

Section 2 – Supporting young people to manage difficult feelings

This document will support you to deliver the content in Section 2 of the Jigsaw toolkit, Managing Difficult Feelings. With the return to school, young people may be experiencing a range of feelings, some of which may be difficult for them to understand and manage. Creating the space in lesson time to support conversations around this, which help young people to name how they are feeling and develop some practical strategies to manage these, can be a good way to help promote and support their mental health and wellbeing.

Why naming our feelings is an important step in minding our mental health

The first step in taking care of our feelings is to be able to identify and name them. Sometimes young people don't have the language to name and discuss how they are feeling. It can, therefore, be helpful to teach young people how to identify what it is they are feeling and differentiate between how they are feeling emotionally and how they are feeling physically.

When a young person is able to name their feelings, they will then be better able to identify when they are experiencing feelings that require some extra attention or support. This, in turn, will help their mental health. Mood boards and body mapping are two of the suggested

activities that can assist you in supporting young people in naming their feelings.

How young people experience feelings

Young people (like all individuals) experience feelings as emotions but also as physical sensations in their body. For example, anxiety has strong physiological components as well as emotional components.

Sometimes young people are more used to, and comfortable with, identifying the difficulty they are experiencing as a physical problem. For example, young people may sometimes miss school because of stomach aches or headaches which may be linked to emotional causes. Of course, it is important to rule out any physical cause, but often the physical sensation experienced is coming from an emotional stressor.

It can, therefore, be helpful to consider feelings as two sides of one coin; one being emotion, and the other being physical, and to consider these together and not in isolation. It can also be helpful to differentiate between feelings and thoughts, for example, often young people will say something like "I feel stupid". It can be helpful to assist a young person to separate that this may be their thought or opinion rather than an emotion.

A simple rule of thumb is that emotions can often be described in one word e.g. sad, happy, angry. To help young people

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better understand the difference between emotional feelings, physical sensations and thoughts, you can take the lead on an exercise, 'The anatomy of a feeling' worksheet. This aims to support young people to think about why we have feelings and to help them to break their feelings down into thoughts and physical sensations.

To practice this exercise, you ask the young people to label the worksheet as they relate to different feelings, both pleasant and unpleasant, for example, anger, happiness, worry, calm. Following this, you can facilitate an appropriate discussion around this topic.

Another activity that can help create a conversation around feelings is to lead a 'walking debate'. This entails reading aloud some statements related to feelings ('You should always try to feel happy, there is no such thing as a bad feeling, feelings are temporary, trying to avoid your feelings is always bad') and asking the class to physically move in relation to their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement. Starting from there, you can encourage the class to give reasons for their decisions and facilitate a discussion around this which supports young people to think about the nature of feelings.

Strategies for supporting young people to manage feelings

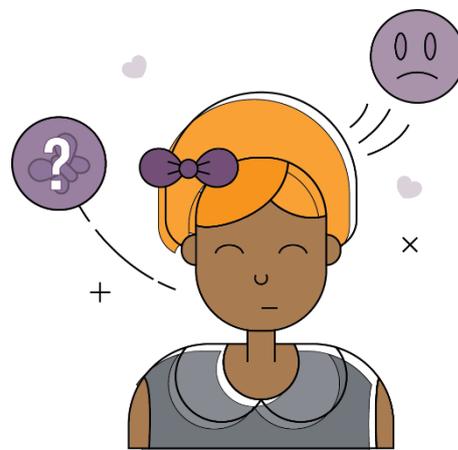
Assist the young person in becoming aware of, and naming, different feelings that they experience. If the emotion is well understood, it will become less feared (mood boards and body mapping are activities that work well for this).

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Assist the young person in differentiating between physical and emotional feelings, and their thoughts (the 'Anatomy of a feeling' worksheet can assist with this).

Normalise feelings: negative emotions are a part of life and it is OK to feel sad, angry, jealous etc. sometimes. The young person can also learn that difficult feelings can alert us to potential problems that need to be addressed, for example, if a young person is feeling angry, that could be a sign that they need to change up their routine or get some extra supports.

Use the ACE animation to demonstrate to young people the ACE technique – which is a way of supporting young people to manage feelings. 'A' refers to accept how you are feeling; 'C' refers to come back into your body and 'E' refers to engage fully with what you are doing. You will be able to access the ACE animation on the Managing feelings section of the webpage on jigsaw.ie.



Support the young person to recognise any patterns in how they are

feeling. Any triggers (internal or external) may be maintaining feelings. Support the young person in making changes if required and if appropriate.

Encourage the young person to express their feelings – in words, through talking, writing, art, dance, music, exercise etc.

Assist the young person in learning how to sit with, and tolerate, emotional distress (using grounding, breathing exercises for example). You will find practical demonstrations of some of these techniques on the Managing feelings section of the webpage.

Use the download 'Top Tips for Managing Feelings' as a method to support young people to think about ways to manage feelings. Ask them to rate from 'Least helpful' for them to 'Most helpful' and start a discussion on this. There are blank spaces for young people to add in their own ideas, but if they don't identify these, you can also encourage the young person to try out activities to better manage difficult feelings, for example, exercise, relaxation, mindfulness and spending time with others.

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