

Psychology and the Return to School:

A resource for secondary schools and further education

Wirral Educational Psychology Team

Credit: London Bi-Borough EPCS



Foreword

We, as a team, have been discussing the issues of reintegration and transition during Covid-19. Our initial aim was to agree foundational principles, informed by research, that we would base our response on as an Educational Psychology Team. The four principles are:

- **Maintaining Wellbeing and Promoting Positive Emotions**
- **Feeling Safe and Secure**
- **Staying Connected**
- **Managing Difficult Feelings**

This document explains these core principles as well as practical implications for schools. In part 2, our four principles are colour coded and tagged, so you can see how implementing some ideas or using strategies contributes to these four principles.

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1. Maintaining Wellbeing & Promoting Positive Emotions

‘Wellbeing’ is a term that is regularly used, but what does wellbeing mean?

Mental health is defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as “a state of wellbeing” within which someone realises their potential, can cope with common life stressors, is able to work productively, and can provide a contribution to the community (WHO, 2013). This can mean providing a contribution to the home, school, and/or the wider community.

Supporting positive wellbeing in the context of COVID-19

For both adults and children, uncertainty and change will have been part of their experience of lockdown. Most will have adapted and coped with this strange situation, but it is likely that everyone will have experienced, at some time, some varying degree of anxiety, fear, frustration etc. This would seem to be a normal response to an abnormal and entirely new situation. How pervasive and impairing these emotions are will depend on a range of factors including individual experience (e.g. bereavement), available support, how anxious others are around them, and individual resilience.

To maintain positive wellbeing in life (and especially in the context of COVID-19), we need to develop resilience. **Psychological resilience** is the ability to cope with a crisis mentally or emotionally or to return to pre-crisis status quickly. Resilience theory argues that it is not the nature of adversity that is most important, but how we deal with it. For individuals to ‘bounce back’ in the face of negative experiences, it is important for them to experience positive mental health and build resiliency.

Positive emotions “broaden an individual’s momentary thought-action repertoire: joy sparks the urge to play, interest sparks the urge to explore, contentment sparks the urge to savour and integrate, and love sparks a recurring cycle of each of these urges within safe, close relationships.” (Fredrickson 2004, p. 1367). Common positive emotions include joy, gratitude, serenity, hope, pride, amusement, interest, awe, and love. The role of positive emotion is more than the momentary positive experience; positive emotion can drive actions and lead to “flourishing.” In schools, teaching and learning, creative activities, and being with others (adults and peers), all offer endless possibilities for the experience of positive emotions. There are also activities and approaches which can encourage and grow these experiences, such as *5 ways to maintain/improve your mental health and wellbeing* (MIND, 2020; NHS, 2020):

1. Connect with other people

Meaningful and positive relationships are vital for a positive sense of wellbeing (Grenville-Cleave, 2012). MIND (2020) highlight that positive social relationships act as a buffer against mental health difficulties across all ages. Examples of what that might look like in schools include:

- *Having fun with others, in a socially distanced way*
 - *Children might be encouraged to think about games they can play together but apart – simple games like “Simon Says”, Charades, or playing bingo together outside where they are able to take part collectively.*
- *Promoting connection through shared experience*
 - *Can Year 6 children create a “lockdown” time capsule of objects, images, thoughts, and photos to be revisited when they are in Year 11?*

2. **Be physically active**

It is well known that being physically active is great for your physical health and fitness. The impact that physical activity has on your mental wellbeing is also well established in the research.

In school, playing games/active learning is a great way to facilitate physical activity with the children.

3. **Learn a new skill**

Learning new skills is established to have a positive effect on wellbeing. It provides a sense of purpose, connection, and accomplishment. For example, you may decide to:

- *Learn a new skill as a class:*
 - *You could how to relay a message using sign language to share on your school website, for your whole school community to access.*
- *Reflect on skills they have developed over time:*
 - *Could they think about the skills they have developed since joining school in F2? What can they do now that was once tricky? This may be particularly useful when considering reintegration; can this be used to reassure them that they can make the same journey at secondary school?*

4. **Give to others**

Engaging in acts of kindness can generate positive emotion, produce a sense of purpose/self-worth, and offers opportunities for positive social connection. Why not try:

- *drawing pictures/writing letters to local elderly residents who may have reduced social connection during COVID-19 restrictions?*
- *asking Year 6 pupils to help prepare Year 4 and 5 pupils by writing to them and describing what school is like post lockdown, in preparation for their return?*

5. **Paying attention to the present moment**

Research shows that paying attention to your thoughts, feelings, your body, and the world around you improves wellbeing. It is important to be 'in the present'; this discourages rumination relating to things out of your control. This practice is known as 'mindfulness'. There are ways you can weave mindfulness into your everyday routine:

- *Could you start and end the day with a mindfulness activity as a class?*
 - *This link provides more information about using mindfulness with children <https://positivepsychology.com/mindfulness-for-children-kids-activities/>. You may also wish to utilise this as staff!*
- *Practising gratitude through noticing:*
 - *You could try savouring the small moments by finding one small thing that you enjoy, or which gives you pleasure, each day and taking the time to notice it. Talk about gratitude as a construct and ask children to keep a journal. As a class/school to create a gratitude tree that everyone can grow and contribute to.*
- *Practising gratitude through reflection:*
 - *Ask the children to reflect on the following....*
 - *What skills have they learned at home?*
 - *What have they enjoyed?*
 - *What are they looking forward to most about returning?*

More information about this can be found at:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/improve-mental-wellbeing/>
<https://www.mind.org.uk/workplace/mental-health-at-work/taking-care-of-yourself/five-ways-to-wellbeing/>

2. Feeling safe and secure

We are probably all familiar with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: -



The assumption is that in order to move up through the successive levels of the pyramid, we need to have achieved the prior level or levels. After our basic physiological needs of shelter, food, warmth, 'safety' is the next requirement. This is true for everyone in the school community: pupils, midday assistants, cooks, cleaners, parents, teachers, headteachers, governors, teaching assistants, site managers and volunteers.

'Being Safe'/Physical Safety: - *the practicalities of keeping individuals and the physical school environment safe.* Guidance for this has been sent to schools from Paul Boyce, Director CYPD, Wirral Council.

Promoting a sense of psychological security in the school community?

A sense of emotional safety and security is important to maintain positive mental health and well-being. Schools are well placed to provide a sense of consistency and predictability that will be supportive to all members of the school community during this time of change and uncertainty.

Re-establishing connections, relationships, routines within the familiar environment of school will be the cornerstones to promoting security and emotional well-being.

Practical ideas for promoting psychological security include:

'Learning Frameworks'

Edmundson found that when the leaders in organisations were willing to model 'Learning Frameworks' through 'Active Listening'*, that this openness and willingness to be fallible/vulnerable, became the norm, i.e., a culture of openness grew. Adults can model this to other adults and children: -

- **What do I know?** *Washing my hands really well and often helps stop the spread of the virus.*
- **What don't I know?** *I don't know how long we are going to have to live like this.*
- **What are my questions?** *How long will it be until they discover a vaccine?*
- **How am I feeling?** *Hopeful that the scientists will find a vaccine soon/ worried that a vaccine may never be found (I put two contrasting statements in to illustrate that it is important to be authentic, not falsely optimistic, if that is not how you are feeling).*

These 'Learning Frameworks' could be used in staff meetings, during a daily 'check-in' with pupils, with parents in a formal or informal discussion. The essential thing is to make this candidness the norm. Other ways of creating openness are to invite those who are less vocal to express themselves indirectly or anonymously, e.g., a 'Learning Tree' (signifying growth).

Learning Trees

Parents/staff/pupils/volunteers/governors can hang a 'leaf' on a tree with their responses to the questions from the Learning Framework, once modelled sufficiently. These could be 'virtual trees' or actual trees (there can be several trees for different 'hubs'/'networks' e.g., parents/carers of Year 6 pupils, to reduce cross contamination). If physical trees are created, once sufficient time has elapsed for them to be safe to handle (see health & safety guidance Covid-19), the responses can be collated, themed and published, with answers if there are any, and without answers if there aren't any. It's not about 'solving problems' it's about 'openness'. However, you may find that innovative ideas may come forward, and you should be open to these, no matter how unconventional they might be, modelling 'curiosity' (something all teachers are well practiced at). For further information about Psychological Safety: -

<https://www.impraise.com/blog/what-is-psychological-safety-and-why-is-it-the-key-to-great-teamwork>

Professor Amy Edmundson recently did an interview about psychological safety during the Covid19 pandemic: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smXjla7XYdg>

**Active Listening: - there are a myriad of articles and guides about active listening, here is one published by the NHS: <https://improvement.nhs.uk/documents/2085/active-listening.pdf>*

<https://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/article-details/the-importance-of-psychological-safety>

<https://rework.withgoogle.com/blog/five-keys-to-a-successful-google-team/>

https://web.mit.edu/curhan/www/docs/Articles/15341_Readings/Group_Performance/Edmondson%20Psychological%20safety.pdf

3. Staying Connected

Despite isolation and lockdown, humans have continued to connect in all sorts of ways: we have learned how to use Zoom, we have learned our neighbours' names, and we have clapped our key workers. This idea of a 'need for belonging', that we are part of something bigger than just ourselves, is widely accepted in research to be a fundamental human need. So much so, 'staying connected' relates to and permeates other factors in this document such as 'feeling safe' and 'keeping psychologically well'. There is no single intervention that leads to social connection and belonging but rather research repeatedly demonstrates some key factors: What are these factors that influence school connectedness?

1. Warm positive consistent relationships

Students who experience school connectedness like school, feel that they belong, believe teachers care about them and their learning, believe that education matters, have friends at school, believe that discipline is fair, and have opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities. An environment needs to be created in which they feel accepted by and able to talk to, staff. It is therefore important that schools take action to provide a safe, caring, and supportive learning environment for students to return to.

2. Feeling listened to

Children knowing that others feel the same way promotes a sense of belonging so that they know they are not alone. Feeling listened to helps children feel that they can voice worries and that their voice matters.

3. Positive peer relationships

Children and young people need to feel connected to others in their social environment in order to flourish. For most young people, schools are not just about academics. Schools are where they find their friends, have lunch, socialize, discuss problems, and interact with adult role models. Opportunities to enhance peer relations may be more difficult within a social distancing environment. Where possible, schools should create opportunities for engaging students in multiple planned and spontaneous play/interactions among peers both within and outside the classroom. Schools should continue to include strategies that encourage positive social relations amongst peers such as cooperative learning and teamwork that ensures acceptance of each team member and participation by all students.

4. Generating a sense of community

Social capital is built by engaging the whole school and wider community (e.g. parents, teachers, volunteers), enabling them to work collaboratively, build on strengths, and solve problems. Schools can use these contacts and relationships to explore and understand the specific challenges and issues they have faced during the pandemic. This knowledge can be used to inform the plans to re-engage children and families in the most appropriate way. Being connected involves being part of something larger than yourself, such as being part of a club, a church, or a school council. Responses that focus on resilience, coping, and strengths will facilitate communities to identify their own resources whilst fostering a sense of connection and belonging.

5. Promoting connection for those who are "vulnerable"

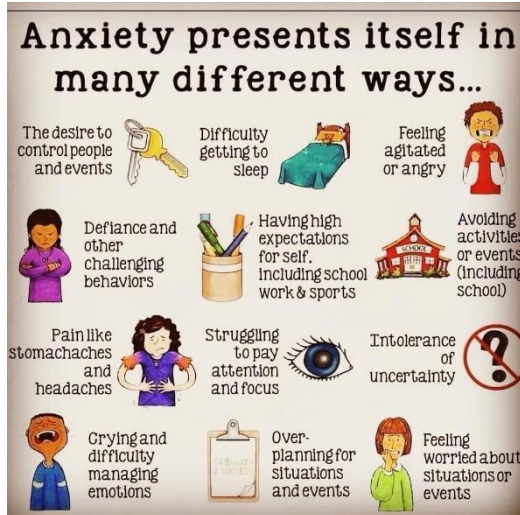
Connectedness is a powerful protective factor for those at risk and raises their chance of overcoming difficulties and disadvantage. This means an acknowledgement that a wider range of factors may be in play beyond Covid-19, for example, SEND, attachment difficulties, SEMH, ethnicity, culture, self-identity, religion, and socioeconomic factors. Alongside the approaches listed above, this will need an explicit focus on social and emotional learning — including coping skills, self-awareness, emotional regulation skills, empathy, goal achievement skills, and relationship skills. It is important to adapt a strengths-based approach whereby schools focus on identifying and developing students' intellectual strengths and personal qualities.

4. Managing difficult feelings

What are difficult feelings and how may they present?

Everyone responds to adversity in a range of ways, including changes in their capacity for learning and physical and psychological wellbeing. A variety of emotional responses is normal in this situation and sometimes behavioural changes may indicate feelings of anxiety or confusion. Children may present with internalising behaviours (such as withdrawal or negative ruminations) or externalising behaviours (such as aggression or refusal to engage). Adults may also experience difficult feelings, but their behavioural responses may be less obvious.

Supporting children who are experiencing difficult feelings



Firstly, children need the appropriate tools to communicate their difficult feelings to others. Children will have varying levels of emotional literacy; *emotional literacy* is the ability to understand your emotions, the ability to listen to others and empathise with their emotions, and the ability to express emotions productively. In order for a child to effectively communicate their emotions they need to recognise the emotion on both a cognitive and physical level (i.e. the feeling of 'worried' may produce 'tummy ache' or 'butterflies'), and then be able to communicate these feelings to a source of support.

Develop emotional literacy through whole-class, small group or individual activities that name and identify thoughts and bodily sensations, and then provide strategies to reduce any feelings of anxiety. Children and young people require approaches which normalise a range of emotional responses; encourage them to regularly share their feelings, and practise self-regulatory strategies. Part 2 of this document contains suggestions of how to do this.

How do we support staff members who are experiencing difficult feelings?

Many adults in the school community will also be experiencing a similar range of emotions and reactions as the children, young people, and their families. It is important to look after yourself and manage your own difficult feelings, before attempting to support others. The common analogy used is "put on your own mask, before you help others". Once these difficult feelings are acknowledged, it is then vital to adopt strategies that provide psychological resilience and reduce stress.

Strategies for coping may include:

- Allow yourself to experience negative emotion e.g. anxiety or grief; these are normal emotional responses.
- It may be helpful to have a "buddy" in school, a trusted person who is available to talk to and who can provide comfort.
- Spend time in a place where you feel calm
- Mindfulness based activities- having strategies you can use "in the moment"
- Build opportunities in that day for hope and positive strengths (perhaps an activity where you can experience a sense of success and/or control)

1. Reintegration and Recovery – some key ideas

Disasters and emergencies throw light on the world as it is. Some thinkers who study disasters frame crises not just in terms of what is lost but also what might be gained – seeing glimmers of possibility. Every disaster is different and it's never just one or the other: loss and gain always coexist.

Rebecca Solnit (2009) used case studies of disasters to argue that emergencies aren't just moments when bad things get worse, or when people inevitably become more scared, suspicious and self-centred. Instead she described the ways in which disasters open up human reserves of improvisation, solidarity and resolve, pockets of purpose and joy, even in the midst of loss and pain. Solnit's book was not a call to celebrate disaster – but to pay attention to the possibilities it might contain.

“Human beings reset themselves to something altruistic, communitarian, resourceful and imaginative after a disaster, we revert to something we already know how to do.”



2. What can adults working in secondary schools and FE provision do to help themselves?¹

Knowing your children and young people is what makes your school a place that the community will turn to as a key support for children and young people, and in whom the community is placing their trust to aid children and youth in their recovery.

It's a big responsibility, especially when we acknowledge that many adults in the school community will also be experiencing a similar range of emotions and reactions as the children, young people and their families. Experiences of bereavement and loss, caring for someone shielding, living with a frontline NHS worker or carer, coping with additional stressors, worry and anxiety will be shared and lived experiences for many.

However, we also know that resilience research frequently cites teachers as trusted significant adults and positive role models for children and young people. Teachers have the skills needed to support children and young people through difficult times, to help inspire their resiliency and hope and to help them recover their wholeness and find comfort in their community.

Now is the time that the work you have done previously with the students in your school will help them in their response to the challenges that the reintegration and recovery period will present. And, as always, we can continue to 'top up' resilience in the way we teach, interact with and model positive behaviour. This doesn't mean we pretend that nothing is different or that we haven't found the pandemic scary, difficult or sad. What it means is we show that people can endure such challenges and are especially able to withstand such hard times when those around them are supportive and caring. It is important to acknowledge that everyone will have their good and bad days and that there are things that we can do that will help us to feel less distressed. Remember:

*"Those who live through terrible times will often be able to help others....and some may go on to do something to make the world a better place. Even terrible things can teach some good things – like understanding, caring, courage... and how to be okay during difficult times"*⁴

Before we can help others, we need to help ourselves **(Maintaining Wellbeing and Promoting Positive Emotion)**

As school staff we need to be seen to be practicing what we are encouraging students to do. Congruence between our actions and our expectations is vital for trusting relationships with students, especially those of secondary school age. During the reintegration period after lockdown you will most likely be exposed to stories and information that are distressing to hear. This can result

¹ With reference to materials developed by Australia Child & Adolescent Trauma Loss & Grief Network ⁴ Marge Heegaard (1991) 'When Something Terrible Happens' Woodland Press.

in stress and distress. Taking time to firstly recognise this and then to adopt strategies that provide psychological resilience and reduce stress is not only important, but professionally responsible.

Managing your own stress

(Maintaining Wellbeing and Promoting Positive Emotions; Managing Difficult Feelings)

Try to:

- Take time out to get sufficient sleep and rest, relax and eat regularly and healthily.
- Talk to people you trust and allow yourself to be comforted. You don't have to tell everyone everything, but not saying anything to anyone is often unhelpful.
- Reduce outside demands and avoid taking on additional responsibilities.
- Spend time in a place where you feel safe and calm to go over what's happened over the course of the day/week. Don't force yourself to do this if the feelings are too strong or intense at the time.
- Try to reduce your access to the constant stream of news from media outlets and social media. Try scheduling 'digital power off' times.
- Use relaxation strategies e.g. slow breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, self-talk.
- Build in opportunities for recognising hope and positive strength.
- Allow yourself experiences of sadness and grief.

Try to avoid:

- Bottling up feelings. Consider whether it would be helpful to talk about them with someone you trust.
- Feeling embarrassed by your thoughts, feelings or those of others. These are normal reactions to a stressful event and period of time.
- Isolating yourself from those you trust and feel safe around.



What might be helpful during the reintegration period?

(Maintaining Wellbeing and Promoting Positive Emotions; Staying Connected; Managing Difficult Feelings)

- Think about having a buddy in school, so you can check in with each other at various times if needed. It might also be helpful to have someone on hand to help you think through any questions that might come up in class and work through them together
- Don't put any pressure on yourself to do any activities or have any discussions you don't feel up to, that is absolutely fine.
- Talk to each other, support each other- the staffroom can become a real sanctuary at times when things are feeling difficult. It never hurts to bring in a few snacks and treats to share or to try and come together for a quick catch-up at break time.

- Mindfulness based activities- having strategies you can use in the moment to support you to stop.....clear your mind for a few seconds....focus on your breath....carry on again.

⁵ Adapted from Advice from NHS Guidance for Coping with Stress Following a Major Incident

3. Psychological First Aid- what can adults working in secondary schools and FE provision do to help each other? ²

(Feeling Safe and Secure; Staying Connected; Managing Difficult Feelings)

Psychological first aid refers to the actions that can be taken by people without formal psychological or counselling training to provide emotional support for people following an emergency or critical incident.

The following may be useful for staff when providing psychological first aid for each other:

- Ask simple questions to ascertain what help may be needed.
- Emphasise the support available.
- Initiate contact only after you have observed and appraised the situation. It is important to make sure that contact will not be seen as intrusive or disruptive.
- Review the situation and emphasise the positive actions taken by colleagues in managing the situation.
- Listen with compassion.
- Offer to make them a cup of tea/coffee.
- Reflect the words of the person. Don't judge the statements a person makes.
- Ask non-intrusive questions (e.g. "Where were you during...?")
- Keep the discussion based on what happened. Avoid "What if...?" or "I should have..." statements. If your colleague takes this line, bring the talk back to real events.
- In some instances staff members may have an intense and lasting response and need professional psychological help. However, your interventions as a line manager or a colleague can do much to reduce or even remove the need for counselling.
- Follow-up should be at a level appropriate to the relationship between the person and helper. In some instances it may be as simple as asking "How are you now?"

² Government of Western Australia Department of Education Emergency and Critical Incident Management Plan Nov 2011

- Remember that psychological first aid is about reducing distress, assisting with the current needs of colleagues and making sure that colleagues are offered the support to allow them to function within their professional setting. It is not about revisiting traumatic experiences.

4.

Recognising the impact of thoughts and feelings on behaviour - an Attachment Aware Approach

For many schools one of the key challenges will be working out how to uphold boundaries and school rules during any reintegration period following lockdown; particularly for those students who are vulnerable and may have experienced lockdown as a frightening and distressing time. We know that consistent boundaries help students feel safer, and that school needs to feel as predictable a place as it can be, after experiencing something that has been so unpredictable. However, knowing how to balance this with the need, for some students, to access more intensive support can feel challenging.

What do adults need to be aware of?

Whole school behaviour policies often work for the majority of students, however they are not successful with all. This is especially true for those who have experienced **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)** (*traumatic life experiences that occur before the age of 18*) and could also be true for those young people who have experienced high levels of anxiety, trauma or bereavement as a result of the pandemic. Young people respond to adversity in a range of ways, including changes in their capacity for learning and physical and psychological wellbeing. These behavioural changes may indicate confusion and uncertainty, or underlying, ongoing distress.

Some young people might display observable and active 'acting out' behaviours that communicate a clear emotional need. Others might become withdrawn or appear unusually needy. We can try to notice our tendency to make judgements around behaviour (e.g. 'mad'/'bad') and remind ourselves to view all behaviour as an indicator of emotions to which we can respond in an empathic and caring manner. This can be particularly hard to do when a young person acts in a way that hurts or frightens others.

Some groups to be especially aware of are:

- ✦ Students who have experienced significant loss or bereavement.
- ✦ Students who have been shielding during the pandemic as a result of underlying health conditions, and siblings of those who have been shielding, whose experience of lockdown will have been even more restricted.
- ✦ Students with existing social, emotional and mental health needs (some might have EHCPs that identify this as an area of special educational need that requires intensive support).
- ✦ Students with other known special educational needs or disabilities.
- ✦ Students who are Looked After, Children in Need or subject to a Child Protection Plan.
- ✦ Students who came under Refugee and/or Asylum Seeker status who may have previous experiences of trauma.

For these students, approaches that tend to focus mainly on behaviour can have further negative effects and tend not to provide opportunities for young people to learn to express their emotions in a more socially acceptable way.

What might help?

- The general principle of providing a safe environment, high in nurture and structure, with adults responding in a consistent manner, maintaining clear boundaries and expectations around behaviour is still important, most particularly, when other areas of a student's life may not feel as structured. This consistency is containing for young people. (*see section 4 Tips for creating a resilient and well-being focused classroom*).
- Trust your instincts in knowing when ignoring low level behaviour is needed. Reflecting on whether students would typically exhibit these types of behaviours, or whether it is "out of character" will help to make informed judgements. Hold on to the importance of **flexibility** for these students.
- Discuss the relationship between behaviour, thoughts and feelings with students, and how we often use our behaviour to communicate our feelings, particularly when we are unable to label the emotion.
- The use of an '**authoritative**' versus '**authoritarian**' approach where adults are 'in control' versus 'controlling' can be very powerful. We know that fostering **connection, inclusion, respect and value** for all members of the school community supports students to feel a sense of belonging, being heard, understood and cared about, and provides a context in which they can start to express their emotions in a more socially acceptable way.

<i>Top Tips for implementing an Attachment Aware Approach³</i>
Recognise behaviour as a form of communication - the behaviour might be a very normal response to adverse life experiences
Promote a positive approach - offer specific and descriptive praise or discrete non-verbal feedback
Differentiate expectations - set the expectations so that children and young people aren't set up to fail
Differentiate response - express disapproval of the behaviour and not the person
Relationships first - 'Engage, don't Enrage' - empathy comes before problem-solving around the behaviour
Small actions can make a big difference - smiling at/greeting a CYP on their way into school can really add to their sense of belonging
Don't expect immediate results or returns - a CYP might be dismissive of you but this doesn't mean that your actions weren't valued

³ Adapted from Sarah Ahmed 2017 *Developing an Attachment Aware Behaviour Regulation Policy: Guidance for Brighton and Hove Schools*.

Expect sabotage from some CYP and name it, where appropriate - 'Name it to tame it'. Dan Siegel ⁴
Recognise that what you feel is a likely indication of how the CYP feels

5. Tips for creating a resilient and well-being focused classroom⁵

As much as returning to school may feel like a relief, or even feel exciting for some young people, it is also likely to be a time when many young people feel anxious, particularly those who have underlying health conditions or who live with someone who is shielding. Feeling safe may have come to be associated with 'staying at home', 'social distancing' and frequent handwashing and so we all need to learn new ways to continue to feel safe whilst connecting with our friends and peers and learning together back in our school setting. Teachers can help to create classroom environments that provide reassurance, for example, how they are following the latest government and scientific guidelines, and make expectations clear about how we can all look after ourselves and each other. This may take time and it is important for us to hold on to the idea of a **reintegration period** as we develop new ways of learning together in the aftermath; rather than rushing or putting unnecessary pressure on ourselves or each other to 'feel or get back to normal'.

• Look after your own emotional needs

(Maintaining Wellbeing and Promoting Positive Emotions; Managing Difficult Feelings)

Many of you within the school community could be experiencing a similar range of reactions and feelings in response to the pandemic and lockdown period as the young people in your classes. This can make it particularly difficult to focus on the needs of the others. As adults, we have a wider range of coping skills than are available to young people and know that we can survive adversity. Young people often haven't yet learnt through experience that they too have these coping capacities.

Working with young people who have had a particularly stressful and frightening experience of the pandemic could be challenging, and it is possible that in hearing their stories you may also experience stress symptoms. It is not uncommon for teachers to feel some of the anxiety, helplessness and anger that their young people feel.

• Create a safe classroom and school environment

(Feeling Safe and Secure)

For young people to feel safe, schools and classrooms need to be high in both nurture and structure, and need to be predictable and organised, with clearly stated, reasonable expectations. Ground rules focusing on how we can keep ourselves and each other as safe as possible together can be coconstructed with groups and classes, with reviews planned to allow for changes and adaptations

⁴ The Whole-Brain Child 2011 Siegel and Bryson

⁵ With reference to materials developed by Australia Child & Adolescent Trauma Loss & Grief Network

in response to new developments. New routines and boundaries can be discussed and agreed to provide reassurance to allow young people to negotiate their day with confidence.

- **Help students to regulate their emotions so that they can learn**

- (Managing Difficult Feelings)

In addition to having a calm classroom, teaching young people strategies to self-calm is useful and conducive to creating a positive learning atmosphere. Sometimes for there to be calmness there needs to be opportunity for movement and the expenditure of energy. Young people who seem to be particularly jumpy, anxious, nervous or on edge may find that a brief time out that allows for time outside or even being able to get out of their seat and hand out sheets for a class task allows them to resetttle.



Talking about feelings, having posters around the classroom that provide words for feelings and emotions and cueing children and young people into their feelings are all strategies that develop emotional literacy and help children and young people to understand their own and others' feelings. If a student seems particularly upset, distressed or angry, it is important to first let them calm down- perhaps have some time out of the classroom, before helping them to identify their feelings.

- **Believe that students can achieve academic success**

- (Maintaining Wellbeing and Promoting Positive Emotion)

The temptation to expect less from young people after frightening events is common. Although their capacity for concentration may be affected it can be re-developed through good teaching strategies, support and time. Make all expectations clear, break tasks down to subsets and provide supportive and clear feedback during and after each subtask to check that the student is on task and has understood the task correctly. Scaffold the task and the skills required to achieve learning. Acknowledge successes and provide explicit feedback on what has been achieved.

- **Restore a sense of control and personal efficacy**

- (Maintaining Wellbeing and Promoting Positive Emotion)

Provide a place to calm down such as a 'peaceful corner' or a quiet reflective place in school where young people can take time out in a quiet place to regain composure and reduce stimulation. Zoning out with music, spending time in libraries, beanbag areas for chilling out with creative arts or a game of basketball are all strategies that students have found useful. Talk to students about how they can support their own sense of well-being by building positive actions into their daily life such as

'Keeping active, connecting with others, taking notice, giving and keeping learning.'⁶

⁶ Five Ways to Wellbeing New economics foundation. Centre for Well-being. 2008

- **Build strengths and capacity**
(Maintaining Wellbeing and Promoting Positive Emotions)

Every child and young person has strengths, aspirations, hopes and dreams. Use solution focused conversations to find out about these. (Asking with interest, *'what are you good at? And what else?'* and if possible deepening the conversation *'When you are at your best what are you pleased and proud to notice about yourself? What does this tell you about what you might be capable of?'*). Promote opportunities for the child or young person to experience success and help them to work out ways they can put these skills to use in other areas of their learning and life. Sometimes they will need help to make the connections and generalise the skills.

Values in Action Character Strengths



12

Social scientists tell us that everyone possesses all 24 of the above character strengths in different degrees, and these are universal across cultures and nations. Ask young people to identify their top 5 strengths (and do the same for yourself!). Discuss other strengths you and they have noticed and build in opportunities to remind them of these. Planning actions and activities to help children and young people to be their best helps to bring a sense of personal control and achievement to the day-to-day life.

- **Be hopeful and optimistic**

(Maintaining Wellbeing and Promoting Positive Emotions; Managing Difficult Feelings)

Some young people may experience a loss of trust in the world after something as frightening and unpredictable as a global pandemic; they may believe that because a terrifying thing has happened, they can no longer dare to hope that life can be happy and safe again. Modelling optimism and encouraging them to see the strengths and coping skills they have and encouraging them to notice acts of courage and kindness will help develop a sense of personal efficacy and future.



It is not uncommon for students to have a less optimistic view of the future after events such as these. Reminding them of their strengths, hopes and aspirations and providing opportunities for them to achieve and experience success will help them to take a positive view of their lives. Remember optimism can be taught and that it is contagious.

¹² *Values in Action Character Strengths*

- **Engagement, social connection and trusting relationships that are built on respect and positive regard**
(Staying Connected)

Communities and societies provide resources which are key to facilitating resilience - being part of a social group is protective and can help people overcome adverse events. However, after events that are frightening such as a global pandemic and social distancing, communities and school communities can change. School provides a community of care for children and young people and it is through the relationships that they have with friends and teachers that they can begin to recover from and make sense of the events.

Some children and young people (and staff) come to school for normality. They may not want to have to talk or think about what's happened as a result of the pandemic, but would rather have as normal as possible a school day of learning and play. Being sad and dealing with the emotions and consequences takes a lot of energy and head space. Not talking about what happened doesn't mean that the child or young person isn't thinking about it or is being unusually avoidant. It's important to take our cues from the child or young person and for them to know there is no one right reaction. It's okay to ask them quietly what their preference is.



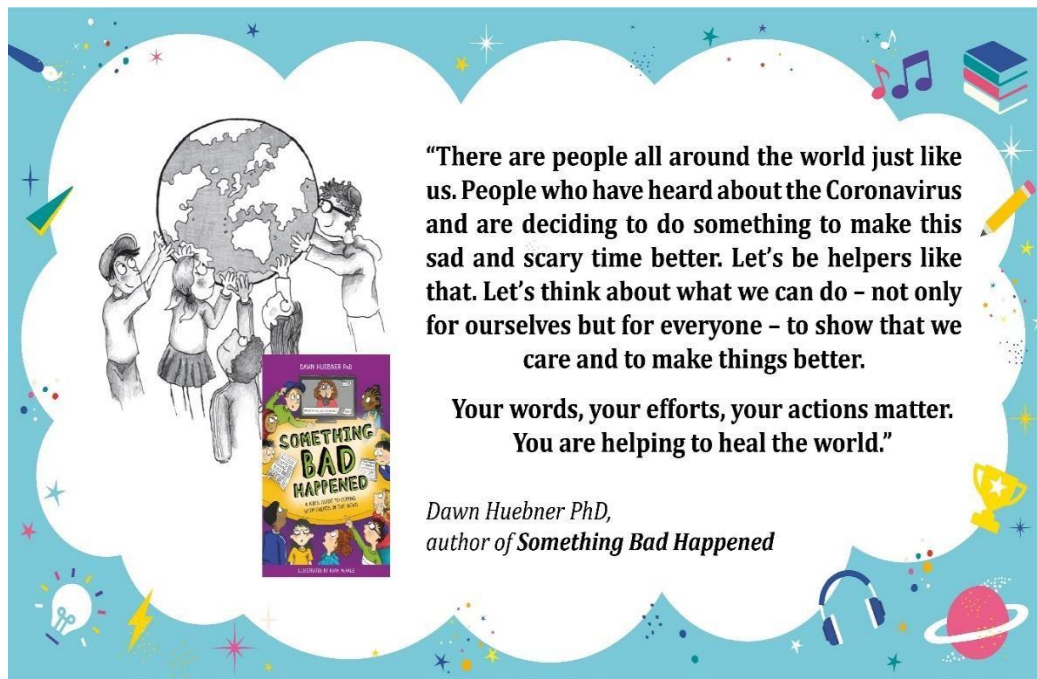
For many young people, their teachers and supportive adults in school are adults in whom they can confide and ask difficult questions. Many young people express the view that they don't want to upset their parents or further stress them by asking questions or saying that they are struggling. This is when a trusted relationship with an adult at school will allow the young person to gain the help and support they need.

6. Activities promoting connectedness and resilience

During disasters and emergencies, alongside the stories of loss and grief, we also hear extraordinary stories of how different individuals, families and communities come together and act with kindness, courage and initiative. We can encourage children and young people to share their stories about ways in which their community helped each other. For example, neighbourhood delivery networks springing up to provide medicines or shopping to people who couldn't get out. We can reflect on what might have changed possibly for the better or what has been brought into sharper focus for us. For example, stories about the impact on the climate such as reduced industrial activity, road traffic and expanded bike lanes leading to air pollution plummeting and birdsong returning to neighbourhoods.

Many events plant seeds, imperceptible at the time, that bear fruit long afterward.⁷

Reading Well - Books on Prescription! A survey by the Reading Agency (April 2020) indicated that 34% of people in London are reading more during lockdown. **Reading Well for young people** recommends expert endorsed books about mental health, providing 13 to 18 year olds with advice and information about issues like anxiety, stress and OCD, and difficult experiences like bullying and exams. <https://reading-well.org.uk/books/books-on-prescription/young-people-mental-health>



⁷ A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster Rebecca Solnit 2009

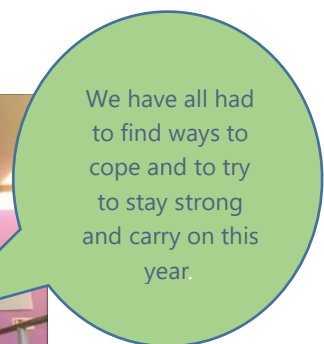
Depending on the age of the children and young people, activities listed below may be helpful in promoting connectedness and resilience. Teachers should work together with colleagues to agree which of the activities would be most relevant and appropriate for their class. Be aware of individuals who may not want to take part and provide alternative meaningful activities for those who do not want to participate without them feeling 'different' or less relevant in any way. For older children and young people team projects can develop a sense of shared experience and togetherness. Activities can focus on the positive gains made.

Topics that can be used in discussions, digital media and projects may include:

- **The role of the individual, family and community.** Thinking about how different communities came together through this time. For example, #Viralkindness, COVID-19 Mutual Aid UK, Community Choirs, Clap for Carers, 5k for Heroes.
- **Reflecting on what might have changed for the better.** For example, impact on the climate, opportunities to pursue a new interest, appreciation of loved ones.
- **Local heroes** – family and friends who are carers or keyworkers, work for the NHS, leaders in the local community etc

Strategies and approaches that have really helped when things have felt tough, this could include mindfulness for example, or sharing stories about social activities that stand out for them. See *Appendix 2 for Mindfulness Based Activities*.

- Sharing the creative ways that children, young people and families have expressed themselves over the lockdown period - by drawing, painting, writing, or through music, drama, dance, TikTok challenges etc.
- **Cook & Talk activities** Groups of 8 children with 2 adults come together to make a fruit salad. The table leader gives step by step cooking instructions and at each step the leader reads out a scripted question for the pairs or groups to discuss. For example, '*It's important to try to find times to relax and have fun even when scary or sad things have happened. Talk about a time when you were able to relax and have fun.*' See Appendix 4 for a Cook &



Talk Fruit Salad activity sheet.

- **Writing to Heal (Pennebaker).** Research suggests that expressive writing can be a route to healing. Writing to Heal is an activity that involves people writing down deepest feelings about an emotional upheaval in their life for 15 to 20 minutes a day for four consecutive days. *See Appendix 1 for a Writing to Heal activity handout.*
- **Ways to Wellbeing activities.** Plan curriculum activities throughout the day/week linked to the 5 ways to wellbeing: [Connect](#), [Take Notice](#), [Keep Learning](#), [Keep Active](#) and [Give](#).



- **THUNKS on DEATH (Winston's Wish).** Thunks are beguilingly simple questions developed by Winston's Wish with Independent Thinking 'that make your brain go ouch'. This set was designed to open up group discussion about grief, death and bereavement. *See Appendix 5 for Thunks activity.*
- **WORDLES** can be helpful in allowing young people to explore the feelings and thoughts they are experiencing - using online tools, children can generate word clouds from the text that they input. The Wordle gives more prominence to words that appear more frequently in the inputted text.



Guidelines for supporting students during these activities:

- Acknowledge losses, fears and other emotions when present.
- Provide reassurance that the thoughts, feelings and reactions are a normal part of recovering from the losses associated with the pandemic, even though they may be upsetting, and that they will lessen in intensity over time.
- Help children and young people to feel safe in their contributions.
- Celebrate strengths and progress.
- Have supportive and trusted adults available to help in case children and young people become overwhelmed by their feelings and reactions.
- Remind children and young people of their coping strategies through your genuine observations and knowledge of them.
- Focusing any discussions around group collaborative, practical activities or tasks can be helpful with additional adults to support.
- Remember that sometimes when students are finding something emotionally difficult, the first signs might be through changes in their behaviour. This can be especially true for students with existing needs or those that were most affected and are finding it difficult to communicate how they are feeling.



Appendix 1: Writing to Heal⁸

Dr. Pennebaker's Basic Writing Assignment

Over the next four days, write about your deepest emotions and thoughts about the emotional upheaval that has been influencing your life the most. In your writing, really let go and explore the event and how it has affected you. You might tie this experience to your childhood, your relationship with your parents, people you have loved or love now, or even your career. Write continuously for 20 minutes.

Tips for Writing to Heal

- Find a time and place where you won't be disturbed
- Write continuously for at least 20 minutes
- Don't worry about spelling or grammar
- Write only for yourself
- Write about something extremely personal and important for you
- Deal only with events or situations you can handle now

"People who engage in expressive writing report feeling happier and less negative than before writing. Similarly, reports of depressive symptoms, rumination, and general anxiety tend to drop in the weeks and months after writing about emotional upheavals."

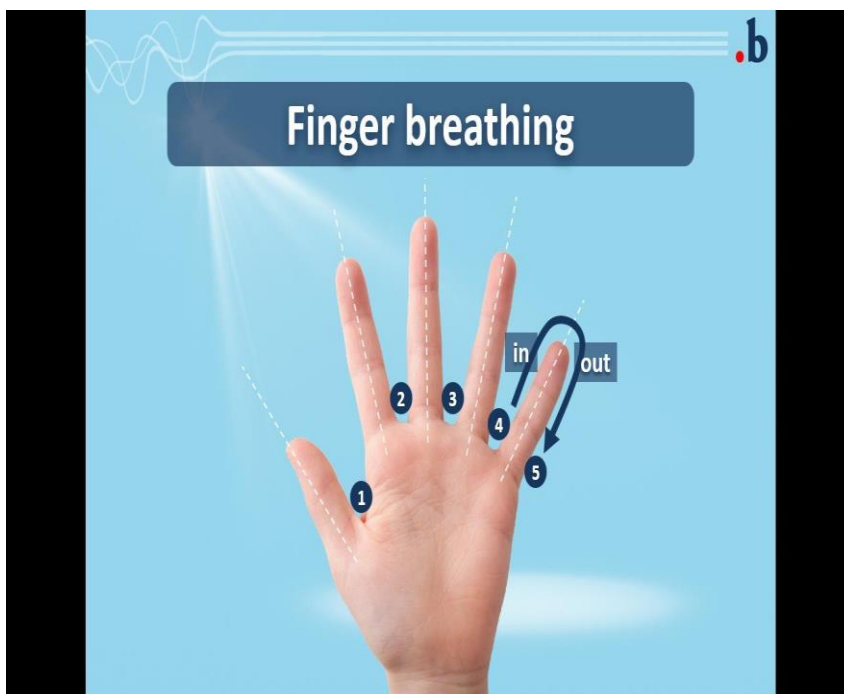
From "Writing to Heal"
by James W. Pennebaker

⁸ Reference Vive Griffith Children and War Foundation Childrenandwar.org.uk

Appendix 2: Mindfulness Based Activities⁹

i. Finger Breathing

- 1) Rest your hands on your lap or a table and tune into the feeling of your breathing.
 - 2) Feel the in and out movements of your breath wherever you notice it in your body.
 - 3) Secondly hold one hand up to your face and trace with a finger from the other hand up and down the fingers.
 - 4) Trace the breath flow with your finger, pausing at the tip of your finger at the end of the in-breath and at the bottom of your finger at the end of the out-breath.
 - 5) Do this along the other fingers on your hand, breathing in and out as your trace up and down your finger.
- If your mind wanders, that's ok, just begin again whenever you need to at the next in-breath or out-breath you notice.



ii. Stop and breathe

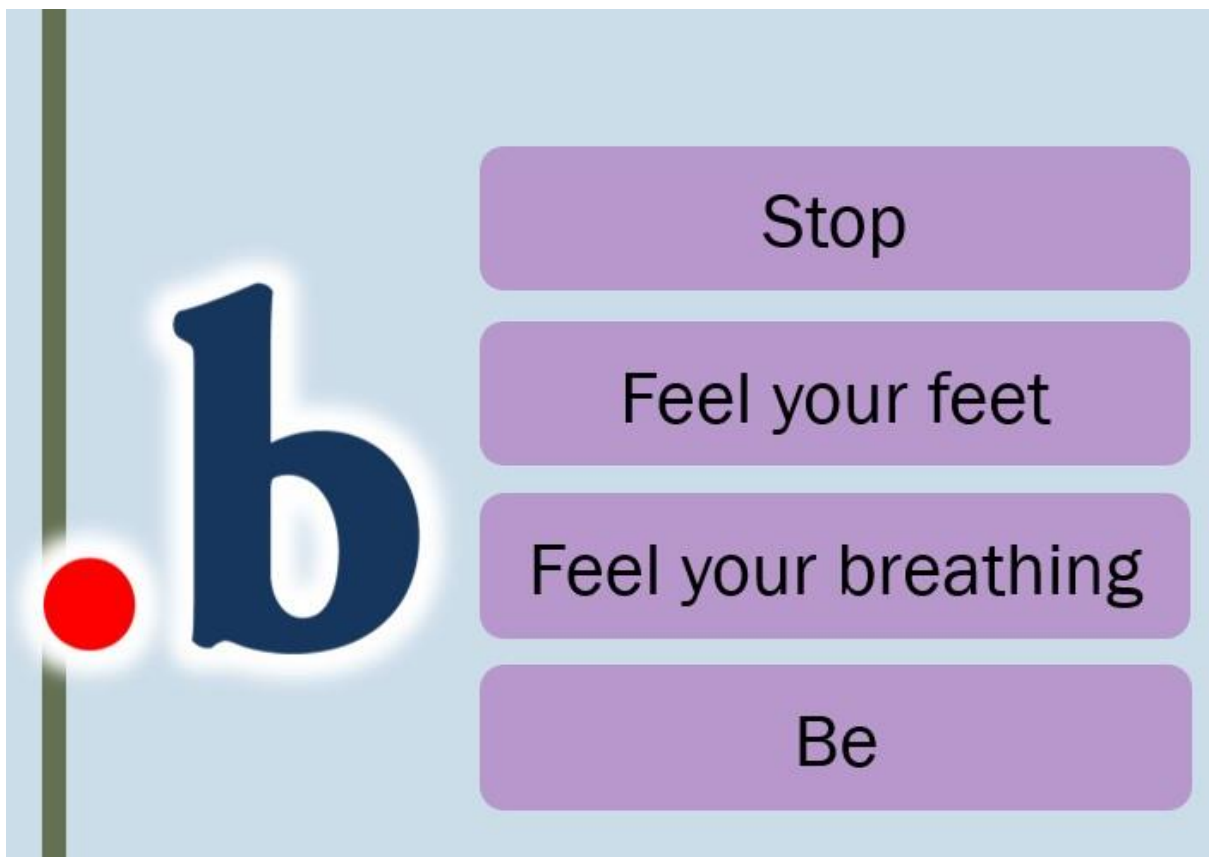
During the day, there usually isn't time to do a lengthy meditation exercise. Instead, it is possible to do a brief .b to freshen your awareness, change mental

⁹ Based on Mindfulness in School Project .b and Paws.b materials

gear, and wake up to exactly what's going on in the moment. Doing a .b is a quick way to help your brain change mode – from being busy and thinking and doing to sensing / and being. The basics of mindfulness are summed up in this practice. Shifting mode, or changing the gear of the mind is the “Core Skill” of mindfulness.

Doing a “.b” is the way to achieve this. .b is a portable 4-step exercise which goes like this:

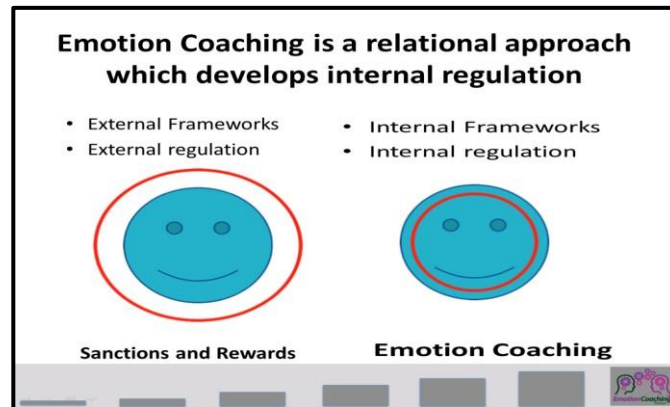
1. STOP whatever you're doing, maybe noticing you've been in autopilot.
2. FEEL YOUR FEET on the ground. Let this ground/anchor you.
3. FEEL THE SENSATIONS OF BREATHING as it moves through your body.
4. Practise BEING – relaxing into the present moment, BEING HERE NOW! Very easy one to do with students- in the moment- if they are especially anxious or upset. Anchoring and calming.



Appendix 3: Emotion Coaching

Emotion coaching builds a power base that is an emotional bond – this creates a safe haven, a place of trust, a place of respect, a place of acceptance, a sense of self. This in turn leads to children and young people giving back respect and acceptance of boundaries’ (Rose & Gus, 2017).¹⁰

Emotion Coaching tools can be a quick and easy way to support students in developing emotional regulation strategies, where they begin to make explicit links between their thoughts and feelings and how they are behaving. This approach is based on key attachment concepts, such as the importance of **connection**.



The following principles are central to Emotion Coaching:¹¹

- All emotions are natural and normal, and not always a matter of choice
- Behaviour is a form of communication
- Emotional ‘first aid’ (calming, soothing) is needed first: ‘connect before re-direct’ (Siegel, 2013), ‘Rapport before reason’ (Riley, 2009)
- Children cannot successfully self-regulate their emotions unless they have experienced and internalised co-regulation i.e. an adult tuning in/empathising with their emotional state and thus ‘containing’ - sharing, supporting and carrying- their emotional state.

What Emotion Coaching means in practice

(how co-regulation works)

Step 1: **Recognising, empathising, soothing to calm** (‘I understand how you feel, you’re not alone’)

Step 2: **Validating the feelings and labelling** (‘This is what is happening, this is what you’re feeling’)

Step 3 (if needed): **Setting limits on behaviour** (‘We can’t always get what we want’)

Step 4: **Problem-solving with the child/young person** (‘We can sort this out’)

¹⁰ From *Developing an Attachment Aware Behaviour Regulation Policy: Guidance for Brighton & Hove Schools*

¹¹ *Developing an Attachment Aware Behaviour Regulation Policy: Guidance for Brighton & Hove Schools*

Appendix 4: Cook & Talk - Fruit Salad Activity¹²



This recipe is vegan and does not contain any of the 14 major allergens Ingredients

Total ingredients needed (for 8)	Ingredients per pair
4 small cups of fresh strawberries	1 small cup of fresh strawberries
4 small cups of green seedless grapes	1 small cup of green seedless grapes
4 firm bananas	1 firm banana
1 cantaloupe melon	2 slices of cantaloupe melon
4 Granny Smith apples	1 Granny Smith apple
4 kiwi fruit	1 kiwi fruit
Fresh Orange juice	1 small cup of orange juice

Preparation: Wipe down the table. Work out how many pairs you have at the table (max 4 pairs) and work out how best to position the following utensils per pair. There should be one adult leader per group.

Divide the ingredients between pairs.

Cut the melon into slices and give 2 to each pair.

1 large bowl needed for food waste.

You will need (per pair)

1 chopping board, 1 sharp knife, 1 peeler, 2 mixing bowls, 1 tablespoon.

1 large bowl for food waste, Bowls to serve, spoons to eat with.

¹² Adapted by Jane Roller Senior Educational Psychologist @Bi-Borough EPCS with thanks to Localwelcome.org

Introductory script

Today we're going to learn how to make some salads in pairs at our tables, and at the same time we're going to answer some questions about ways you/we have been coping and staying strong. It's important that we remind ourselves of the courage we have shown and the skills and strengths we have learned this year. We're going to talk to each other about what we have done and what has helped us to do that while we make our salads.

Ask if there are any questions and don't forget to WASH HANDS before starting.

Steps:	Leader script and Questions for pairs:
1. Cut the top off the strawberries and cut in half. Add to bowl.	Optional script: We all find different ways of coping during difficult times. Q: Tell your partner/ the group one way that you have tried to 'stay strong'.
2. Cut the grapes in half. Add to bowl.	Optional script: We all have different challenges to overcome. Q: Tell your partner/ the group one of the challenges you have overcome and what has helped.
3. Peel and slice the banana into small pieces. Add to bowl.	Optional script: It's important to try to find times to relax and have fun even when scary or sad things have happened. Q: Tell your partner/ the group about a time when you were able to relax and have fun.
4. Cut the melon slices into small pieces. Add to bowl.	Optional script: Sometimes there are opportunities to learn new things during times of crisis. Q: What strengths or new skills have you developed?
5. Peel and core the apple and cut into small pieces.	Optional script: When scary or sad things happen, the smallest act of kindness can have enormous power. Q: What kindnesses have you noticed and appreciated?
6. Peel and slice the kiwi fruit.	Optional script: Connecting with other people can help us stay strong. Q: What have other people done to help you?
7. Combine the fruit. Pour over the orange juice and toss to coat. Enjoy!	Optional script: Learning new things makes us more confident as well as being fun. Q: What new things would you like to learn or try next year?

Appendix 5: THUNKS on Death

THUNKS ON DEATH

Introduction

Thunks™ are 'beguilingly simple-looking questions' that make your brain go ouch. They grew out of educator and writer Ian Gilbert's work on Philosophy for Children and have proved incredibly popular with teachers around the world as a quick and easy tool for getting children and young people's brains to hurt. This particular set, a collaboration between Winston's Wish and Independent Thinking, is specifically designed to open up thinking and discussion around the topics of death, grief and bereavement.

Instructions

The only Golden Rule when it comes to Thunks is that there are no 'right' answers. Their purpose is to encourage thought, debate, argument and philosophical reflection as well as practising speaking and listening skills. From working on a single Thunk as an entire class to having one each, one between two or working in smaller 'communities of enquiry', from using them as lessons starters to building whole lessons around a single Thunk, teachers have used them in many, many ways with children of all ages and academic backgrounds. Good luck!



Winston's Wish is a Registered Charity (England and Wales) 1061359, (Scotland) SC041140 | 0308

Is being alive a choice?



**If every time you laughed, it
knocked a minute off your
life, would you stop laughing?**

**Is it better to die suddenly
than be given a month to
live?**



Is it ever cruel to save a life?

**Can you choose not to be
sad?**



**Do you love a family member
less after they've died?**

**Can you love someone you
can't see?**

independent
thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

**Is it really better to have
loved and lost than not have
loved at all?**

independent
thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

**Do you still own the things
you've lost forever?**

independent
thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

Can you choose to be happy?

independent
thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

**Is quantity more important
than quality when it comes to
your life?**

independent
thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

Are funerals always sad?

independent
thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

**Are you a different person
once both your parents die?**

independent
thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

**Is it an act of love to let
someone you love die
before you?**

independent
thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

**If you put the brain of someone
who has died into a robot, have you
brought that person back to life?**

independent
thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

Is a funeral a party?

independent
thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

**Should your online profile be
deleted as soon as you die?**

independent
thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

**If someone is being kept
alive, are they living?**

independent
thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

Should we be made to live longer if we can?

independent thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

independent thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

Can you love someone who's not around?

independent thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

independent thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

Is anything worth dying for?

independent thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

independent thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

If you dream of someone who has died, are you dreaming of their ghost?

independent thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

independent thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

If you could live forever, would you want to?

independent thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

independent thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

Is losing a loved one harder the older they are?

independent thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

independent thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

Should you live each life as if it were your last?

independent thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

Do all your family members have to be alive to be part of your family?

independent thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

Does grief hurt?

independent thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

Does a child know what death is?

independent thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

Can death ever be happy?

independent thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

Do you die when the last person who remembers you dies?

independent thinking 

WINSTON'S
WISH WW

Appendix 6: Additional Resources

1. **DECP Guidance: Back to school - using psychological perspectives to support re-engagement and recovery**
2. **Training to Support Staff Through the COVID 19 Crisis. Bringing safety and hope:**
<https://localofferwirral.org/listing/wirral-educational-psychology-team/>
3. **MindHK: Managing our own mental health. Found at:**
<https://www.mind.org.hk/coronavirusoutbreakmentalhealthtips/>
4. **Advice for young people who are feeling anxious about Coronavirus (Young Minds):**
<https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/what-to-do-if-you-re-anxious-about-coronavirus>
- 5.
6. **WINSTON'S WISH Coronavirus related Bereavement materials for schools: How schools can support children and young people; How to tell a child or young person that someone has died from coronavirus; How to say goodbye when a funeral isn't possible**
<https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus-schools-support-children-young-people/>
7. **GRIEF ENCOUNTER - Support for bereaved children and their families:**
<https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/> and **CRUSE:** <https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/coronavirusdealing-bereavement-and-grief>
8. **TEEN BREATHE – monthly magazine available from newsagents and supermarkets.**
9. **WHEN SOMETHING TERRIBLE HAPPENS. Marge Heegaard Woodland Press. For younger children up to 11 years.**

These materials were developed and shared by the Bi-Borough Educational Psychology Consultation Service (covering the London Boroughs of Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea, 2020). We have updated them and added to the original document. We hope you find it useful in welcoming back your students.