



Student Wellbeing Hub

Expressing feelings

Module **1**
Years 7-8



Teaching resource for
students with autism

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Introduction

This resource is designed to support teachers of students with autism. It aims to help you as a teacher to understand some of the strengths and challenges that this diverse cohort of students brings to the topic. The core audience is teachers who work in mainstream schools rather than special schools.

The resource includes background information, links to resources designed for teacher use and resources that can be used with students.

This resource builds on activities in [Module 1 Year 5-6: Expressing feelings](#) where students learnt the skills to start identifying and recognising their own emotions and feelings. You may have students who would benefit from revisiting this material.

The activities in this module will support students to be confident in recognising and naming or describing their own emotions and feelings using both internal body cues (interoception) and external body cues such as skin temperature or noises emanating from their body.

You will find a set of activities related to the digestive system. This may come as a surprising inclusion. Interoception skills are required for a range of basic and more advanced functions such as knowing when to go to the toilet, being aware of becoming angry or upset and being able to manage your emotions proactively. Some students will have difficulty making sense of this information. It can be really hard for them to recognise when they are hungry, thirsty, too hot or too cold, or to know in advance that they are going to need to go to the toilet soon. The body and brain can get stressed if individuals do not recognise and respond helpfully to all these things. This focus can be linked to the Health and Physical Education and/or the Science curriculum.

Developing students' understandings of the signals that our bodies provide – whether it is about being hungry, needing to urinate or feeling angry or frustrated – and developing skills in managing feelings and emotions is the key focus of this module.

Background information

Note that there is a Glossary at the end of the module. At first, using some of the terms in the resource will seem ambitious, but it is helpful to students to understand the formal terms and what they mean in terms of how their body functions and, more importantly, how they can learn to regulate some of the zones of behaviour.

Australian curriculum

Achievement standard links:

- ✓ By the end of Year 8, students evaluate strategies and resources to manage changes and transitions and investigate their impact on identities.
- ✓ Students evaluate the impact on wellbeing of relationships and valuing diversity.
- ✓ They analyse factors that influence emotional responses.
- ✓ They investigate strategies and practices that enhance their own, others' and community health, safety and wellbeing.
- ✓ Students apply personal and social skills to establish and maintain respectful relationships and promote safety, fair play and inclusivity.
- ✓ They demonstrate skills to make informed decisions, and propose and implement actions that promote their own and others' health, safety and wellbeing.

Recognising emotions and feelings

The aim of this topic is to assist students to identify their feelings and emotions in response to internal body cues (interoception) and external body cues. A lot of background information about interoception and related concepts was provided in Module 1: Expressing Feelings for Years 5 and 6, so it may be valuable for you to read through part of that module if you are not feeling confident with these concepts.



For students who enjoy animation, it may be useful to watch the film [Inside out](#)¹ prior to starting this module, to revisit how emotions can impact some behaviours. The short video [Ravi's roar](#)² is an alternative resource if *Inside out* is not available. Note that if you are using *Ravi's roar*, the text will need to be read for non-readers.

Please be wary of labelling emotions in ways that are not biology based, for example, saying that 'silly' is an orange emotion. For students with autism this can create significant confusion. Instead, you can link emotions to their **autonomic nervous system** (ANS) (the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems) and link their readiness or availability to learn to the hand model of the brain.



Watch the short video [Big emotions and survival behaviour](#)³ to find out more about the ANS or refresh your understanding.

For example, if someone is being a little bit silly, it may be that their sympathetic nervous system (SNS) is slightly dominant and still available to learn. However, if they are feeling very silly they may be SNS highly dominant and stuck in the 'big emotions' as described in the hand model of the brain. Then they will not be available to learn, as the emotion is in control of the brain.

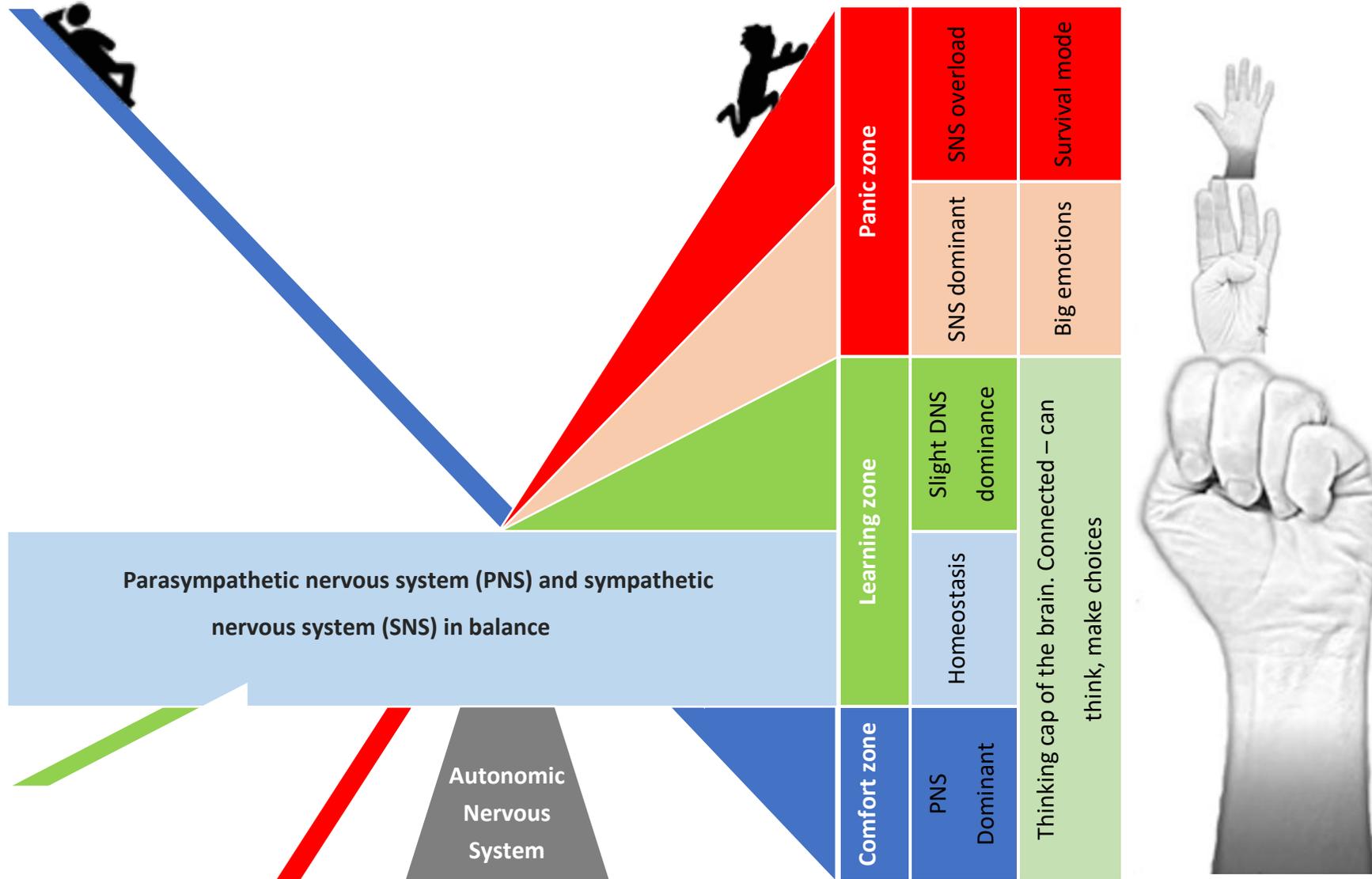
Big emotions can often slip into SNS overload/survival behaviour, as is clear when students suddenly get overwhelmed when they have been being extremely silly or over-exuberant for a while.

¹ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2096673/>

² <https://youtu.be/UhS-bpUIstk>

³ https://youtu.be/v0vFt-_OjaY

Teaching activity 1: Hand model of the brain



Teaching activity 2: Recognising emotions and feelings

This set of activities focuses on interoception and is designed to ensure students can recognise their own big emotions. Where possible, students will also learn to identify emotions and feelings as they are building up, before they develop into big emotions.

An interoceptive activity involves creating and noticing a change in some aspect of one's body such as the muscular system, breathing, temperature, pulse or touch. People with atypical interoception are not able to identify the physiological changes that signal mood changes or bodily self-regulation needs. Interoception activities teach us to connect with these.

Feeling muscles: hands

Begin by asking students to focus on their hands. Provide the following directions:

1. Sitting down, just rest your hands on the top of your thighs.
2. Now stretch your fingers as wide apart as possible and hold them tense like that for 30 seconds.
3. Rest them back again, now they should be relaxed.

This is activating the parasympathetic nervous system. During this time, name the movement and the part of the body involved.

Encourage students to identify a change in their body state (e.g. hot–cold, soft–hard, stretch–relax) and where they felt that change (in the fingers, in the palm, on top of the hand, or in the muscles). Choose one of these changes in body state (such as how the muscles feel when the hand is stretched) for all the students to focus on and repeat for another 30 seconds.

Many more examples of this type of activity, focussing on hands, feet, legs, whole body, breathing and feeling temperature can be found in the Interoception Kit produced by the Department for Education in South Australia.



Download the [Ready to learn - Interoception Kit](https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/ready-to-learn-interoception-kit.pdf)⁴ (PDF, 6.9 MB)

⁴ <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/ready-to-learn-interoception-kit.pdf>

Ask students to reflect more broadly on when they move into different zones of regulation:

- **Comfort zone** - Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS) is dominant
- **Learning zone in balance** - Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) and the PNS are in balance or homeostasis
- **Learning zone challenged** - the SNS is slightly dominant
- **Big emotions zone** - where the SNS is dominant
- **Panic zone** - where the SNS is in overload.

You do not need to wait until students are confident and competent at recognising their emotions before introducing the activities on self-managing feelings and self-regulating anger and frustration. As each set of activities will reinforce the other, students can work on these at the same time.

Encourage students to identify how their body feels when they are in each zone using the worksheets on the following pages. Write down some of the events or experiences that they associate with being in that zone.

Worksheet 1: Comfort zone

Think about when you feel most comfortable in yourself. How does this feel? What were you doing? Where were you? Write or draw to complete the table below:

<h1>Comfort zone</h1>	
Parasympathetic nervous system dominant	
How does your body feel?	Why are you in the comfort zone?



Worksheet 2: Learning zone - in balance

Think about when you feel most engaged in learning something easy or expanding your knowledge about something you already knew about. How did this feel? What were you doing? Where were you? Who were you with? Write or draw to complete the table below:

Learning zone	
Parasympathetic/Sympathetic nervous system homeostasis	
How does your body feel?	Why are you in the comfort zone?



Worksheet 3: Learning zone - challenges

Think about when you feel most engaged in learning something difficult or expanding your knowledge about something you already knew about. How did this feel? What were you doing? Where were you? Who were you with? Write or draw to complete the table below:

<h1>Learning zone</h1>	
Slightly sympathetic nervous system dominant	
How does your body feel?	Why are you in the active zone?



Worksheet 4: Big emotions zone

Think about when you feel extremely emotional, whether this is pleasant or unpleasant. How did this feel? What were you doing? Where were you? Who were you with? Write or draw to complete the table below. You may like to focus on when you are really angry and frustrated.

Big emotions zone	
Sympathetic nervous system dominant	
Why are you in the big emotions zone?	How does your body feel?



Worksheet 5: Panic zone

Think about when you have been completely overwhelmed and 'flipped your lid'. How did this feel? What were you doing? Where were you? Who were you with? Some people describe this as a meltdown or shutdown. Think about what this feels like for you and what behaviours you present in those moments. Write or draw to complete the table below:

Panic zone	
Sympathetic nervous system overload 	
Why do you get in the panic zone?	How does your body feel?

Teaching activity 3: Design your own interoception activity

Explain to students that sometimes when we hold emotional tension in our body, we can experience this as physical tension. Then encourage students to design their own bespoke interoception activities for the following two scenarios.



Sometimes when we hold emotional tension in our body, we can experience this as physical tension.

Which muscles in your body get tight when you are experiencing **big emotions?**

Design an interoception activity to tense and relax the muscles in that body part. Don't forget you can stretch and relax muscles or tense and relax muscles. Draw or write how to do this activity below:



Sometimes when we hold emotional tension in our body, we can experience this as physical tension.

Which muscles in your body get tense when you are experiencing **sympathetic nervous system overload** (panic zone/survival behaviours)?

Design an interoception activity to tense and relax the muscles in that body part. Don't forget you can stretch and relax muscles or tighten and relax muscles. Draw or write how to do this activity below:

Identifying changes in the digestive system

This next section focuses on activities related to the digestive system. This may come as a surprising inclusion yet interoception skills are required for a range of basic and more advanced functions. This includes knowing when to go to the toilet, being aware of becoming angry or upset and being able to manage your emotions proactively. Some students will have difficulty making sense of this information. It can be really hard for them to recognise when they are hungry, thirsty, too hot or too cold, or to know in advance that they are going to need to go to the toilet soon.

The body and brain can get stressed if individuals do not recognise and respond helpfully to all these things. To help understand and support the body and brain to work optimally, external signals provide indicators; for example, the colour and feel of our skin helps us assess if we are too hot or too cold. Understanding physical needs and indicators of different states can help with understanding the emotional equivalent and being able to identify where they are at.



[Temperature regulation of the human body⁵](#) is a video from FuseSchool that helps to explain how the skin and blood vessels interact to manage body temperature. Use the video to introduce students to this topic.

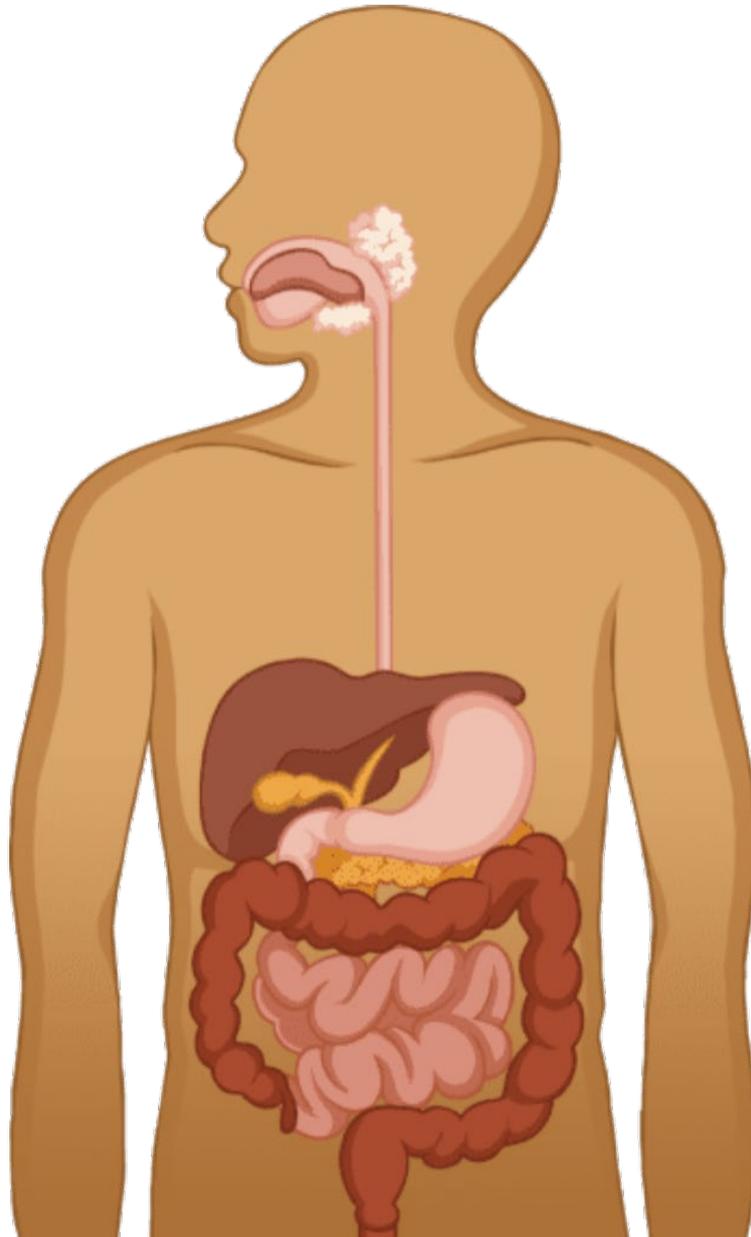
You may need to provide students with some background information or facilitate a conversation about hunger prior to exploring the next activity.

Hunger is the collection of sensations produced by the body when the body requires food. Satiety results when the body has received enough nutrients, and signals fullness. Hunger and fullness are governed by hormones, and how in tune a person is with these hormones governs how aware they are of their hunger and/or fullness. When we have digestive problems and/or difficulty knowing when we are full or hungry, this can impact our bowel health and our wellbeing. The digestive system can provide a range of body signals, which we can become more aware of over time.

⁵ <https://youtu.be/vJhsyS4ITW0>

Teaching activity 4: Body signals

This activity is designed to prompt students to pay attention to their digestive system. Label the parts of the digestive system and place a tick next to all the parts that you have noticed a body signal from this week. It might be an uncomfortable feeling that you noticed for a moment or for several minutes.



Large intestine	Small intestine	Gall bladder
Stomach	Mouth	Tongue
Liver	Pancreas	Oesophagus

Teaching activity 5: Know your poo and what to do

Constipation is a significant contributor to dysregulated behaviour in the school setting. Introducing hydration charts and the Bristol Stool Chart can help young people to learn the skills to self-manage their water intake and develop an understanding of the link between what they eat and drink and their bowel health. (Some students may need to be explicitly told that observations should only be done of their own urine and stools/poo, and that this should be after they have gone to the toilet, *in* the toilet.)

The handout Know your poo and what to do on the next page is adapted from the Bristol Stool Chart. (Ref: Heaton, K W and Lewis, S J 1997 'Stool form scale as a useful guide to intestinal transit time', *Scandinavian Journal of Gastroenterology*, 32 (9), 920–924). This version contains images and descriptions of the impact of the food that we eat on our digestive system.



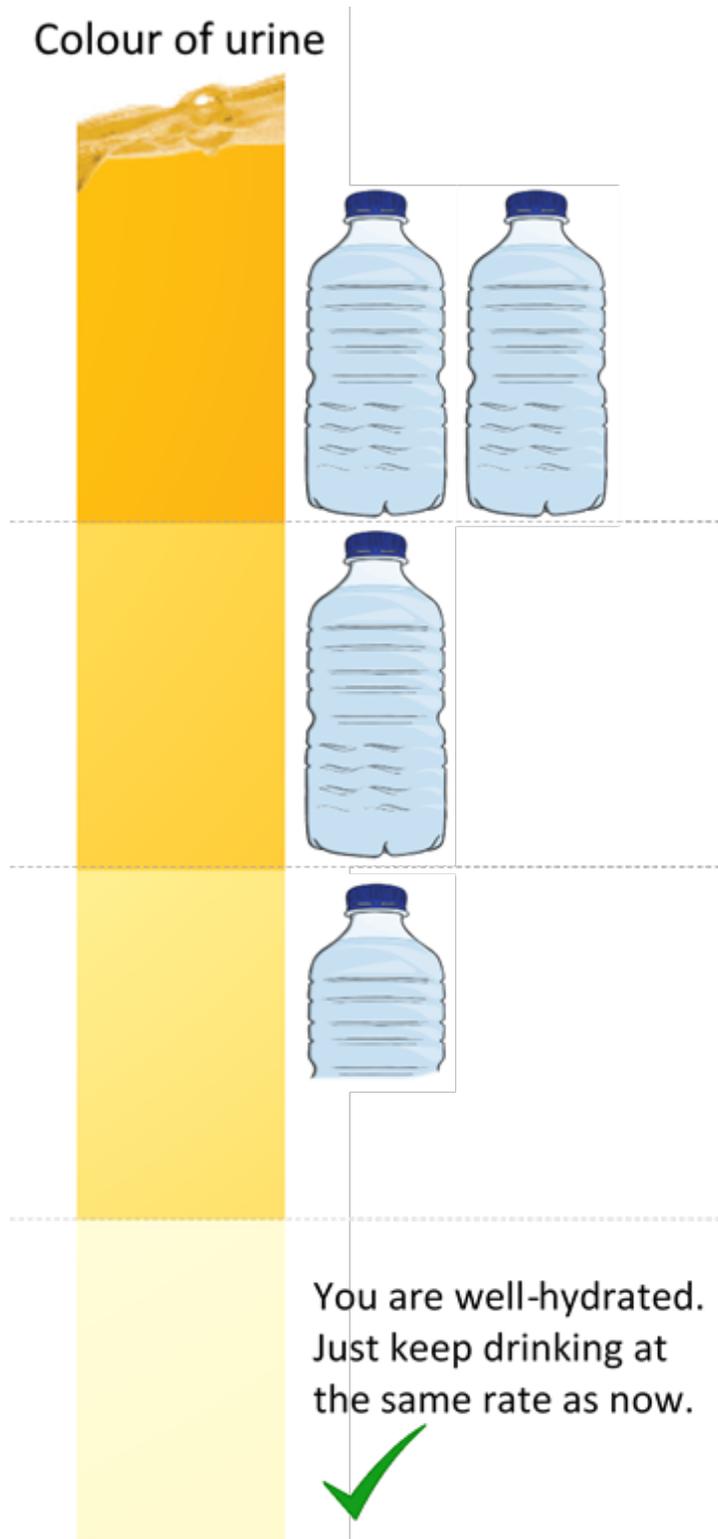
This external support can be used school wide and/or shared with the students' families for use in the home.

Know your poo and what to do

<p>Type 1</p>	<p>Severe constipation: looks like separate small hard lumps, can be hard to pass</p>		<p>Drink lots more water and increase dietary fibre with fruit and vegetables and go to see your GP if it keeps happening.</p>	
<p>Type 2</p>	<p>Constipation: looks like a lumpy sausage shape, can be hard to pass</p>		<p>Drink more water and increase dietary fibre with fruit and vegetables.</p>	
<p>Type 3</p>	<p>Healthy: looks like a sausage shape with cracks on the surface</p>		<p>Healthy diet but drink a little more water. Well done.</p>	
<p>Type 4</p>	<p>Healthy: looks like a smooth sausage shape</p>		<p>Healthy diet and good water intake. Well done.</p>	
<p>Type 5</p>	<p>Loose: looks like separate soft blobs, easy to pass</p>		<p>Increase dietary fibre with fruit and vegetables.</p>	
<p>Type 6</p>	<p>Very loose/diarrhoea: looks like mushy soft fluff, easy to pass</p>		<p>Diarrhoea could be on its way. Keep your fluids up.</p>	
<p>Type 7</p>	<p>Diarrhoea/leakage from severe constipation: looks like liquid.</p>		<p>Drink water and go to see your GP if it keeps happening.</p>	

Teaching activity 6: How much water do I need to drink now?

Many people struggle with knowing when they are thirsty. The human body requires enough water to function optimally and many body systems, including the brain, function less well when the body is thirsty. These two handouts are designed to help students to assess how well hydrated they are.



i Note: The colour and smell of urine can be impacted by foods and medications; for example, eating asparagus will change the smell of your urine.

Hydration record

Students: Use this handout to record your hydration levels today and work out if you need to drink more water.

1. Measure how much water your drink bottle holds.

2. Record how much water you drank so far today.

How did you work that out?

3. Are you well-hydrated? (circle)



4. How much more water do you need to drink now to be well-hydrated?

5. What body signals are you getting that tell you how hydrated you are?

My skin is _____

My mouth is _____

My throat is _____

Other: _____

Help-seeking strategies

Help-seeking strategies were introduced in Module 1: Expressing feelings (Years 5 and 6). They are revisited in this module, with a focus on help-seeking for classroom activities and assistance with co-regulation when a student is experiencing big emotions, or is in survival mode.

Teaching activity 7: Help-seeking

It is important students learn to identify what helps them to feel better when they recognise the signals that a big emotion is building. The help-seeking worksheet on the next page allows students to explore the ways they can help themselves.

Help-seeking worksheet

When I am experiencing big emotions, I can do things to feel better and manage myself. Other people can also help me to feel better. My favourite interoception activity will help me by calming my brain down and getting me ready to learn.

To feel better I need to:



everything

breathe in and out

and then do this interoception activity:

Teaching activity 8: Getting help

This activity looks at injuries or 'hurts' in terms of levels of seriousness and explores the supports that students might access for each issue.



Show students the video: [Social skills: Asking for help](https://youtu.be/8qKlxgi1W4g).⁶

Then hold a discussion about exploring the barriers to help-seeking for the following three scenarios.

1. Asking for directions in the community (e.g. to the bus stop)
2. Asking for help after falling over and cutting their leg
3. Reporting an incident in the yard, where someone was unkind to them (vary this to suit your students' needs and current issues)

Once students have highlighted the barriers, such as not wanting to look silly, discuss the pros and cons of giving in to the barriers and finding solutions to overcome them.

Introduce students to the 'How to ask for help' worksheet on the next page. Student can use this to explore levels of 'hurt' they can relate to and work out who and how to ask for help.

You can encourage students to role-play three scenarios which will be preparation for Teaching activity 9. For this they will also need a working knowledge of the regulation zones in order to identify times when they fit into each category, to identify the external and internal body signals that alert them to their feelings or emotions and to identify strategies that assist them in staying in the learning zone

⁶ <https://youtu.be/8qKlxgi1W4g>

Worksheet: How to ask for help

When I am hurt, I need to think about whether it is only a little hurt that doesn't need anything, whether it is a medium hurt that needs first aid from the office, or whether it is a serious hurt that needs help from a doctor or the hospital. To feel better I need to first decide what help I need, if any. Then I need to ask for help if I need it.

Examples of injuries/hurts	Who and how to ask for help
Little/minor hurts	
Medium injuries/hurts	
Serious injuries/hurts	

Teaching activity 9: Integrated activity

We are all different. Complete the table for yourself. In the coloured cells that have no text, you can put in an icon, picture or drawing that represents that zone for you.

Regulation zone			When do I feel like this?	How I know that I am in this zone (my external and internal body signals)	How other people can help me and/or how I can get into or stay in the learning zone – my strategies to self-regulate
	Panic zone	SNS overload			
		SNS dominance			
	Learning zone	Slight SNS dominance			
		Homeostasis			
	Comfort zone	PNS dominance			

Glossary

Homeostasis	Required for us to be healthy, homeostasis is one of the ways that our brain and body work together to keep us in balance. You may wish to use a simpler phrase such as 'balance' with your students.
Interoception	The conscious perception of our internal body signals, including emotional reactions or feelings. You may wish to use a simpler phrase such as 'body/self awareness'.
Parasympathetic nervous system (PNS)	Part of the autonomic nervous system that is working when the heart rate slows, muscles relax and circulation improves.
Sympathetic nervous system (SNS)	The part of the autonomic nervous system that prepares the body for stressful or emergency situations and promotes the flight, fight or freeze response.
Sympathetic nervous system overload or SNS overload	A stressful situation or overwhelming emotion or event activates the SNS and leads to what is more colloquially known as a 'melt-down' or 'shut-down'.



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