

Understanding thoughts and feelings



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Introduction

This resource is designed to support self-regulation and help you understand more about the connection between thoughts, feelings and behaviours. You can use this as a personal resource, as a resource for your older child or teenager or in addition to our 'Cards to Help You Connect' resources for children, families, therapists and schools.

We recommend that you use this resource when you have time and space to focus and think. Forty-five to an hour should be ample time to get started. Using this resource, you, or your older child can begin to create and develop personalised strategies to support self-regulation and return to feeling safe.

If this resource is intended for use by older children or teenagers, we advise that you do this together with them or at the same time. Not only will this be helpful in terms of guidance, but it will also provide opportunity to connect and share your findings with one another.

It is important to note that this resource is not intended as a substitute for professional support. If you are affected by any of the content within this workbook, you should seek support from your GP or an accredited health professional.

For more information about Beacon Family Services, including additional resources and support and guidance on our blog, head to our website: beaconservices.org.uk.



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Understanding ourselves

At different points throughout the day, we can all move from feeling safe, to feeling like we're struggling or even drowning. The events of the day, how we respond to others and our own thoughts and feelings all contribute to our overall state. Often, our bodies respond to how we are feeling before our brains.

When we feel threatened, either physically or emotionally, the body's natural response is to fight or flee. However, these instinctual, primitive, biological responses aren't always appropriate in our modern, day-to-day lives. Rarely does fighting or running away provide an adequate solution, so we must create a personal toolkit of strategies which help us find our way back to safety.

First, before coming up with a list of solutions that work for us, we must learn to identify when there is a problem. This is not as easy as it sounds. Since childhood, many of us will have learned to ignore, suppress or internalise our thoughts and feelings. While we may have been able to trick our minds, our bodies tell a different story. To really understand ourselves, we must first look to our bodies.



What can our bodies tell us?

Start by tuning in to your body. Take 60 seconds to do this now.

Sitting or lying down comfortably, briefly close your eyes and take a deep breath in. Notice where your shoulders are sitting. Do they feel tight or loose? What about the rest of your body? Starting with the top of your head pay attention to how each part of your body feels as you move your awareness down your body to your toes.

Activity

Note the words or symptoms from the list to the right, or add your own words or symptoms which describe how your body feels physically.

- My muscles feel tight.
- I feel relaxed and calm.
- My body feels heavy.
- I feel sweaty or clammy.
- My body feels full of unspent energy.
- I'm finding it difficult to concentrate.
- My body feels achy.
- I feel uncomfortable.
- I feel light.
- My breathing is quick.
- My heart rate is slow and even.
- I am breathing quickly.
- I feel like I need the loo.
- I feel like my body is filled with unspent energy.

Add your own words or symptoms



Connecting feelings and thoughts

Now that we've taken some time to think about how our bodies are feeling, let's explore our thoughts.

Activity

Using the letters from your name, or the letters of the alphabet, write out words or phrases to describe how you are feeling. For example, if your name is Charlotte, it may look something like this:

Cranky

Hungry

Altogether fed up

Rag

Lots of guilt

Overworked

Tense

Tired

Energy levels low

Use this space to write your own words

Connecting feelings and thoughts

You may have noticed that taking slow, deep breaths helped you feel relaxed and in a safe space. This is because when we are safe, our breathing is well-paced, slow and deep. Breathing in this way sends signals to the brain that all is well.

Activity

Do you notice anything about the way your body is feeling and the thoughts you are having? Write down any ideas you having about the connection between your thoughts and how you are feeling.

Use this space to write your own words



Struggling and Drowning





Struggling

I'm focused on doing what I need to do to survive or get away from the threat.

If you are struggling, you may be feeling

- ◆ Scared
- ◆ Angry
- ◆ Uncomfortable

? What other words might you use?

Thoughts you may be having

- ◆ No one understands me
- ◆ I don't want to be here
- ◆ I need to shout / bite / kick / punch

? Any other thoughts you would add here?

Things that may be happening with your body

- ◆ Tense muscles
- ◆ Fast breathing and heart rate
- ◆ Unable to process what I hear

? Have you noticed anything else?

Things you can do to help yourself

- 1 Find a safe person or a safe place
- 2 Get moving
- 3 Take deep breaths

Things other people can do to help you

- 1 Speak to me in a soft tone, smile
- 2 Don't expect me to fully hear you or make eye contact
- 3 Organise things (or help me organise things) so they are predictable and safe



With thanks to Dr. Stephen Porges and Deb Dina for their work in this field.

Every second of every day our brains are processing millions of pieces of information to keep us safe. This includes reading people's facial expressions, the tone of their voice and their body movements, as well as measuring our responses to people, places and situations. A real or perceived threat could be an actual physical threat, or it could be an impending deadline, an upcoming presentation, debt, relationship issues, loss of a loved one, or even supporting a child who may be struggling themselves. What we interpret as threatening is unique to each person.

Have you ever been somewhere that made you feel uncomfortable or frightened for no apparent reason? Perhaps it was a feeling you got from someone you met or there was something about where you were that didn't feel right? Others may not pick up on it and you may not be able to put your finger on why you felt that way, but you knew that something about that person or that place wasn't safe.





If our brains register a threat, messages are then communicated throughout our bodies via our central nervous system. It is our nervous system which tells our body how to react. If the primitive part of our brain senses danger or a threat, the message given to our body is to prepare to fight or prepare to flee. In this Struggling state, adrenaline is pumped through our body to enable us to respond in any way necessary to deal with, escape or avoid the threat.

When we are Struggling, we may feel sweaty, tense or anxious. We may be quick to anger and impatient. Our hearts may be beating quickly and we may find it difficult to concentrate on anything other than the thing we are registering as threatening. We may also find it difficult to hear what others are saying to us. It can feel as though the world, and everyone in it, is against us. We like to imagine this state as being 'on the rocks' or in a small boat in stormy seas. When we are in this state we are often scared, worried or uncomfortable. We need to find a way to return to feeling Safe.

We feel like we are Drowning when we are no longer able to fight or when we feel unable to flee. We have given up. We see this in animals when they 'play dead' after attempts at fighting or fleeing have failed. When we are Drowning we may feel despondent, disconnected, disinterested and distant. In this state we are not really connected to our thoughts and feelings and it may feel as though you are just 'going through the motions'. We imagine this state like



Safe



Safe

I'm ready to connect ♦ I'm ready to play ♦ I'm ready to learn

If you are safe, you may be feeling

- ♦ Happy
- ♦ Confident
- ♦ Calm

? What other words might you use?

You are able to

- ♦ Talk to other people about how I'm feeling
- ♦ Laugh with other people
- ♦ I can organise myself and solve problems

? Anything else?

Thoughts you may be having

- ♦ I feel great
- ♦ I want to spend time with other people
- ♦ I am interested in the world and creating new things is exciting

? Any other thoughts you would add here?

Things that may be happening with your body

- ♦ Relaxed muscles
- ♦ Easy breathing
- ♦ Heart rate is normal

? Have you noticed anything else?

Things you can do to keep yourself here

- 1 Do nice things with other people
- 2 Listen to music, play music, draw or read
- 3 Make plans or learn something new

Things other people can do to keep you here

- 1 Help me spend time with people I like and trust
- 2 Teach me new things
- 3 Play games, laugh and have fun with me

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Throughout the day we all move through the various states depending on what happens during the day and how we have learnt to react to it. How we react to real or perceived danger is first learned when we are children. Children who have had the experience of a trusting adult who is able to help return them to a safe state will have learned, through co-regulation, how

to respond in ways that don't involve fighting or fleeing. The experience of being Safe helps children learn that not everything or everyone poses a threat. It also helps them learn that it is possible to move out of Struggling or Drowning.



As we get older, we learn that there are a lot of things we can do to help ourselves to feel safe. Each person has their own strategies and practices draw on our positive experiences of safety. First, however, we need to think about what safe looks like for us.

Activity

Imagine a time when you felt content, comfortable and confident. Consider where you were? Who was with you? How did you feel physically and emotionally? What made you feel this way?

Draw pictures, attach a photograph or jot down words, phrases, names or paragraphs below to capture it.

This is what safe looks like for me.

When we are feeling Safe we are largely able to be optimistic about ourselves, the world and others in it. We are interested in spending time with others and are able to give of ourselves and our time. Joy and laughter come easily and we are open to new experiences and new learning. We are actively taking care of ourselves and investing in ourselves. We are able to problem-solve, think about and plan for things in the future. Though the situation, the location and the people present may change, this is the state you are constantly looking to return to.

Activity

Now you know what Safe looks like for you, think about what you need to feel safe.



Next, let's think about what you enjoy doing. If given a choice, how would you prefer to spend your time?



Activity

List the things you enjoy. Include an idea of how long each of those activities take.



Activities which support self-regulation

Self-regulation is about supporting your nervous system. There are many ways you can do this. Some well documented strategies include:

Breathing exercises

There are many examples of techniques you can use to slow down and regulate your breathing. You can breath through a straw, or spend a minute doing square breathing which involves breathing in for 4 seconds, holding your breath for 4 seconds, breathing out for 4 seconds and holding your breath again for 4 seconds before repeating.

Physical exercise

This could be as little as going for a walk or 10 minutes of yoga. Anything that gets your heart rate up and gets your muscles moving is good. If you do this outside and in nature it can help you relax and regulate your nervous system further according to a study conducted by researchers at Brighton and Sussex Medical School in 2017. If you can't get outside, listening to sounds of nature or looking at a picture of nature works well too.

Movement

This may seem like the same thing as physical exercise, but this is actually just moving your body. Rocking or even just moving yourself to look out of a window may be all you can manage at a time when you feel like you're drowning. Any movement at all can help. Stretch out your arms, fiddle with a piece of paper or a fiddle toy. If you are unable to move, imagine yourself moving or create a labyrinth picture either on paper or in your mind.

Be aware of your body

Like your body scan, take a few moments to consider how your body feels. Are you warm or cold? Where can you feel that? What does it feel like? You could take off your shoes and focus on how your feet feel when they are touching the ground or, if you are sitting down, think about which parts of your body are touching the chair. Interestingly, lowering the tone of your voice can support your nervous system and help to create a sense of safety.

Caring for yourself and your body

Self-care helps us feel better. Take some time to do something that is good for you. Make yourself a cup of tea, buy yourself flowers, make yourself something nutritious, run a bath - essentially, do something good for yourself. Meeting your own needs helps you remind you of your own value.

Mediation

This doesn't have to involve chanting or visualising anything in particular. Simply taking a few moments to empty our minds, watch the wind move through the trees or allowing ourselves to get lost in a thousand yard stare can really help to calm our nervous system and move us towards feeling safe.

Be creative

Studies have shown that expressing yourself through creative pursuits such as writing, art, music or dance can help to vent negative thoughts or emotions, improve our ability to problem-solve and improve resilience and resistance to stress.

Laughing

According to the Mayo Clinic, laughing helps increase your oxygen intake and "stimulates your heart, lungs and muscles, and increases the endorphins that are released by your brain". Longterm benefits of laughter can include pain relief and improving your immune system as "positive thoughts can release neuropeptides that help fight stress". Watch a funny film, read something funny, look up jokes on the internet, or tell a joke.


Self-nurture

Create a space just for you. Light a candle, tuck yourself up in a cosy den, snuggle up in a blanket, play your favourite songs, put a warm flannel on your face, or buy and use nice smelling hand soap. Doing little things that provide comfort can make a big difference in helping your body to feel safe.



Personal regulation strategies


Create a series of time-stamped resources to help you return to feeling Safe.




Things I can do in 5 mins or less.



Things I can do in 15 mins or less.



Things I can do in 30 mins or less.



Things I can do with a little more time.

When you find what works for you, practice savouring moments when you feel safe. You may need to build up from a few seconds of noticing and then remembering. You may find that keeping a journal can help you notice the strategies you are developing to help you feel safe. →

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