational Psychological Service.

Step 1: Body scan

Invite the students to take part in this Bodyscan exercise (duration: 4 minutes, 47 seconds).



Walk in my Shoes - Bodyscan

https://www.walkinmyshoes.ie/media/2952/mys_mindfulness_ex2.mp3

Ask the students what they noticed when doing the body scan. Did any part of their body feel different from other parts? Did they notice different sensations throughout their body? If they did not notice anything, that’s okay too.



Step 2: Emotions in the body

Divide the class into six groups. Give three of the groups the **Worksheet – Emotions** and the other three groups the **Worksheet – Emotions in the body**.

Invite the groups with the **Worksheet – Emotions** to write or draw small emoticons/images for all the emotions they can think of. Use the **Emotions**

vocabulary to prompt students if needed.

Invite the groups with the **Worksheet – Emotions in the body** to select some emotions and indicate where in their bodies they feel these emotions and what that feeling is like.

Give each group 2 minutes to complete the task and then swap worksheets, so that each group has a chance to contribute a response to each worksheet. Encourage all students to contribute to each worksheet.

Take feedback from each group, asking them to describe where in their body they feel specific emotions and what the feeling is like. Use the Teacher’s note on page 11 to prompt students if needed. Students may be able to describe other sensations and feelings.

Emotions vocabulary

Pleasant emotions	Unpleasant emotions
 Joy	 Anger (annoyance, frustration, fury, outrage)
 Gratitude	 Fear (worry, anxiety, panic, terror)
 Delight	 Sadness
 Anticipation	 Hurt
 Interest	 Rejection
 Hope	 Devastation
 Pride	 Embarrassment
 Excitement	 Guilt
 Inspiration	 Regret/remorse
 Love	 Shame
 Happiness	 Shock
 Surprise/ astonishment	 Disgust



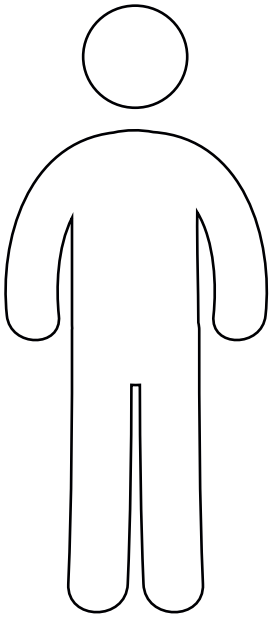
Worksheet – Emotions

Name or draw all of the emotions you can think of.

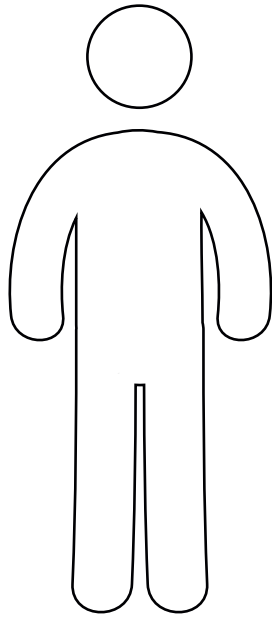
A grid of 20 dotted circles arranged in 5 rows and 4 columns, intended for drawing or writing emotions.

Worksheet – Where you feel emotion in your body

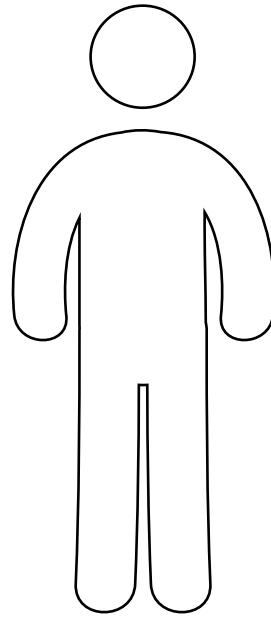
Colour the areas of your body where you feel...



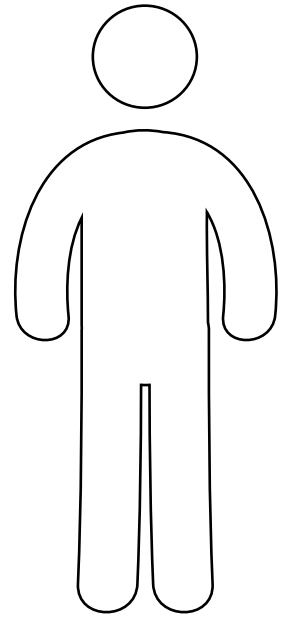
Anger



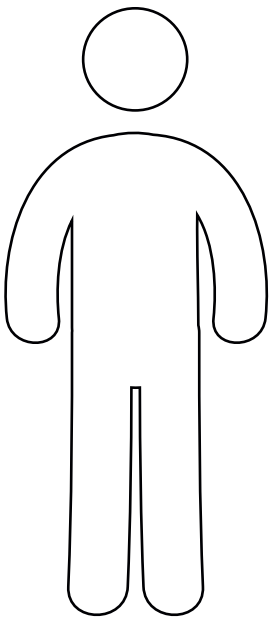
Sadness



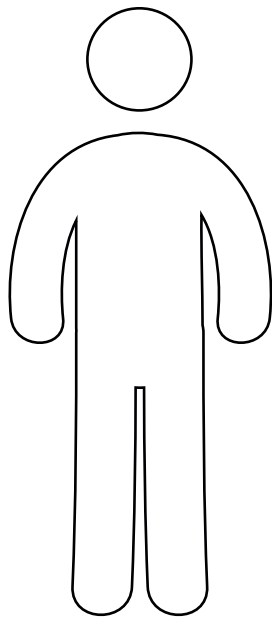
Disgust



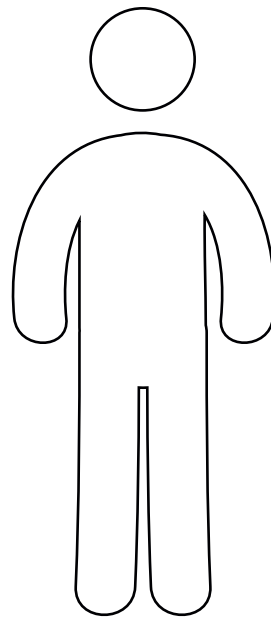
Fear



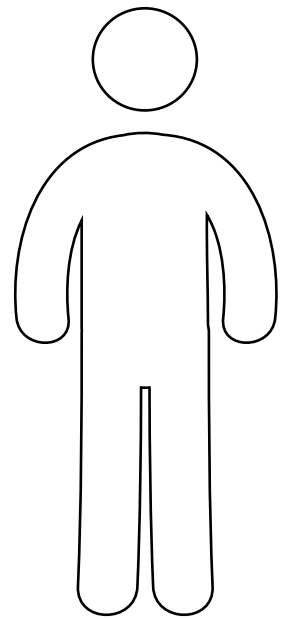
Surprise



Happiness



Worry



Frustration

Teacher's note

Being able to identify and acknowledge emotions can make it easier to manage them and respond in more helpful ways. While it can be very distressing to feel unpleasant emotions, such as anger, fear, sadness, disgust and shame, they are a normal part of life. All emotions, pleasant and unpleasant, are like waves: they come and go. They are not a permanent state.

It can be challenging to identify and acknowledge our emotions, as sometimes we have emotions that we wish we did not have. However, it is only by identifying our emotions and acknowledging that both pleasant and unpleasant emotions are part of life that we can mature and grow in our understanding of ourselves and others.

One way to identify our emotions is by tuning in to how our body is feeling. Emotions can be felt in the body – worry may be felt as butterflies in the tummy, or fear may be felt as a tightness in the chest. Each person experiences emotions in their body in their own way, so while there may be similarities between students' experiences, there may also be differences, and that is okay.

The following is not a full list of all bodily sensations related to the emotions, but it can be used as a prompt if required:

- Happiness can make your body feel light and energised. You might feel your heart swelling, you might be smiling and feel warmth towards other people.
- Sadness can feel like your body is heavy and weighed down, or like there are weights in your tummy. You might sigh a lot, you can feel tired, and when you walk it can feel like you are dragging your feet.
- Anger can feel like a sudden rush of energy; the upper body can feel tense, fists can be clenched, breathing can be quicker, and a person can feel like they want to lash out.
- Anxiety/fear can make your body feel jittery. You might feel like you have butterflies in your tummy, you might be breathing quickly, you might have sweaty palms, your heart might be pounding, or you might have a headache. Overall it feels unpleasant, as if you are expecting something bad to happen.
- Excitement can also feel jittery: you can have quick breathing, butterflies in your tummy, sweaty palms, or your heart might be pounding, but it is a pleasant feeling, as if you are expecting something good to happen.

Being able to recognise, acknowledge and name our emotions is also a key skill for managing ourselves and managing our relationships. If we can communicate our feelings to others, it is more likely that we will be able to solve problems calmly, and self-confidence will grow. If we ignore our unpleasant emotions or try to suppress them/banish them, we run the risk of discharging/releasing them through our behaviour, such as throwing temper tantrums or withdrawing from others.

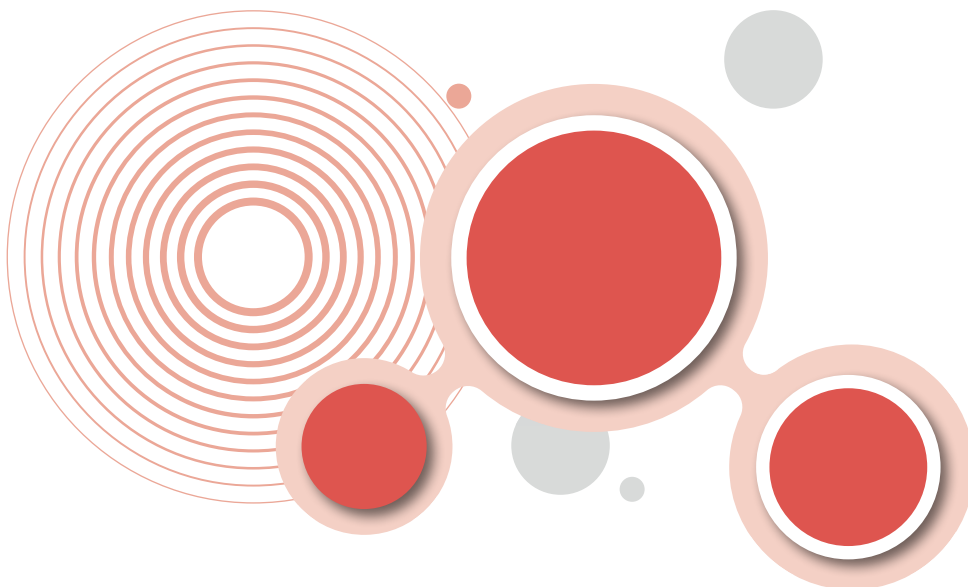
It can be useful to pick a routine task, such as washing your hands, as a time to close your eyes, pay attention to any sensations in your shoulders, tummy, head, and heart, and ask yourself, "How am I feeling now?" This can help to develop the skill of recognising, acknowledging and naming your emotions.

Suggested discussion points

- How did you find this activity?
- If we are having trouble identifying our emotions, what might help us? (*Noticing how our body feels.*)
- How can we help ourselves to tolerate unpleasant emotions? (*We can acknowledge that it is normal to feel unpleasant emotions and we can identify ways of coping with them that work for us; it could be by talking to someone, listening to music, writing about it, engaging in physical activity) or problem solving (for example, you may be feeling stressed because you have not studied for a test).*)
- While anger, fear/anxiety, and sadness can feel very distressing and overwhelming at the time, how long do these feelings last for? How do we typically feel an hour later, a day later, a week later? (*Emotions, both pleasant and unpleasant, are typically short lived and problem solving or seeking support to manage the situation that caused the feeling is useful).*)
- How can we remind ourselves to tune in to how we are feeling during the day? (*See the last paragraph of the Teacher's note.*)

Step 3: Self-soothing strategies for unpleasant emotions

Finish the class with a one-minute breathing exercise. Invite the students to close their eyes and count the number of deep breaths they take in one minute. The students may like to keep note of the number of breaths they took in one minute and add it to their **Wellbeing workout** (i.e. "Take six deep breaths"). This is also a useful way to calm down when in an emotionally charged situation.





Activity 3 – Thoughts, feelings and behaviours (LOs 4.2, 4.3)

In this activity, students are introduced to the idea that our thoughts affect our feelings and our behaviour.

Step 1: Dropping the Anchor

Invite the students to take part in this short grounding exercise (duration: 1 minute, 16 seconds).



Walk in my Shoes - Dropping the Anchor

https://www.walkinmyshoes.ie/media/2954/mys_mindfulness_ex4.mp3

Step 2: Thoughts, feelings and behaviours



Divide the class into five groups. Cut up the **Worksheet – Thoughts, feelings and behaviours**. Give one scenario to each group.

Invite the students to consider what the characters might think and what emotion they might be feeling when they behave in the ways described.

Facilitate a discussion about the potential thoughts and feelings the characters could have in each scenario.

Worksheet – Thoughts, feelings and behaviours

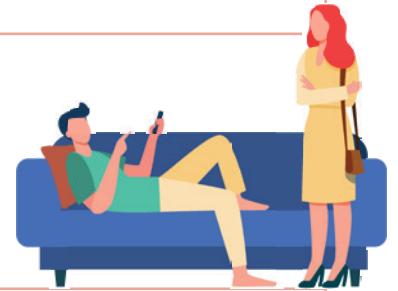
Look at the situation and the behaviour of each character before answering the questions about their thoughts and feelings.

Callum's situation

Callum has no credit for his phone and his parents have said that they won't give him money until the weekend.

Callum's thoughts

Callum's feelings



Callum's behaviour

Callum refused to come downstairs for dinner and then shouted at his parents, slammed doors and said he wasn't doing any homework until they gave him credit.

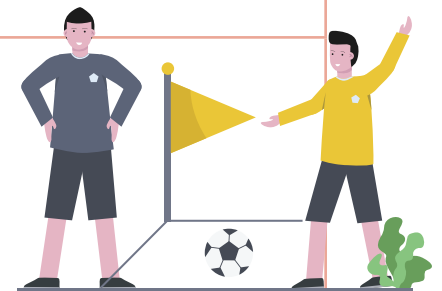


Sam's situation

Sam waved at the coach, who walked by without responding. There was a team selection taking place that evening at training.

Sam's thoughts

Sam's feelings



Sam's behaviour

Sam decided not to go to training that evening and didn't speak to anyone for the rest of the evening.

**Stevie's situation**

Stevie told a story that she thought was funny, but no one laughed.

Stevie's thoughts**Stevie's feelings****Stevie's behaviour**

Stevie was in a bad mood and gave short answers to everyone for the rest of the day.

**Leah's situation**

Leah has entered an art competition, and has heard that the judges were impressed with her entry.

Leah's thoughts**Leah's feelings****Leah's behaviour**

Leah couldn't stop smiling and couldn't concentrate in class.

Hugo's situation

Hugo told a funny story and everyone laughed.

Hugo's thoughts

Hugo's feelings

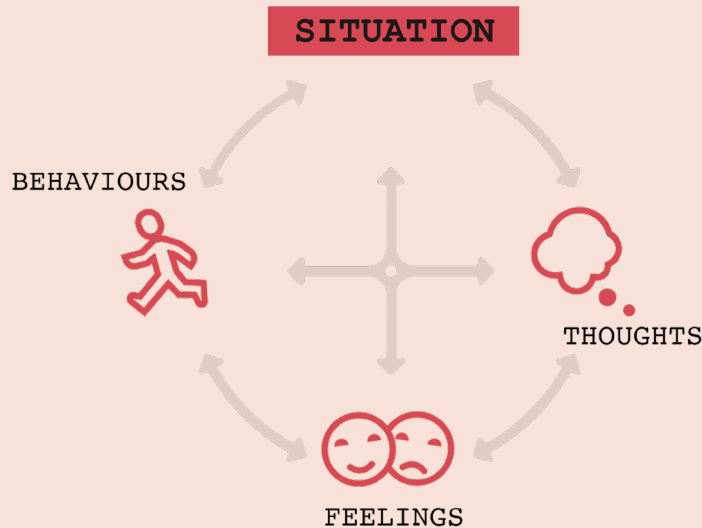
Hugo's behaviour

Hugo laughed too.



Teacher's note

The main principle of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is that our thoughts affect how we feel and how we behave. The aim of this exercise is to help students understand this cycle:



Our behaviour in any situation is affected by the thoughts and feelings we have about the situation.

Helpful thoughts are based on facts and lead to appropriate feelings and behaviours. Unhelpful thoughts are based on our emotions around the facts, which can lead to unnecessary, unpleasant feelings (sadness, worry, fear, anger) and behaviours (avoidance, aggression). While we all engage in unhelpful thinking at times, a continued cycle of unhelpful thinking is not good for our wellbeing.

The students may find it easier to identify feelings than to identify thoughts. It is important to assure them that these characters are having thoughts, even though they may not be conscious of them.

Suggested discussion points

- Is it easier to identify the thoughts or feelings in each scenario? *(Students may find it easier to identify the feelings in each scenario and may not find it easy to identify the thoughts behind the feeling as sometimes thoughts are not in our conscious awareness. It is important to assure students that the characters are having thoughts even if they are not aware of them.)*
- Are you surprised that there is such a strong link between our thoughts, emotions and behaviours?

Step 3: Reflection

Option 1

Reflect for a few moments on a mildly stressful situation that you have recovered from, such as forgetting something, being late or losing something.

Can you identify the feelings you had? (ie. anxious, worried, angry, frustrated)

Can you identify the thoughts you had about that situation?

Ask students to raise their hand if they can see a link between thoughts and feelings.

Option 2

Reflect on an episode of a TV programme, film, book where a character was in a stressful situation.

Can you identify the feelings they might have had?

Can you identify the thoughts they might have had?

Can you see a link between their thoughts and feelings?

Ask students to raise their hand if they can see a link between thoughts and feelings.



Activity 4 – Pressing pause (LO 4.2, 4.3, 4.4)

In this activity, students learn the ‘pressing pause’ technique. It involves noticing when you are about to have an emotional reaction, pausing before you react, doing something to help yourself calm down, and then responding in a calmer way. This activity builds on activity 3, where students learned the link between thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

Step 1: Review of activity 3

Invite the students to remember the scenarios involving, Sam and Stevie discussed in the **Worksheet – Thoughts, feelings and behaviours** from activity 3, and the thoughts and feelings that led to the behaviour in each scenario.

Step 2: Emotional reactions

Show the following video clip, which gives an explanation for what happens in our brain when we get caught up in an emotional reaction (duration: 6 minutes, 40 seconds).



Why do we lose control of our emotions?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bKuoH8CkFc>

Facilitate a discussion about the video, what are the signs that we are about to “flip our lids”? What emotions are we experiencing? How do our bodies feel? How can we press pause and stop ourselves from flipping our lids?



Divide the class into pairs and give a scenario from the **Worksheet – Pressing pause** to each pair, explaining that the pause button in each scenario indicates the stage where the characters could have pressed pause (i.e. before they shouted, slammed doors or refused to go to training).

Invite the students to discuss what the characters could do to regain calm once they have pressed pause and how they might have behaved if they were not caught up in their emotions.

Write their feedback on the whiteboard, adding in the strategies below if the students do not mention them. The students may have strategies besides those mentioned below, and it is important that they are acknowledged.

Teacher's note

Pressing pause

We have all experienced challenging situations in life. Reacting when emotionally charged usually makes things worse. It is therefore helpful to learn to press pause when we experience unpleasant emotions in reaction to a situation. By pressing pause and calming down, we can have a more measured response. This kind of response usually has better results.

Once you have 'pressed pause', you can do things such as:

- **Take deep breaths for a minute**
- **Use a self-talk strategy, such as 'let me think about this'**
- **Talk to someone else about it**
- **Listen to/play music**
- **Write about it**
- **Draw, or**
- **Leave the room or go outside until you have calmed down.**

This gives us time to regain calm and assess the situation so that an appropriate response can be given. 'Pressing pause' will usually lead to more helpful responses, whereas reacting when caught up in the unpleasant emotion can result in unhelpful and often regretted actions. For example, in the scenarios presented in this activity, if the characters had paused and regained calm before reacting, Stevie may have had a calm conversation with his/her parents, Sam may have gone to training.

Gender stereotypes

It is important to be aware of gender stereotypes with regard to what emotions girls and boys are "allowed" to express. It is a gender stereotype to expect girls not to express anger and for boys not to express vulnerability. Students may unconsciously reinforce these stereotypes in their discussions. It is important to gently challenge statements that reinforce gender stereotypes.



Suggested discussion points

- How do you think that Stevie and Sam might have reacted if they had paused and allowed themselves to calm down before they reacted to their situation?
- How might they have felt about their response afterwards?

Step 3: Reflection

Invite the students to reflect on what has helped them/might help them to calm down if they are experiencing a strong, unpleasant emotion, and have them add it to their Wellbeing workout.

One of the suggested strategies is to take deep breaths for one minute. If you have time, invite the students to practise this strategy.



Worksheet – Pressing pause

Stevie's situation

Stevie has no credit for his phone and his parents have said that they won't give him money until the weekend.


Stevie's thoughts

My parents are so unfair.
If I don't have credit, I won't know what's happening this weekend and I'll be left out.



Stevie's feelings

Angry and afraid of being left out.

Press pause  and calm down by _____

How might Stevie behave if he is calm?

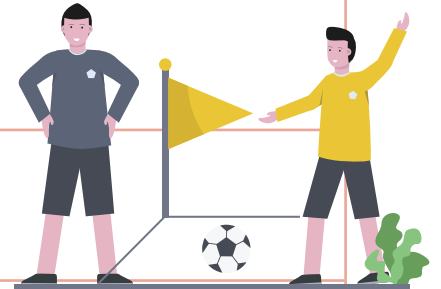


Sam's situation

Sam waved at the coach, who walked by without responding. There was a team selection taking place that evening at training.

Sam's thoughts

He doesn't like me.
He's not going to pick me for the team.



Sam's feelings

Angry and anxious.

Press pause  and calm down by _____

How might Sam's behave if he/she is calm?



Activity 5 – Helpful and unhelpful thoughts (LO 4.2, 4.9)

In this activity, students learn that when we press pause and calm ourselves down, we can start to notice what thoughts might have led to our emotional reaction. Then we can differentiate between helpful and unhelpful thoughts, which is the skill learned in this exercise. This activity is a follow-on from activity 4.

Step 1: Three-minute breathing space

Allow the class to listen to the three-minute breathing space:



Mindfulness meditation three minute breathing space.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOne1P0TKL8>

Step 2: Helpful and unhelpful thoughts



Divide the class into six groups. Cut up the **Worksheet – Helpful and unhelpful thoughts**. Give one scenario to each group.

Invite the students to circle the helpful thoughts (i.e. the thoughts based on facts) and draw a square around the unhelpful thoughts (i.e. the thoughts based on worries, anxieties and fear, not facts). One way of establishing if something is a fact is asking if there is evidence to support it, and if that evidence is trustworthy.

Invite each group to report on their scenario and the helpful thoughts and unhelpful thoughts they listed. One helpful thought and four unhelpful thoughts are listed in each scenario.

Worksheet – Helpful and unhelpful thoughts



Stevie's thoughts

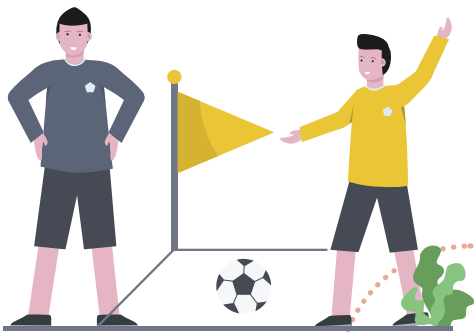
I need money for credit and I have to wait for the weekend to get it.

My parents are so unfair, they never give me credit.

If I don't have credit, I'll be left out.

I won't know what my friends are doing this weekend and that would be terrible.

I could end up with no friends and my parents don't care.



Sam's thoughts

It is strange that my coach didn't say hello to me today.

He doesn't like me.

He's not going to pick me for the team.

He doesn't want to be friendly to me now and then leave me off the team later.

I'm not going to training tonight; I wouldn't be able to cope if I wasn't selected.

Teacher's note

Helpful thoughts are thoughts that are based on facts. Unhelpful thoughts are thoughts based on our feelings (e.g. fear, worry) around facts. Helpful thoughts lead to appropriate feelings and responses. Unhelpful thoughts lead to unnecessary, unpleasant feelings and unhelpful responses if not challenged.

Unhelpful thoughts are not based on facts, but are based on one's emotions triggered by the facts. If not challenged, unhelpful thoughts can lead to unnecessary, unpleasant feelings and unhelpful behaviours. For example, Stevie can think, "I have no credit. If I don't have credit, I won't be able to stay in touch with my friends, they will forget about me and I will have no friends." This is an unhelpful thought which is based on fear, not on facts. If this unhelpful thought is not challenged, Stevie will continue to have these unpleasant feelings of fear and sadness about possibly being left out of his friend group. Stevie may also behave inappropriately if he feels this way and have an unnecessary fight with his parents that could end up making him feel worse.

Everyone has unhelpful thoughts, and while it can be difficult to catch or notice unhelpful thoughts, we can explore our feelings and behaviours in order to gain insight into our unhelpful thinking patterns, as unpleasant feelings or tension in the body may be a sign that we are engaging in a cycle of unhelpful thinking. By becoming aware of our thoughts, we can distinguish between helpful and unhelpful thoughts. By challenging unhelpful thoughts, we can break cycles of negative thinking patterns that may lead to anxiety or depression. As the students learned in activity 4, pressing pause allows the body and mind time to calm down and challenge unhelpful thoughts, which will be addressed in activity 6.

Suggested discussion points

- What might be a clue that we are having unhelpful thoughts? *(If we are experiencing unpleasant emotions, we may be having unhelpful thoughts without questioning them.)*
- What can we do when we notice that we are having unhelpful thoughts? *(We can press pause, allow our body and mind to calm down, and challenge the unhelpful thoughts. Challenging unhelpful thoughts is addressed in activity 6.)*

Step 3: Visualisation

Ask the students to close their eyes and listen to this audio exercise, Leaves on a stream (duration: 3 minutes, 12 seconds).



Walk in my Shoes - Leaves on a stream.

https://www.walkinmyshoes.ie/media/2953/mys_mindfulness_ex3.mp3

Activity 6 – Challenging unhelpful thoughts (LO 4.2, 4.3, 4.4)

In this activity, students devise thought challengers in response to unhelpful thoughts. A thought challenger is a question that challenges the validity of an unhelpful thought. Thought challengers include: 'Is this thought true?', 'How do I know it is true?' and 'Do I have any evidence to prove it?'

Step 1: Review of activity 5

Remind the class about activity 5, where they looked at helpful and unhelpful thoughts. Ensure that they understand what a helpful thought is and what an unhelpful thought is, using the Teacher's note from activity 5.

Step 2: Thought challengers

Ask students if they could guess what a thought challenger is and explain thought challengers using the Teacher Note.



Divide the class into pairs. Give out the scenarios from the **Worksheet – Thought challengers**.

Invite the pairs to write down a thought challenger and a helpful/more accurate thought for each scenario.

Ask each pair to give feedback on one scenario.

Teacher's note

A thought challenger is a question that challenges the validity of the unhelpful thought. Examples of thought challengers are: 'Is this really true?', 'How do I know it is true?', 'Do I have any evidence that it is true?', 'what would I tell a friend in this situation?', 'Is thinking like this helping me or making me feel worse?'

Using thought challengers can help break the cycle of unhelpful thoughts, unpleasant feelings, and behaviour that is not good for us and/or others. Students can use a thought challenger to come up with a helpful/more accurate thought.



Worksheet – Thought challengers

Example

Stevie has no credit for his phone and his parents have said that they won't give him money until the weekend.

Unhelpful thought: My parents are so unfair, they never give me credit.

Thought challenger: Is this really true?

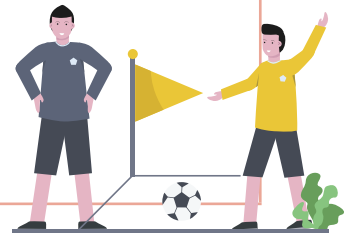
Helpful thought: My parents usually give me credit for my phone, but I think it's unfair that they won't give it to me until the weekend.

Sam waved at the coach, who walked by without responding. There was a team selection taking place that evening at training.

Unhelpful thought: He doesn't want to be friendly to me now and then leave me off the team later.

Thought challenger:

Helpful thought:



Callum told a story that he thought was funny, but no one laughed.

Unhelpful thought: Everyone thinks I'm stupid.

Thought challenger:

Helpful thought:



Lucy had an argument with her dad.

Unhelpful thought: We have a terrible relationship.

Thought challenger:

Helpful thought:



Daire messaged a new friend two hours ago and he hasn't responded.

Unhelpful thought: He doesn't want to be friends with me.

Thought challenger:

Helpful thought:



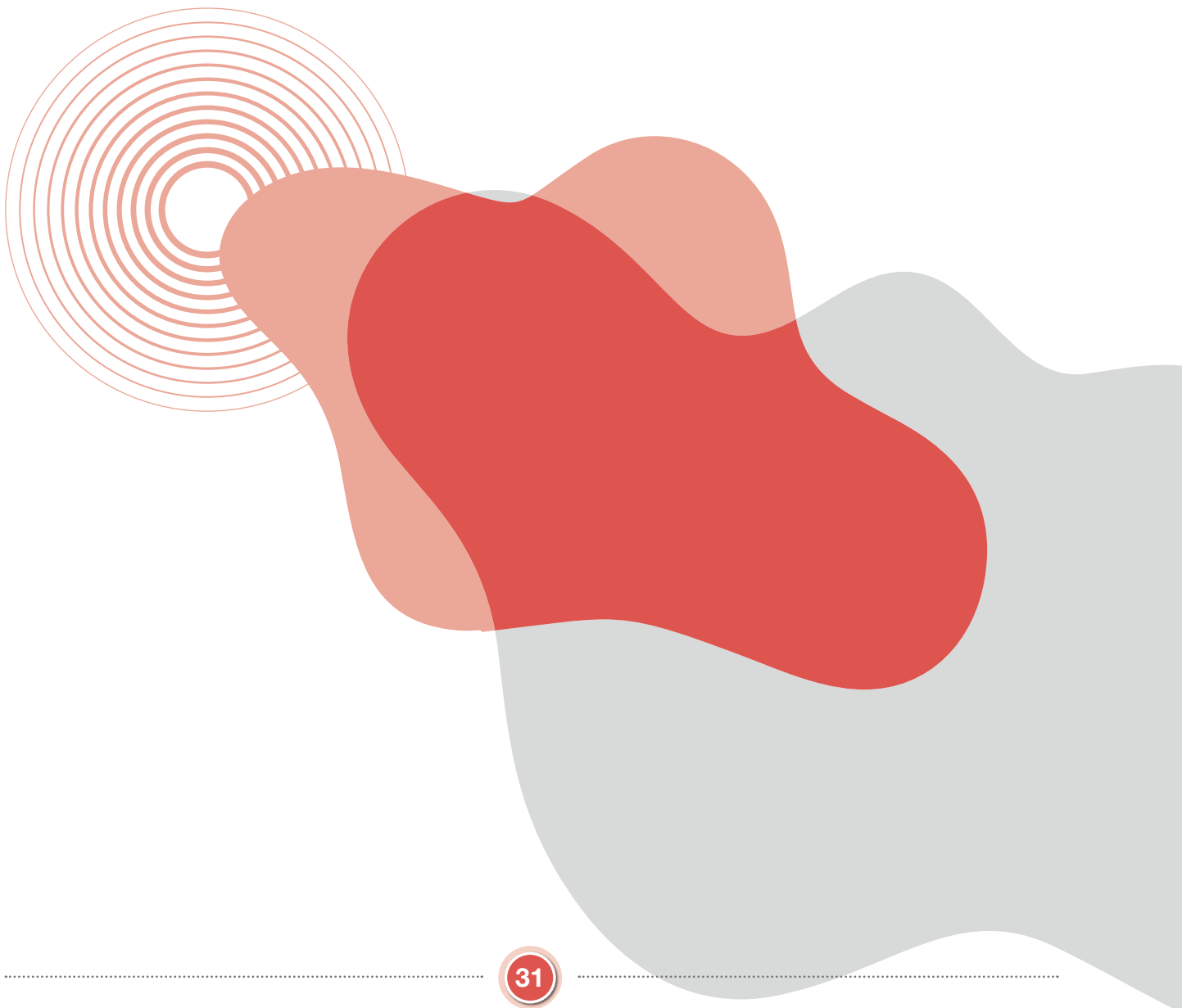


Suggested discussion points

- Have you ever used a thought challenger in your own life?
- Do you think you could use thought challengers in your own life?

Step 3: Using thought challengers

Try to notice when you have unhelpful thoughts during the week. Write down the unhelpful thought and how it makes you feel, then use a thought challenger to question the unhelpful thought.



Activity 7 – Gratitude (LO 4.1, 4.5)

In this activity, students are introduced to the practice of gratitude. Training the mind to find the good, however small, helps to lay neural networks in the brain that orient people towards happiness, and helps us see more small positives that often go unnoticed. When we express our gratitude to others, we strengthen our relationships with them. In short, gratefulness and living gratefully causes us to experience more positive emotions.

Step 1: Understanding the power of gratitude

Discuss with the class what they think gratitude means.

Play a video that explains why being grateful can make us happier, such as this one published by watchwellcast (duration: 4 minutes, 40 seconds).



The Gratitude Experiment
https://youtu.be/U5IZBjWDR_c

Step 2: Practising gratitude

Ask the students to write down three things they are grateful for that happened in the past few days – what went well, or what made them smile, laugh or feel good. It can be a big thing, but it is usually a small thing, like a good night's sleep, a hot shower, sunshine, nature, nice food, or something that a parent/family member/friend did for them or with them. You might like to start off by giving an example of a small thing that you have been grateful for in the past few days.

Suggested discussion points

- What did it feel like to think about what you are grateful for?
- Could you feel any particular sensations in your body?
- Where in your body did you feel gratitude?
- How often do you take the time to appreciate what you have?
- What is the impact of being more grateful?



Step 3: Follow-on activity

Evidence indicates that practising gratitude can have a positive impact on our emotional wellbeing *when it is practised regularly*, such as every day or every second day.

Use a special notebook to record three to five things that you are grateful for at the end of each day. Do it four times a week for three weeks. Remember, on most days it will be small things, such as those mentioned above. Try to think of different things every day, but if some days you cannot think of anything new, that is okay. There are several mobile phone apps for practising gratitude; your students may find these useful, if this is in line with your school's mobile phone policy.

OR

Write a gratitude letter/text/Snapchat to one person or several people in your life, telling them why you are grateful that they are in your life. You can choose to share it with that person if you would like to, or you can choose to keep it for yourself.

OR

Say thank you to everyone who does something for you in the next few days (e.g. your parents, friends, teachers, coaches, bus drivers, staff in shops).



Activity 8 – Mindfulness (LO 4.1, 4.3)

This activity introduces students to the practice of mindfulness, a mental state achieved by noticing the sensations in the present moment while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts and bodily sensations.

Teacher's note

While all students should be invited to participate, if a student is not comfortable it is best to let them sit quietly or choose an alternative mindful activity or a calming or relaxing technique.

Step 1: What is mindfulness?

Invite the students to think about the meaning of the word “mindfulness” and then discuss their understanding of the word with a partner.

Take feedback from the students. They may not be able to define it but may be able to provide words they associate with it such as being quiet, sitting still, having your eyes closed etc.

Provide the following definition:

Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally. - *John Kabat-Zinn*

Invite the students to respond to the definition. Probe if this definition has changed their understanding of mindfulness. For example, is it possible to walk mindfully, to eat mindfully, to breathe mindfully? (*Yes, as long as you are paying attention to the present moment and not judging your experience you are practicing mindfulness*).

Step 2: Online guided meditation focusing on the breath

Play a guided meditation, such as this 10-minute meditation with Andy Puddicombe



Guided 10 minute meditation

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVzTnS_IONU.

Ask the students to break into pairs and share what they noticed from doing this practice. Facilitate a discussion using the suggested discussion points below if required.

Teacher's note

Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally.

- John Kabat-Zinn

Mindfulness can improve the mental, emotional, social and physical health and wellbeing of young people. Professor Kathleen Weare has reviewed the evidence on the impact of mindfulness on children and young people. It is available at: <https://mindfulnessinschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/MiSP-Research-Summary-2012.pdf>

Mindfulness practice helps strengthen focus and attention, as well as improve wellbeing and mental health. Just sitting for 10 minutes per day has positive benefits. Most people will find focusing like this challenging, because the mind keeps wandering. Remember it is normal for the mind to wander, that is what minds do, when you notice the mind wandering just come back to the breath. Recommend starting small. Try one minute first, then three minutes, gradually increasing your time for practising mindful breathing.

It is helpful in teaching this lesson that the teacher has some practical experience of mindfulness themselves. There are several apps and courses for teachers on mindfulness.

The class is more likely to go well when students see the teacher listening mindfully to every contribution, thanking each person who contributes, and managing stress within the classroom and responding, rather than reacting, to stressors.

Suggested discussion points

- What was it like to observe your breath like that?
- What was it like when your mind wandered away?
- Were you able to bring your mind back with kindness or were you harsh on yourself?
- How do you feel now?
- What do you think the benefits of doing this could be?

Step 3: Follow-on activity

Practise 5 to 10 minutes of breath awareness every day this week, using a guided meditation app or another online guided meditation.

