



Student Wellbeing Hub

Expressing feelings

Module **1**
Years 5–6

Teaching resource for
students with autism

CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Background information	3
Australian curriculum.....	4
Key considerations: Teaching about expressing feelings and emotions	5
Explicit teaching	5
Cultural influences	5
Help-seeking.....	5
Modes of communicating	5
Emotions may not last	6
How do we feel?	6
Improving awareness of how the brain responds	7
Teaching activity 1: Dan Siegal’s hand model of the brain.....	8
About interoception activities	10
Area of focus	10
Additional resources	10
Teaching activity 2: Focus on muscles – hand squish.....	11
Teaching activity 3: Focus on breathing – belly breathing	12
Teaching activity 4: Focus on temperature – warmth.....	13
Teaching activity 5: Focus on pulse	14
Feelings and emotions	16
Teaching activity 6: Make a hunger–fullness scale.....	17
Teaching activity 7: Responding helpfully to feelings.....	21
Emotions	22
Teaching activity 8: What’s your reaction?	23
Teaching activity 9: Uncomfortable and comfortable feelings	25

Understanding that emotions can change	28
Teaching activity 10: Changeability	28
Teaching activity 11: Making jelly	29
Teaching activity 12: Inside out	31
Teaching activity 13: Turning uncomfortable emotions into more comfortable emotions	31
How do students know when they are in control of their emotions?	33
Teaching activity 14: Example regulation scale	34
Teaching activity 15: Practising strategies to express emotions	37
Teaching help-seeking strategies.....	40
Helping students identify <i>when</i> to seek help	40
Teaching activity 16: I might need help because I am hurt when	41
Teaching activity 17: What I can do to get help	43
Glossary.....	47

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.

Background information

Students with autism may struggle to understand:

- how they feel
- how others feel
- how to interpret visual cues of how others feel.

This resource provides information about a system that we take for granted – how our brains and bodies respond automatically to signals. You probably understand this intuitively but young people with autism might require explicit unpacking of some of the things that are taken for granted. When these students are cued into an activity, it is often much more successful. A glossary has been included 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.

For more background try the following resources:



[Understanding autism¹](https://youtu.be/6CqbyoMfn1U)



[Positive Partnerships²](https://www.positivepartnerships.com.au/)

¹ <https://youtu.be/6CqbyoMfn1U>

² <https://www.positivepartnerships.com.au/>

Australian curriculum

[Achievement standard links](#)

- ✓ By the end of Year 6, students investigate developmental changes and transitions.
- ✓ They recognise the influence of emotions on behaviours and discuss factors that influence how people interact.
- ✓ They describe their own and others' contributions to health, physical activity, safety and wellbeing.

Key considerations: Teaching about expressing feelings and emotions

Explicit teaching

Some students need to be taught explicitly how to express their feelings and emotions appropriately in different contexts. For example, it is appropriate to scream when your team scores a goal at a footy match, but not to scream at a café when your ice-cream arrives. In both instances you may be excited, but there are different ways to express that excitement in each context.

Cultural influences

The public expression of feelings and emotions has a significant cultural component. It is important to take this into account while teaching about emotions. Students who display very little emotion and those who are very gregarious in their displays of emotions, may be acting in culturally appropriate ways. It can feel very wrong to some students to go against these natural ways of expressing themselves. Make sure to teach expression of emotions for particular contexts, with the classroom and playground/yard being the two most practical contexts to focus on.

Help-seeking

An important aspect that can get left out of this explicit teaching is help-seeking. Some students are able to seek help without additional support by Year 5, but many students with autism struggle to recognise when they need help. This is often due to a combination of things. For example, they may have learnt that adults do not want to be bothered by them. They may not want to appear stupid. They may not know that they can ask for help. They may not realise that they are frustrated. They may have auditory processing issues and/or expressive language difficulties.

Modes of communicating

The aim of the activities in this resource is to enable students to share how they are feeling with their peers and teachers in ways that are helpful, rather than inappropriate. For example, rather than hitting a peer to show excitement, it would be helpful if they could

express that excitement verbally or by using sign or [augmentative and alternative communication](#)³ (AAC). Where students use AAC, it is useful to spend a number of sessions modelling using the emotions sections. Where students use Auslan to communicate, then the whole class should learn the signs for the various feelings and emotions, so that the communication can be truly two-way.

Emotions may not last

A key concept that underlies the effective and helpful expression of emotions is the knowledge that an emotion or feeling will not last forever. For students with autism, this can be new knowledge, as they often have a ‘now is forever’ thinking style. This is sometimes described as **perseveration**. Can you imagine how much worse it is being upset if you think it will last forever? This may be one of the contributing factors to the very high rates of depression and anxiety experienced by people with autism. If you would like to know more about the issues surrounding the thinking styles of people with autism, view the article [Cognitive rigidity: The 8-ball from hell](#)⁴.

How do we feel?

We experience feelings and emotions in our bodies and brains. If we want to express our feelings and emotions in helpful ways, we need to connect to the signals in our bodies and tune in to how those signals interact with the world around us.

For example, if you are outside in the sun in the middle of summer, your body will give you signals to let you know that you are getting hot. You may or may not notice the signals, and if you don’t notice them, you won’t notice that you are feeling hot, even though your body is getting hot. In this case, if you felt hot, you might have a drink of water, or move into the shade – both of which can help to cool your body down. This process is known as the interoceptive system. **Interoception** is the eighth sense, the conscious perception of our internal body signals, including emotional reactions or feelings.

³ https://www.health.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0027/674172/aac_pro.pdf

⁴ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/making-sense-autistic-spectrum-disorders/201608/cognitive-rigidity-the-8-ball-hell>

Our feelings are part of our biology, one of the ways that our brain and body work together to keep us in balance, or **homeostasis**. Homeostasis is required for us to be healthy. Our emotions help us understand and relate to not just ourselves and other people but also to the places and things around us.



Homeostasis is likely to be an unfamiliar term for your students, you may wish to use a simpler term, such as **balance**.

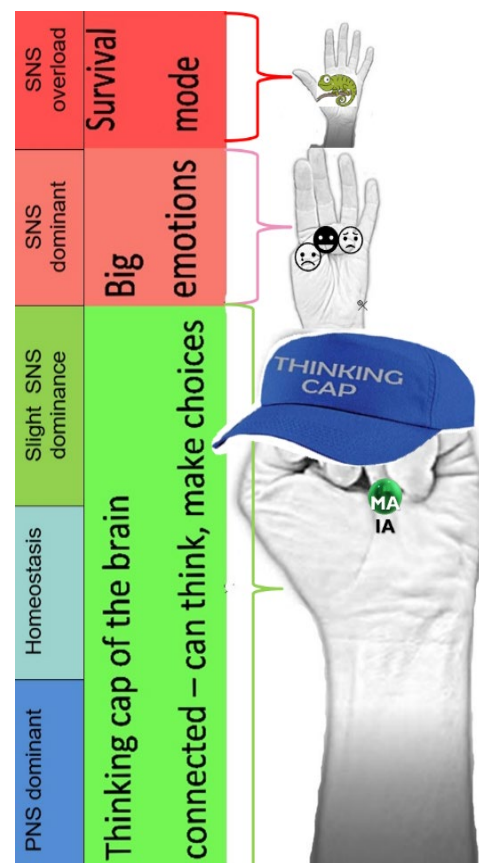
Interoception is also likely to be an unfamiliar term for your students, you may wish to use a simpler term, such as **body/self-awareness**.

Improving awareness of how the brain responds

When our interoception is working well, we notice our emotions developing before they become big emotions. Big emotions are those emotions that you cannot control, and that may control you.

Our interoception helps us recognise and manage our feelings and emotions so that we don't go into survival mode when we don't need to. For example, if we think we see a snake, then realise it is a rope on the floor, we would be able to calm ourselves down more quickly if we realised we had become scared.

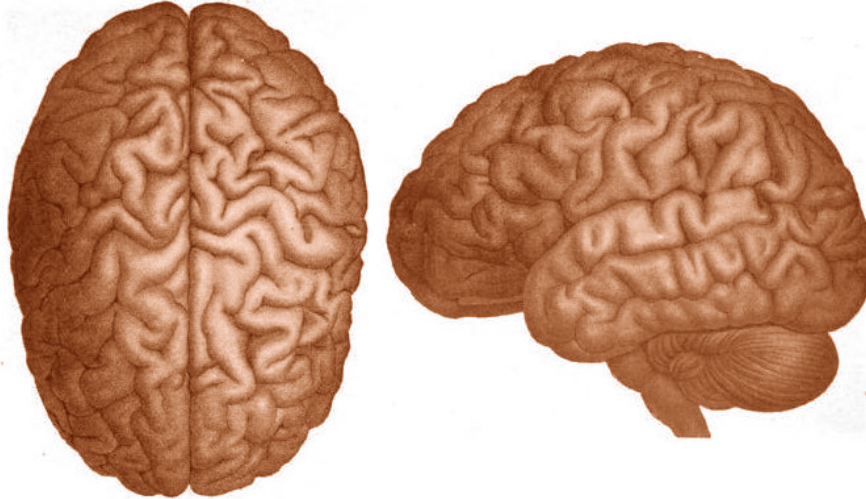
It is useful for students, including those with autism, to understand how their brain works and how it might respond under stress. A brain that experiences threat has a very specific response. A standard response to stress caused by a social interaction would be to employ social engagement (smiling, making eye contact, building a connection), as a strategy to return to equilibrium. But for more significant threats, or when social engagement is unsuccessful, our survival instincts kick in. The 'hand' model of the brain created by Dan Siegel is a great resource (this can be found on YouTube: [Dr Daniel Siegel presenting a hand model of the brain⁵](https://youtu.be/gm9CIJ74Oxw)).



⁵ <https://youtu.be/gm9CIJ74Oxw>

Teaching activity 1: Dan Siegal's hand model of the brain

Use this activity to introduce students to what happens in the brain if it goes into 'survival mode'.



Modified from *The Soul of Man* by Paul Carus, 1905



Watch the video: [Hand model of the brain⁶](#)

- Explain to students that we all have a different default (typical) survival instinct. So, we all behave slightly differently when we're in our survival mode.

When our reptile brain takes over, our survival instinct kicks in and we 'go crazy' or 'lose it'.

- Discuss the video and explore what happens when you lose it.

⁶ https://youtu.be/rZfYh9O_yZ8



- Explain that sometimes we can lose it without noticing that we have been getting strong emotions or feelings. This is because we haven't been noticing our body signals – our interoception is not working as well as it could be.
- Explain that we can improve our interoception by doing short interoception activities two to three times a day. It takes a while to feel the changes and improved awareness of our emotions and feelings, but over time we will get better at noticing what is happening in our bodies.

About interoception activities

It is possible to improve interoceptive awareness with practice. It is recommended 'interoceptive awareness' activities be done two to three times a day as a whole class for at least a full school term. This is because it can take some months for the neural networks in the brain to start working more effectively.

Area of focus

Interoception activities always focus on one change in the body state, as this enables the active noticing of internal body signals. The activities can focus on one of the following:

- muscles
- breathing
- temperature
- pulse rate processes.

In an interoception activity there are four steps:

1. All students complete the activity that focuses on one aspect of the body.
2. Talk about, sign or point to where each student felt something different in their body, comparing both before and during the activity.
3. Discuss and agree upon what different element you are going to focus on when you redo the activity.
4. All students redo the activity focusing on the body area/function that was agreed upon.

Teaching activities 2–5 provide examples of an activity for each type of body area/function (muscles, breathing, temperature, pulse).

Additional resources

- The [South Australian Department for Education](https://www.education.sa.gov.au/supporting-students/health-e-safety-and-wellbeing/health-support-planning/managing-health-education-and-care/neurodiversity/interoception)⁷ website provides more information about interoception
- Download the [Ready-to-learn interoception kit](https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/ready-to-learn-interoception-kit.pdf)⁸
- [Healthy Possibilities YouTube Channel](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCylovxevV3W2l2WXHDBkKxA)⁹

⁷ <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/supporting-students/health-e-safety-and-wellbeing/health-support-planning/managing-health-education-and-care/neurodiversity/interoception>

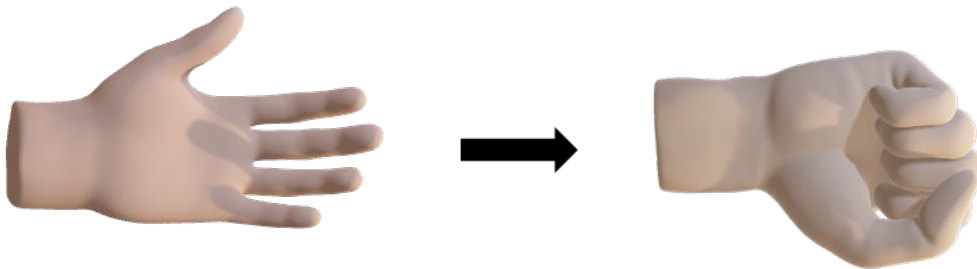
⁸ <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/ready-to-learn-interoception-kit.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCylovxevV3W2l2WXHDBkKxA>

Teaching activity 2: Focus on muscles – hand squish

Use the following activity with your students. This activity develops awareness of the hand, arm and sometimes the shoulder muscles.

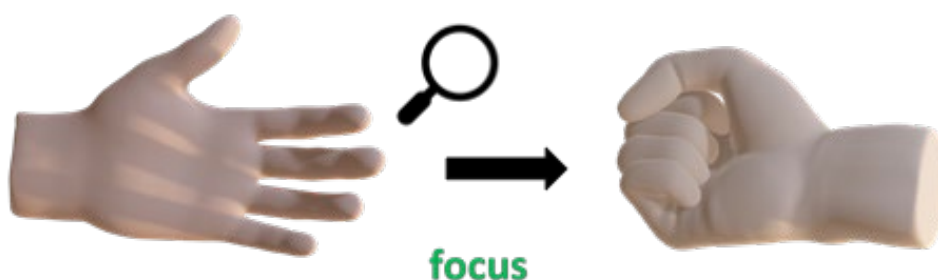
1. Sit comfortably. Have your hands relaxed. Then, curl them up as tight as possible and hold for 30–60 seconds. You can either tuck your thumb in or leave it on the outside of your fingers.



2. Talk about, sign or point to where you each felt something different in your body from before and during the activity.



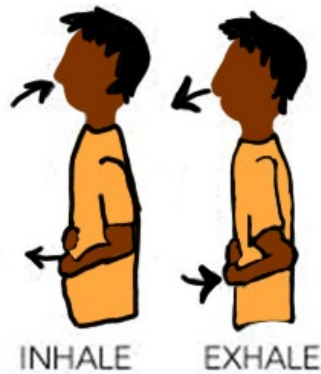
3. Pick one part of your hand, arm or shoulder where someone indicated that they felt a change in their muscle state. This is where you are going to focus on trying to feel something when you redo the activity. You could focus on the knuckles, palm, back of the hand, side of the little finger.
4. Now, redo the activity focusing on the body area/part that you decided on. Again, hold the fist tight for 30–60 seconds.



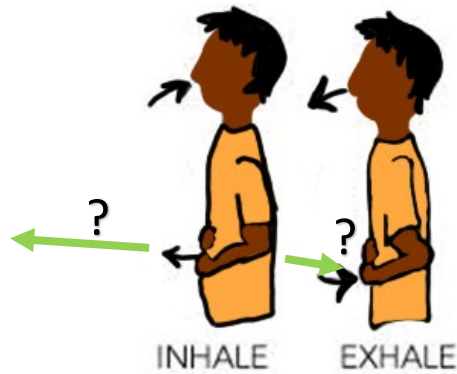
Teaching activity 3: Focus on breathing – belly breathing

Use the following activity with your students.

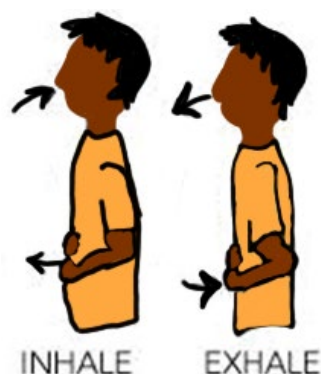
1. Standing or sitting down, be still and put your hands on your belly, just below your diaphragm. Your diaphragm is behind your lowest ribs, at the bottom of your lungs. Now breathe in and out slowly and deeply while watching your hands. You can breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Do this for 30–60 seconds.



2. Talk about, sign or indicate how far your belly extended out when you breathed in, and how far it sank back in when you exhaled.



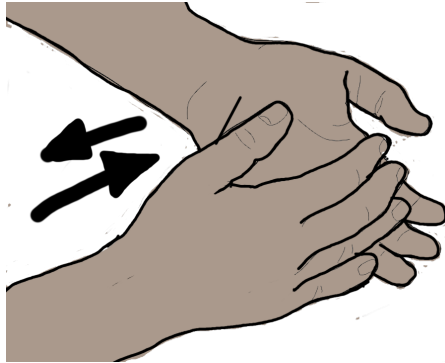
3. Now you can focus on your belly rising and falling when you do the belly breathing, instead of watching your hands.
4. Redo all the activity for 30–60 seconds, focusing on how your belly falls and rises.



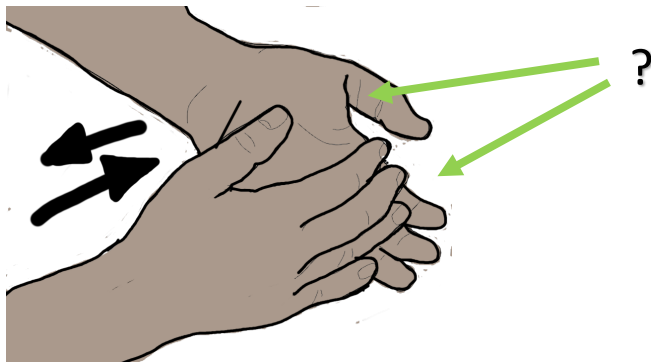
Teaching activity 4: Focus on temperature – warmth

Use the following activity with your students.

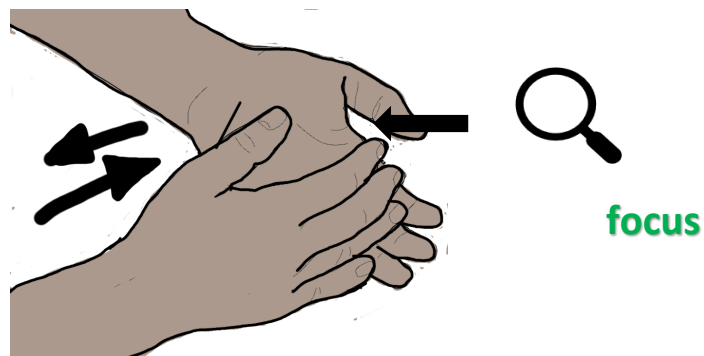
1. Standing or sitting down, rub your hands together fast for 30–60 seconds. Does this make your hands warmer or colder?



2. Talk about, sign or indicate whether your hands feel warmer or colder. Which part of your hands feels the warmest?



3. Decide and agree where you are going to focus on trying to feel the warm part(s) of your hands, e.g. focus on either your fingers or palms.
4. All redo the activity, focusing on how warm you can make your palms.



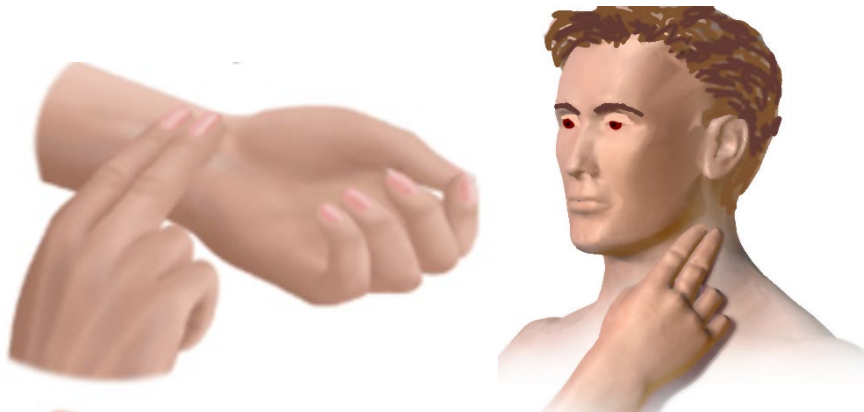
Teaching activity 5: Focus on pulse

Use the following activity with your students.

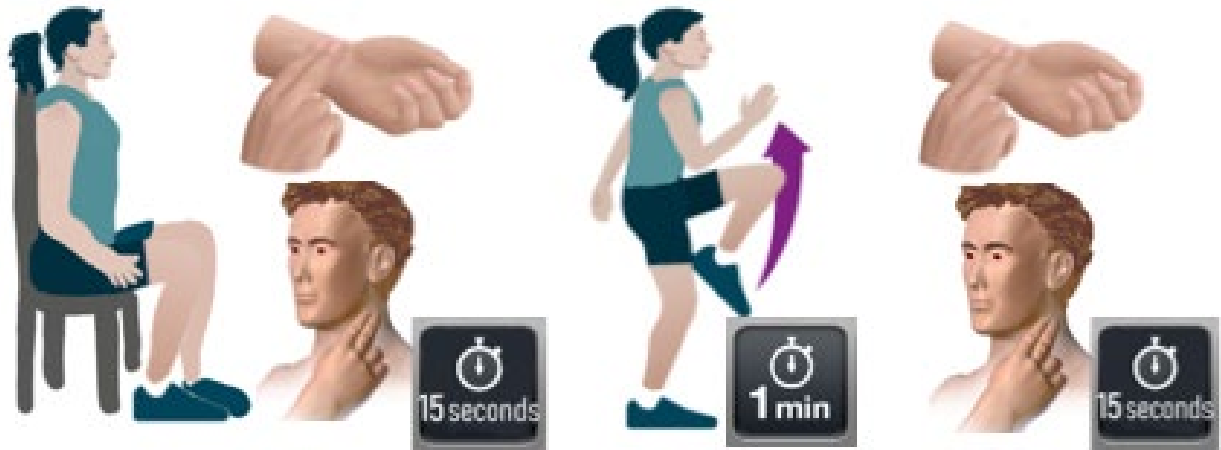
Some people find it very difficult or uncomfortable to take their own pulse, while others find that it gives them a really good indication of how calm or not, they are.

- To take your pulse manually use the first and second fingertips (never your thumb as it has its own pulse) and place them on one of your arteries, such as on the wrist or the neck.
- For this activity, you can either focus on how the pulse feels under your fingertips or count it for 15 seconds. It is very difficult to count accurately for a minute, so most people count for 15 seconds and either times it by four or just compare the pulse rates for before and after the exercise.

If you cannot find your pulse straight away, tilt your wrist slowly back and forward under your fingertips.



- Take your pulse, and then, if able, jump up and down for a minute. If this is not possible, then move any of your body parts as much as possible, as quickly as possible, for a minute. Then retake your pulse.



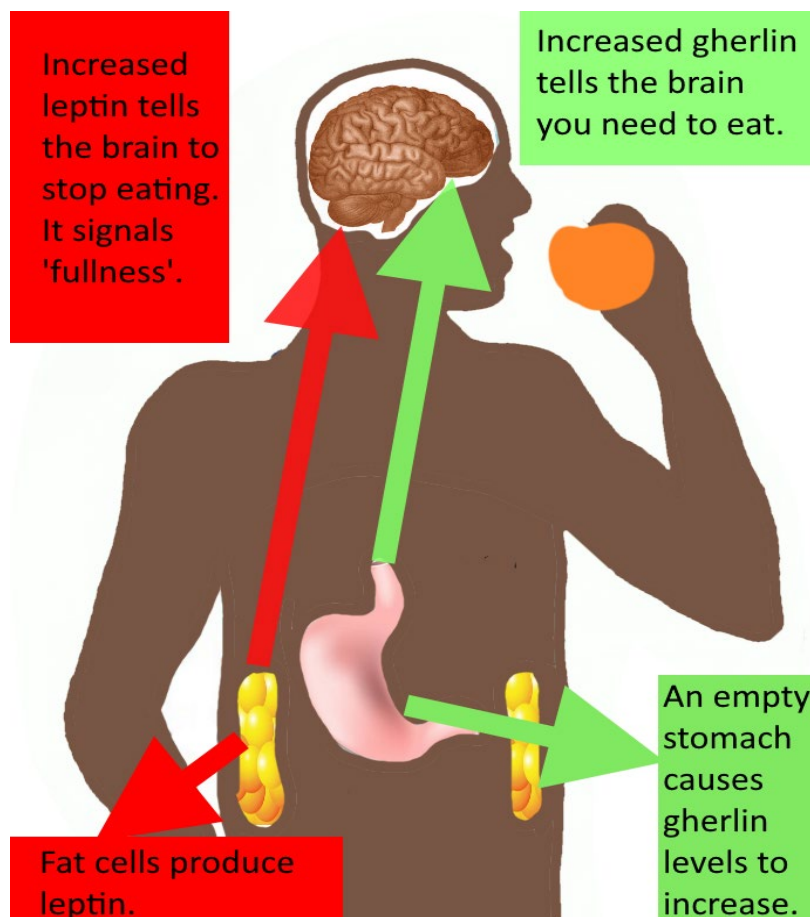
Ask students what they noticed:

- What happens if you run on the spot for two minutes?
- What changes did you notice in your body?

Feelings and emotions

Our feelings and emotions come and go all the time. Sometimes we can experience a feeling or emotion for a long time, but at other times it might come and go very quickly. When we do something helpful to respond to a feeling, usually the feeling changes or goes away. This is because feelings are related to keeping our bodies in balance (homeostasis) so it can work optimally and our health can be as good as possible. When we respond helpfully to our feelings we help to return our body to homeostasis.

However, in order to respond helpfully to our feelings, we need to know that we are having those feelings. This is where three things help: noticing our internal body signals (interoception), noticing our external body signals, and noticing the context we are in. So, for example, if your tummy growls and it is lunch time but you haven't yet eaten your lunch, you can assume that you are hungry. However, if you already ate, you may need to go to the toilet. Everyone can miss the signals from their internal body. The changes we can see or hear in our body are easier to notice.



Our bodies release different hormones to signal to our brain that we are hungry or full. ‘Gherlin’ is the hormone that tells our brain that we are hungry, while ‘leptin’ is the hormone that signals to our brain that we are full. Noticing these is part of interoception.

Sometimes, we think we are hungry, but actually we may be bored or frustrated. It can help to think about hunger using a couple of different strategies:

1. Think about when you last ate and whether you will be eating soon. If so you may not be hungry.
5. Try and notice how empty or full your stomach feels. Sometimes when we eat too much our stomach can bloat and then we can feel sick.



[Fitnaturally Hunger and Fullness Scale¹⁰](https://fitnaturally-xdvqhnz1vll3y04w.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/fitnaturally-hunger-fullness-scale.pdf) is one example of a hunger–fullness scale that shows a continuum of ten stages from ‘1: Shaky, headachey, nauseous hunger’ to ‘10: Full like on Christmas Day ...’

This hunger–fullness scale illustrates that we have more complex feelings than just hungry and full. There are many other versions of hunger–fullness scales online, find one that works for you.

Teaching activity 6: Make a hunger–fullness scale

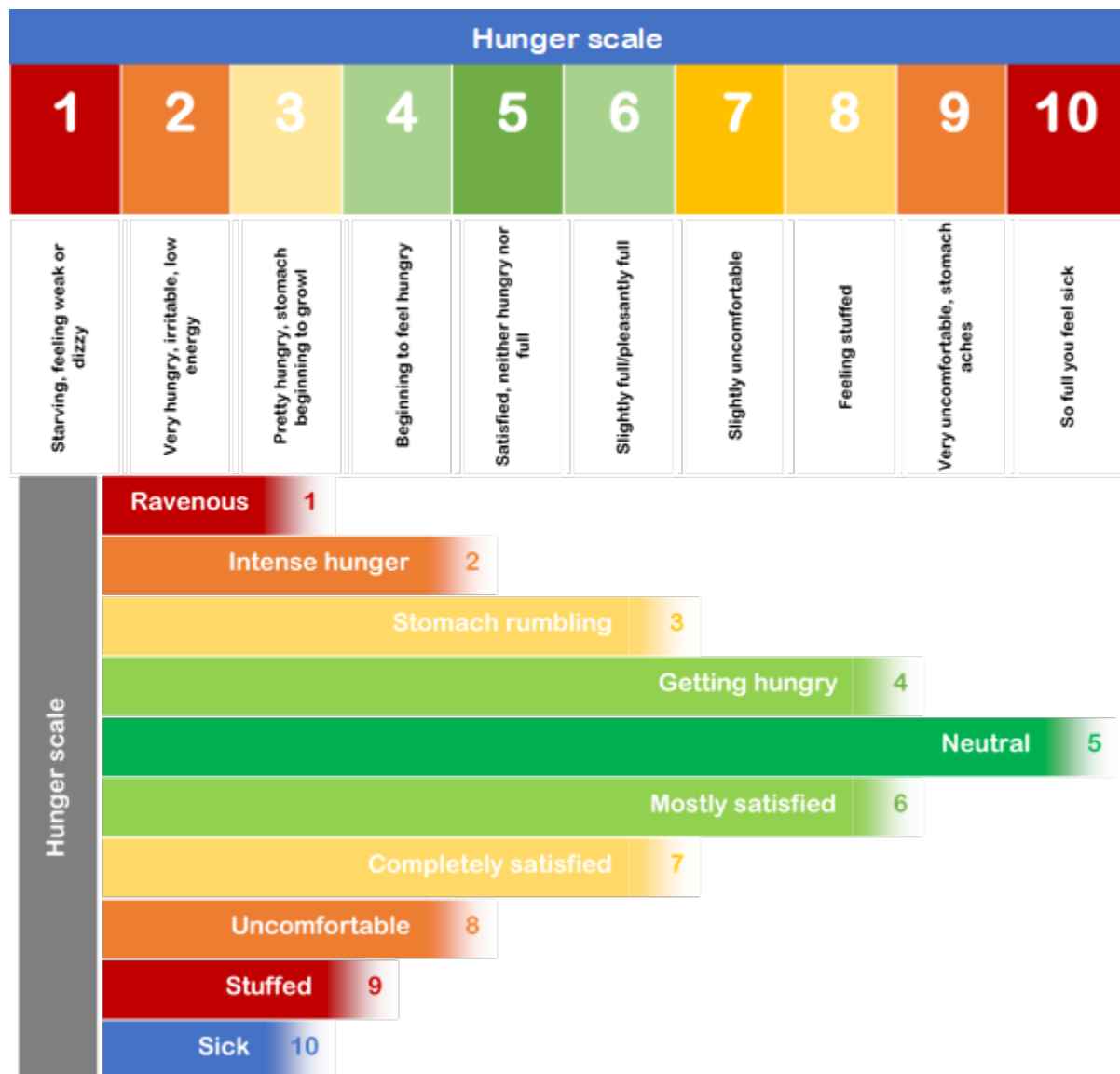
This activity supports your students in making their own hunger–fullness scale. Through the activity you can explore the fact that we can experience a wide range of intensity in feelings of hunger or fullness. This means that we could respond quite differently to each level.

For example, if you are level 5 hungry (neither full, nor hungry), you could eat a bit more or not eat any more and both choices would be fine. However, if you were level 10 full (very overfull) and ate any more you might be sick. In this case it would be helpful to stop eating straight away, and perhaps not eat for several hours or even until the next day. See examples on the next page.

If we think about the range of hunger–fullness as starving/painfully hungry because we have not eaten for three days, to completely overfull to the point that we feel we might burst (though this will not literally happen) or be sick (which might), what does this feel like in our body?

¹⁰ <https://fitnaturally-xdvqhnz1vll3y04w.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/fitnaturally-hunger-fullness-scale.pdf>

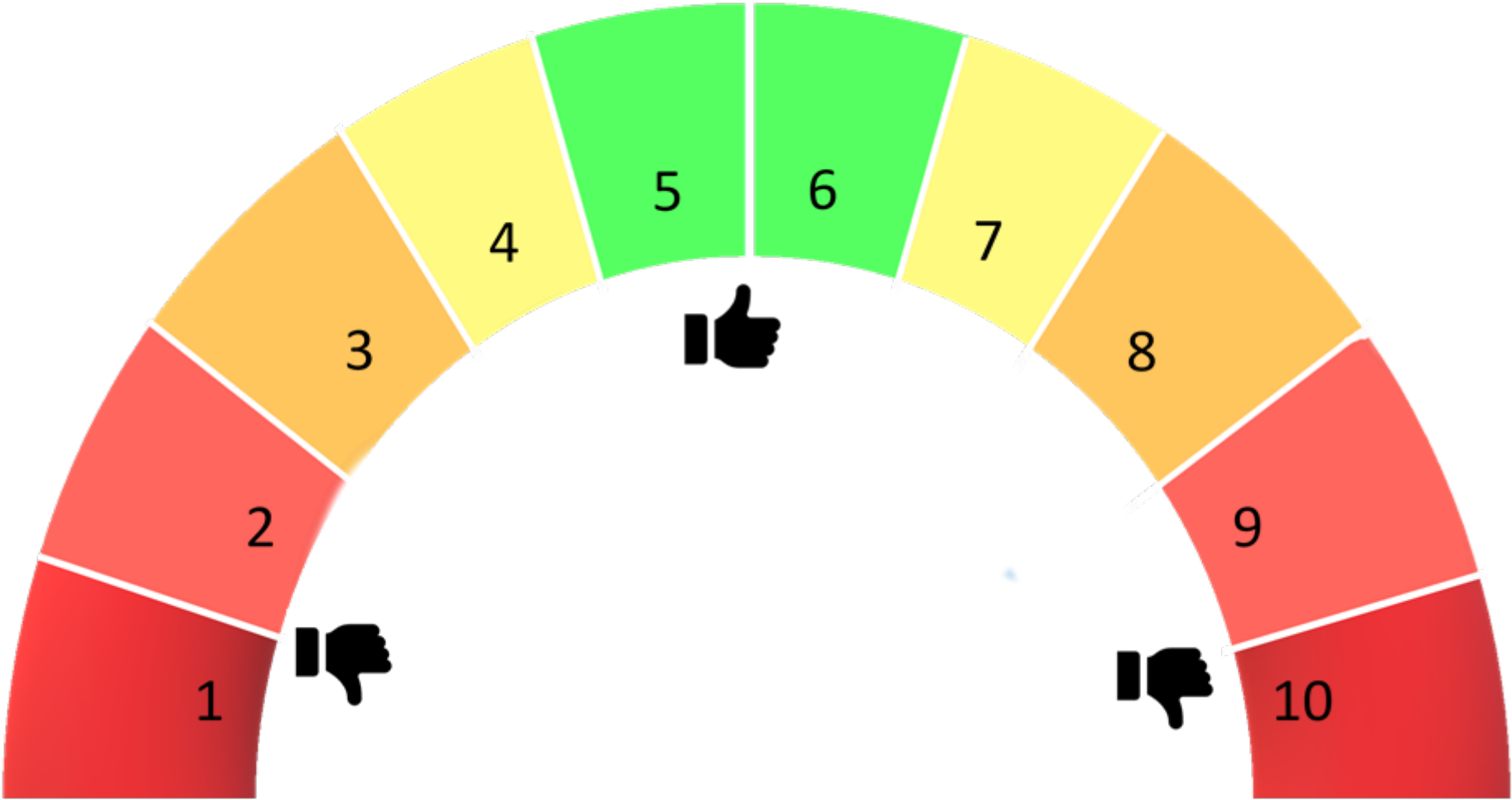
Example scales:



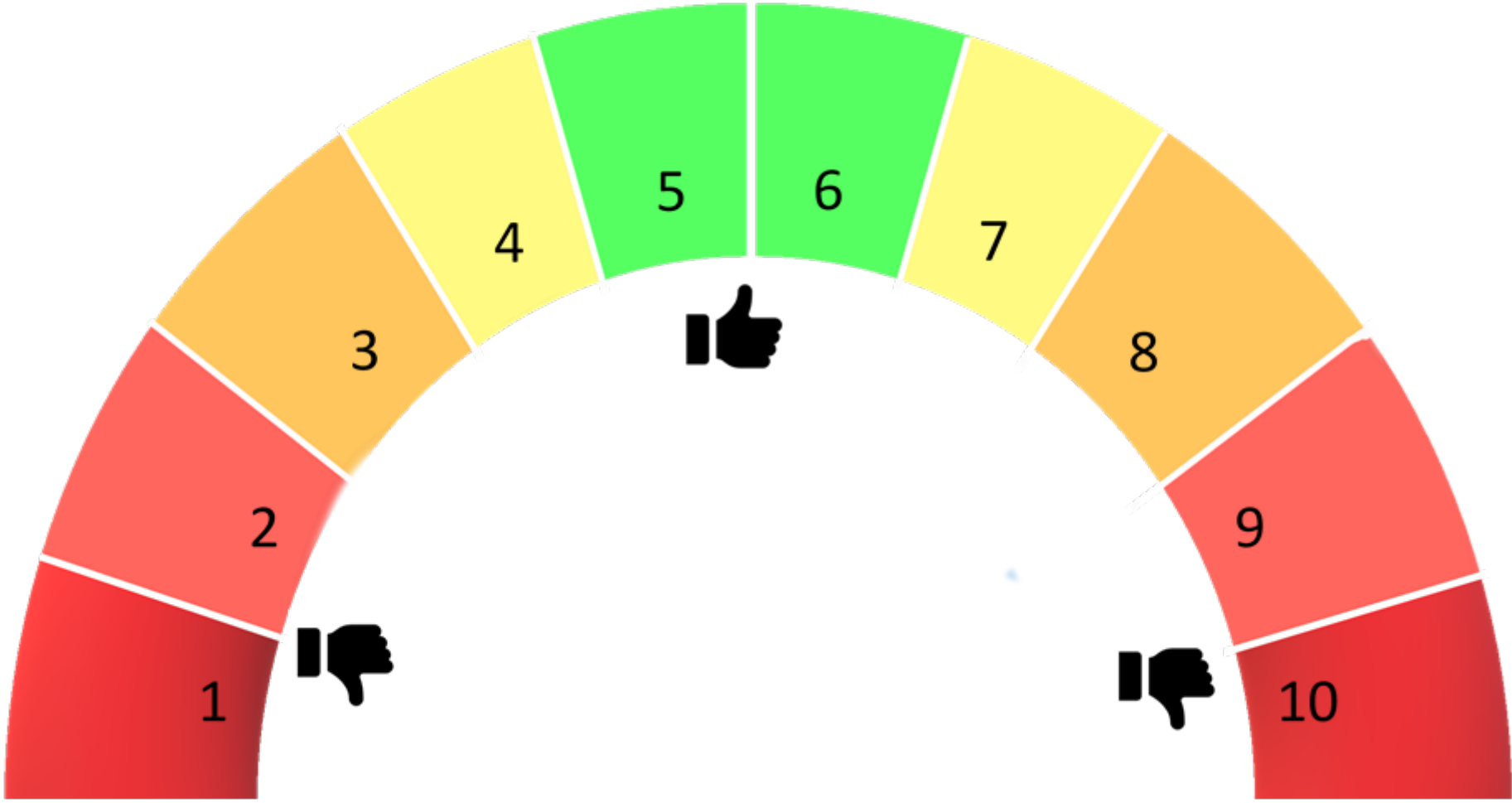
Students could add helpful things ‘to do’ to their hunger–fullness charts, or create new ones to show what they could do at each level that would be helpful for them as individuals. Two templates are included on the following pages.

- Template 1: My hunger–fullness chart: how I feel at each level – provides an opportunity for students to identify the different feelings they have for each part of the scale.
- Template 2: My hunger–fullness chart: helpful things that I can do at each level – an opportunity for students to be proactive, to think about what they can do to help themselves if they are really hungry or too full.

Template 1: My hunger–fullness chart: how I feel at each level



Template 2: My hunger–fullness chart: helpful things that I can do at each level



Teaching activity 7: Responding helpfully to feelings

Students: Think about your options and actions in responding to bodily needs such as feeling tired, or in pain or having a full bladder. Fill in the following table by writing or drawing two helpful things that you can do for each feeling. It is okay to have different answers from other people.

Feeling	One helpful thing that I can do	Another helpful thing that I can do
Hunger	e.g. Eat something	
Thirst		
Tired		
Wide awake		
Hot		
Cold		
Full bladder		
Pain		
Nauseous (sick)		

Emotions

Emotions are more complicated than feelings and are our brain's and body's response to things, events, people and places around us.

For example, if you are afraid of spiders and you see a spider, then there are chemicals released by your brain called neurotransmitters, which send signals to your brain that affect your sympathetic nervous system, a part of your autonomic nervous system. Other things that you see, hear or smell may activate the neurotransmitters that then affect your parasympathetic nervous system.



[*Big emotions and survival behaviour*¹¹](#) provides information about the nervous system and how it links to your emotions and the survival instinct.

You can use the information provided in this video to discuss the things which make students stressed, angry or upset (without asking them to differentiate among these different emotions).

Alternatively, if you feel that the video is not appropriate to your students, you could use the following teaching activity to explore the differing reactions that individuals have to dogs.

¹¹ https://youtu.be/v0vFt-_OjaY

Teaching activity 8: What's your reaction?



When you look at this photo, what do you feel about the dog?

How do you know you are feeling that way? Can you feel any tension in any of your muscles when you look at the dog, or are some muscles feeling relaxed? How does your breathing feel? Is this different when you look at the photo on the next page?



For some people, dogs and even pictures of dogs can provoke a feeling of fear. Fear is a feeling that is useful to help keep us safe. The oldest part of the human brain is sometimes called the 'reptile brain' or 'survival brain'. It is designed to keep us safe. When we experience fear, this activates our survival brain.

Other people find dogs or pictures of dogs, and especially puppies, cute. They may feel 'warm and fuzzy' inside. How did each of the pictures make you feel?

Teaching activity 9: Uncomfortable and comfortable feelings

This activity is designed to help students to begin to understand that uncomfortable emotions are shared by other people but differing situations have a variety of effects on individuals. For example, one student might get very upset by loud noises, while for another student people eating bananas might be a significant cause of distress. This activity consists of two worksheets on the following pages. Worksheet 9A, 'Uncomfortable feelings' explores scenarios where students feel sad, angry or frustrated. Worksheet 9B 'Comfortable feelings' explores scenarios where students feel happy, excited or satisfied.

In working through these with students, it is useful to note that any emotion, even a traditionally pleasant one such as excitement can, when too intense, become a 'big emotion' that, in effect, controls the person rather than them controlling it.

The problem with big emotions is that all too easily they can slip over into 'too much'. The individual becomes overwhelmed and – in the language of the hand model of the brain – 'loses it'. This is because, as the sympathetic nervous system becomes more and more dominant, it activates the survival instinct. Once the survival instinct kicks in, until a person feels safe again they are not able to make conscious choices or engage in behaviours through choice.

Note: You may wish to return with students to some of the concepts discussed in **Teaching activity 1** which explored the impact of the survival instinct and how it is governed by our reptile brain, which is activated by sympathetic nervous system overload.



Even though students may use and see emoticons regularly it is important to understand that students with autism may not actually know what emotions are being represented or how it feels to experience those emotions.

Worksheet 9a: Uncomfortable feelings

Fill in the table below. You may need to discuss this with your teacher or another adult or friend. You can choose the last emotion yourself.

This may take a few days to complete. That's OK. You can keep coming back to it as you need to.

Uncomfortable feeling/emotion	What this feels like in my body/What other people can notice about me	Places that make me feel like this	Activities that make me feel like this	People/things that make me feel like this
Anger 				
Sadness 				
Frustration 				
Boredom 				
Fear 				

Worksheet 9b: Comfortable feelings

Fill in the table below. You may need to discuss this with your teacher or another adult or friend. You can choose the last emotion yourself.

This may take a few days to complete. That's OK. You can keep coming back to it as you need to.

Comfortable feeling/emotion	What this feels like in my body/What other people can notice about me	Places that make me feel like this	Activities that make me feel like this	People/things that make me feel like this
Happiness 😊				
Excitement 😄				
Satisfaction 👍 or 🙌				
Deep interest/ Passion 😍				
Amusement 😜				

Understanding that emotions can change

Prior to teaching strategies that assist students to appropriately express feelings and emotions, it is useful to explore the more general concept that things change, sometimes reversibly and sometimes irreversibly.

The next activity will provide opportunities to discuss aspects of children's lives that change over time. For example, they have grown from babyhood to the present day, a local vacant block is developed, the school makes a change in uniform policy.

If students are struggling with the concept of change in general you may want to include some of the seven lessons from [Change detectives](#)¹². (You will need a [Scootle](#) login to access this free resource.) You could also use [Physical and chemical changes: Part one](#)¹³ which explores reversible and irreversible changes.

Teaching activity 10: Changeability

Discuss with your students some things that change. The aim is to enable students to understand that things change, sometimes reversibly and sometimes irreversibly.

Make a collage or mind map of these things. If the students can't think of examples, you can prompt them with some ideas or visuals such as:

1. Humans and animals grow as they age. People don't stay babies forever.
2. The weather changes. It may be raining for a while, but it doesn't rain forever. The seasons also change.
3. Butterflies and frogs go through lifecycles.
4. Lego models change. They get built from bricks and may get taken apart again.
5. Conversations change as each person contributes. The topic may change completely.
6. Emotions change. You may be happy and then frustrated and then annoyed and then return to feeling OK again (and variations of these).

¹² <https://primaryconnections.org.au/curriculum-resource/change-detectives>

¹³ https://youtu.be/jz0cP_K_CNA

Teaching activity 11: Making jelly

This activity provides a visual example of the irreversibility of some change processes.

Requirements

jelly crystals

hot/boiling water

cold water

bowl or jug to mix the crystals and water

spoon or fork for mixing



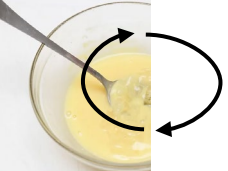
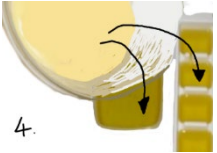
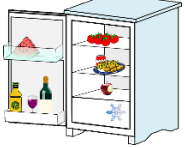

jelly moulds/cups/silicone muffin tins/ice-cube trays to set the jelly in

fridge to set the jelly

Steps

1. Make jelly with your students using the instructions on the packet.
2. At each step of the procedure discuss the changes that the students can see.
3. You can use the worksheet on the next page to record this experiment.

Worksheet: Changes observed during jelly making

Stage of making jelly	Changes observed	Notes/drawings
<p>1. Opening jelly-crystal packet and pouring into bowl</p> 		
<p>2. Adding boiling water to bowl</p> 		
<p>3. Stirring the boiling water and jelly crystals, and adding some cold water as per the packet instructions</p> 		
<p>4. Pouring mixture into jelly moulds or cups or ice-cube trays</p> 		
<p>5. Putting into fridge</p> 		
<p>6. Removing from fridge and eating</p> 		

Teaching activity 12: Inside out

The aim of this activity is to reinforce the fact that different contexts/events can create different feelings and that one person experiences a range of feelings. It is important for students to understand this before developing strategies to help appropriately express feelings and emotions.



[*Inside out: Guessing the feelings*](#)¹⁴ illustrates a number of different feelings.

View the clip with students and use it to explore how each of the students can actively change their own emotions.

When watching the video, pause it each time the screen goes black and a number appears.

At these points, ask the students the following questions:

1. What emotion do you think she was experiencing?
2. Why do you think this?
3. What do you think made her experience that emotion?
4. Do you feel similar or different when you experience that emotion? If appropriate ask students how/why?

Teaching activity 13: Turning uncomfortable emotions into more comfortable emotions











This activity explores strategies students can use to move from uncomfortable to comfortable emotions. To start the activity, students will need to review the places, activities, people/other things that make them feel comfortable feelings/emotions. They also need to note down what internal body feelings they experience across a number of uncomfortable emotions.

Ask the students to use the worksheet on the next page to record helpful ways to respond to uncomfortable feelings. In effect, these are their appropriate strategies to express feelings and emotions.

¹⁴ <https://youtu.be/dOkYKyVFnSs>

Worksheet: Turning uncomfortable emotions into more comfortable emotions

Fill in the green column after you have completed all the other columns.

Uncomfortable feeling/emotion	What this feels like in my body/What other people can notice about me	How I can relax relevant tense body parts	What I/other people can do to help	Comfortable feeling/emotion	People/places/things/activities that make me feel like this
Anger 				Happiness 	
Sadness 				Excitement 	
Frustration 				Satisfaction  or 	
Boredom 				Deep interest/Passion 	
Fear 				Amusement 	

How do students know when they are in control of their emotions?

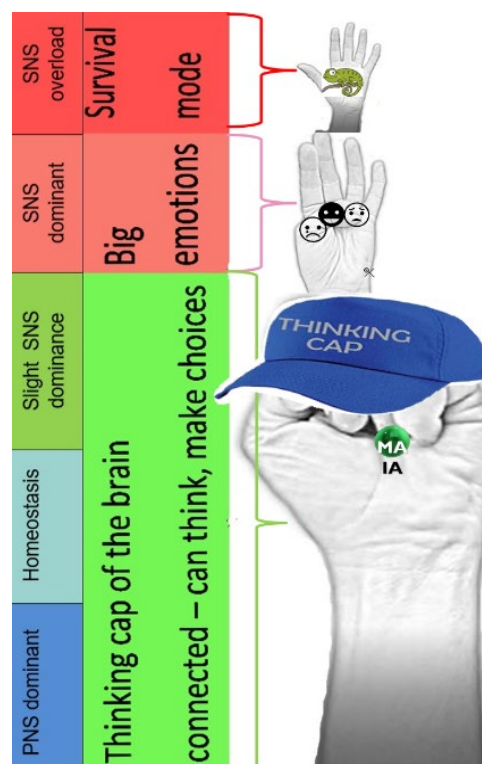
In order for students to have the motivation to implement new skills and strategies to manage their emotions and learn how to effectively self-regulate, they need to understand how emotional dysregulation can impact their engagement in learning, as well as peer and family relationships.

To understand this concept, it is useful for students to complete a regulation scale. This can be done one-on-one with adult support at home or in school, or following a group or class discussion.

As students with autism tend to have poorer interoception than their peers they can miss the internal body signals that indicate their emotional state. This can lead more frequently to their emotions becoming big and overwhelming (compared to those of their peers). Colloquially known as ‘meltdowns’ or ‘shutdowns’, overwhelming emotions and feelings are part of autism, but not an inevitable part. It is more helpful to refer to this emotionally overwhelming state by its biological name: **sympathetic nervous system overload** or **SNS overload**.

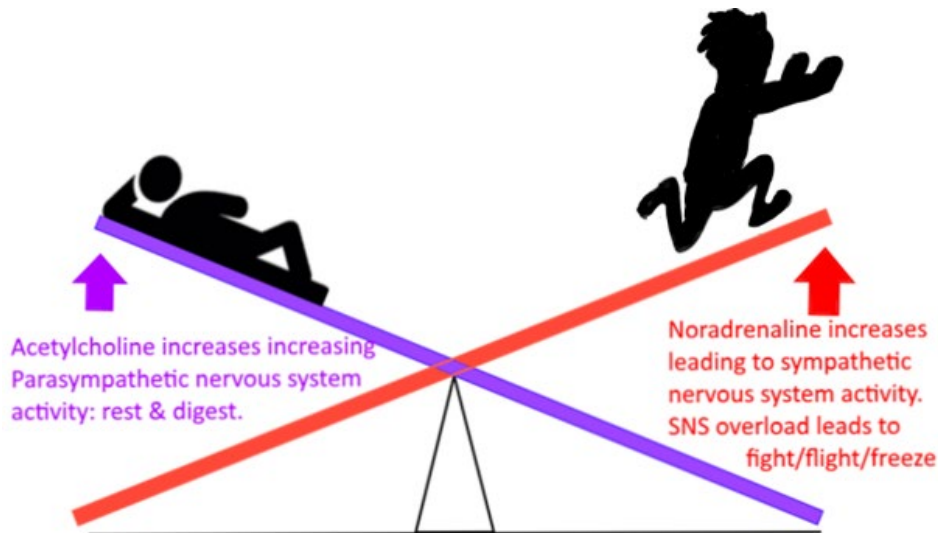
In this state, students are unable to make conscious choices as their survival instinct is in control. The survival instinct remains in control until the impact on the SNS decreases as the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) becomes more activated. (The PNS is dominant when the heart rate slows, muscles relax and circulation improves.)

The PNS and SNS act like a seesaw or a balance scale. As the neurotransmitters for one goes up, the neurotransmitters for the other goes down.



Interoception activities engage the mindfulness centre of the brain as the students are mindfully focusing on the changes in their body state. Engaging in mindful body

awareness/interoception activities helps to activate the PNS, decreasing the SNS. This will not work if the individual is already in survival mode, but it will be effective in the big emotions state.



For additional resources about this topic, see the following from the South Australian Department for Education.



[Regulation scale guide¹⁵](https://www.education.sa.gov.au/doc/regulation-scale-guide)

[HSP431 Regulation scale¹⁶](https://www.education.sa.gov.au/doc/hsp431-regulation-scale)

Teaching activity 14: Example regulation scale

The worksheet on the next page provides students with examples of activities they may regularly do on a scale from when they are 'relatively relaxed' (more in PNS) to when the SNS is overloaded and a meltdown is imminent.

Use the scale to encourage students to identify the bodily feelings and emotions associated with each state and some strategies for managing negative feelings and emotions.

Then using the My regulation scale worksheet, ask students to identify and fill in activities that represent some of the times when their SNS is activated, and times when they are in either homeostasis or PNS.

¹⁵ <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/doc/regulation-scale-guide>

¹⁶ <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/doc/hsp431-regulation-scale>

Worksheet: Example regulation scale

* These activities should be interoception activities that relax the parts of the body that are tense

Regulation zone		Why do I feel like this?	What signals am I getting from my body (interoception)?	What can I (or someone else) do to help to get into the Learning zone? *
Panic zone	SNS overload	Someone took my pen.	My neck is stiff, my head hurts and sometimes my voice gets really loud and I hide or run away.	Leave me alone for ten minutes. Then, show me a picture of my neck-relaxing exercise or hand me my neck-relaxing visual.
	SNS dominant	No one will play with me.	My neck is stiff and my shoulders are tense.	I can do my shoulder tense and relax exercise. Someone could play with me. I could play Minecraft.
Learning zone	Slight SNS dominance	I am doing maths.	I am interested in what I am doing and feel challenged by new things.	I could keep doing maths. I could do a breathing activity.
	Homeostasis	I am practising my graphs.	My hands feel a bit tense or achy. My feet are relaxed.	I could do a tense and relax hand activity.
Comfort zone	PNS dominant	I am playing Minecraft at home in my room.	My body is relaxed, my eyes can get tired.	I could do some body stretches. I could do some hand stretches.

Worksheet: My regulation scale

Regulation zone		Why do I feel like this?	What signals am I getting from my body (interoception)?	What can I (or someone else) do to help to get into the Learning Zone? *
Panic zone	SNS overload			
	SNS dominant			
Learning zone	Slight SNS dominance			
	Homeostasis			
Comfort zone	PNS dominant			

Teaching activity 15: Practising strategies to express emotions

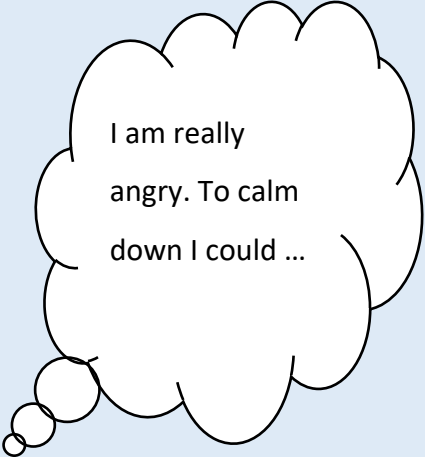
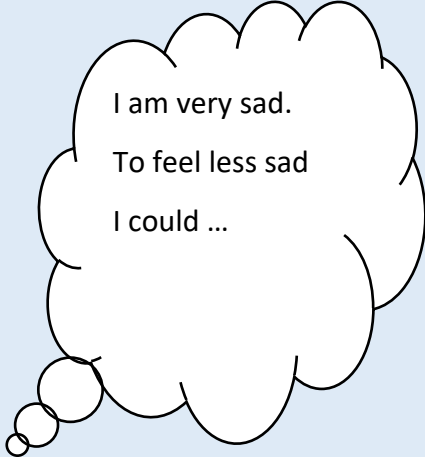

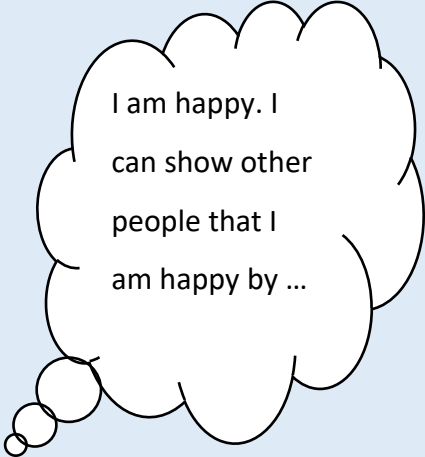
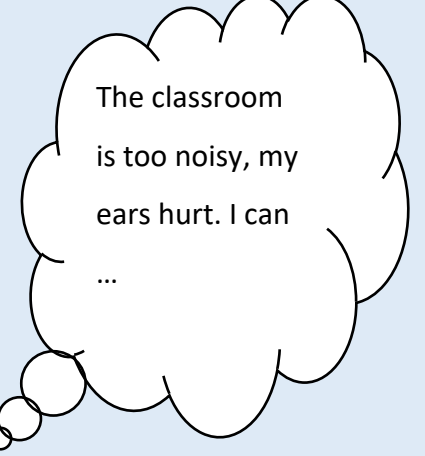
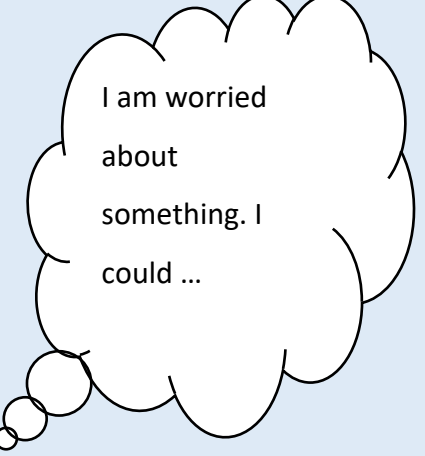
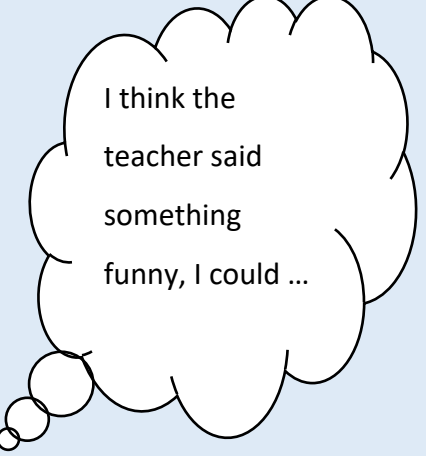
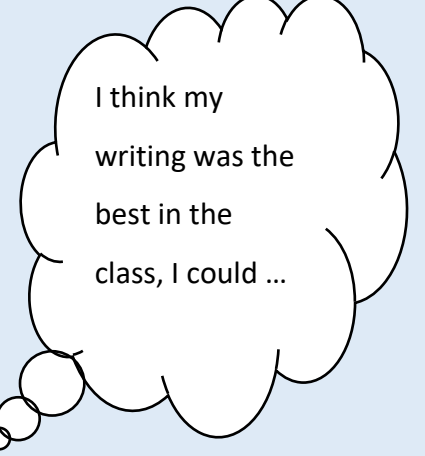
Worksheet A on the next page provides topics for discussion and/or role plays. Each card shows common situations or emotional states and asks students to imagine the types of responses they could have. For example:

- I am very angry. To calm down, I could ...
- I think the teacher said something funny. I could ...
- The classroom is too noisy. My ears hurt. I could ...

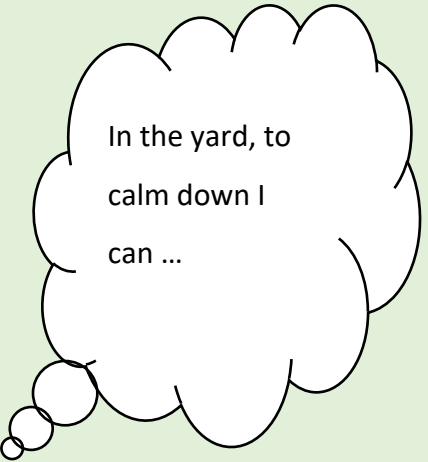
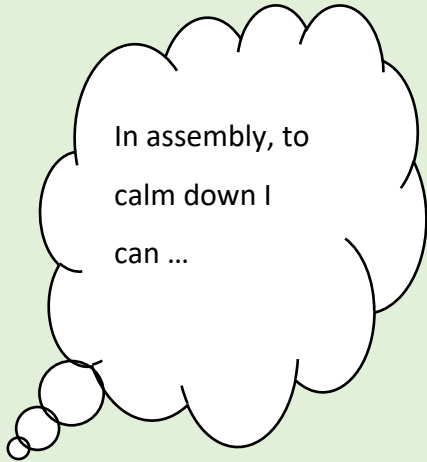
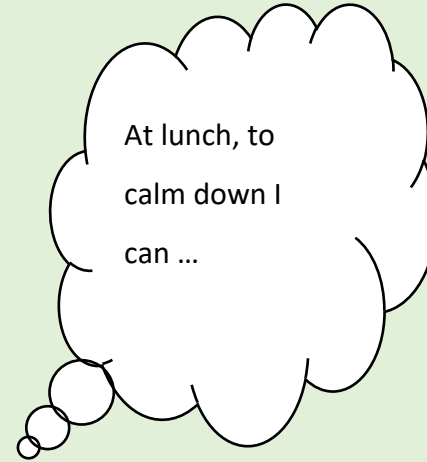
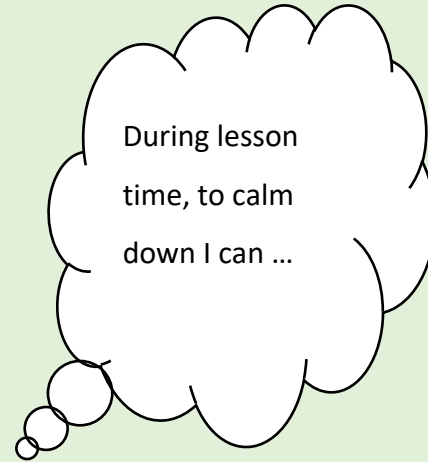
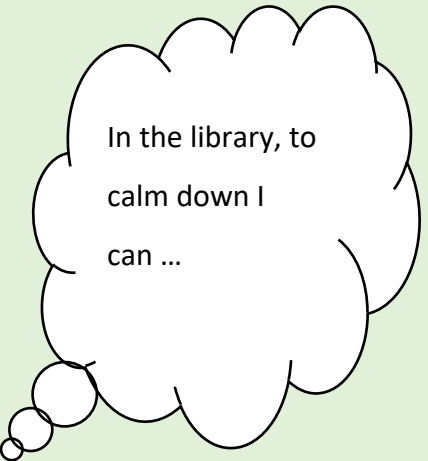
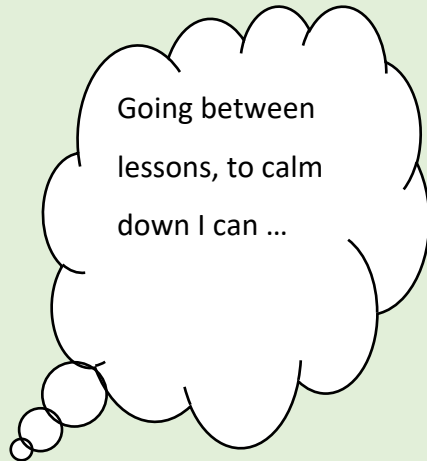
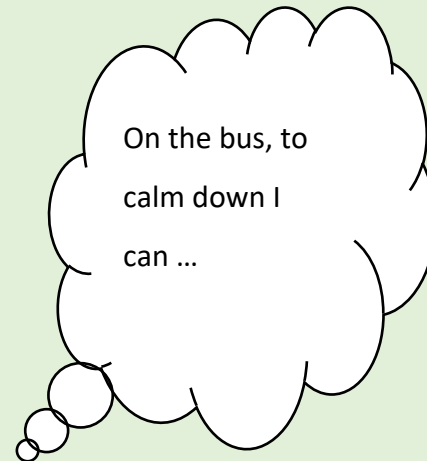
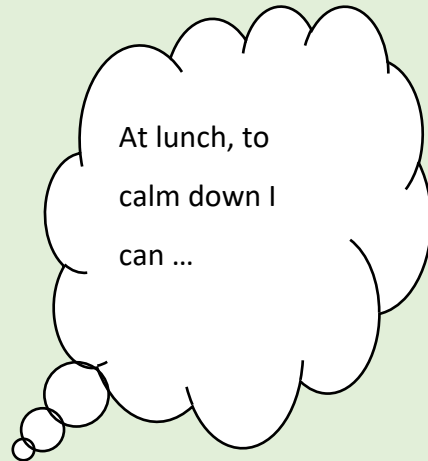
Provide a copy of the worksheet to each student and ask them to work through each scenario individually or as a group. Ask the students to role play their responses to each scenario.

Follow this with worksheet B which provides a set of common student locations (e.g. in the yard, classroom, on the bus). Ask students to imagine the ways in which they might calm themselves if they are upset. Again, ask the students to role play their responses to reinforce ideas.

Worksheet A: Strategies to express emotions

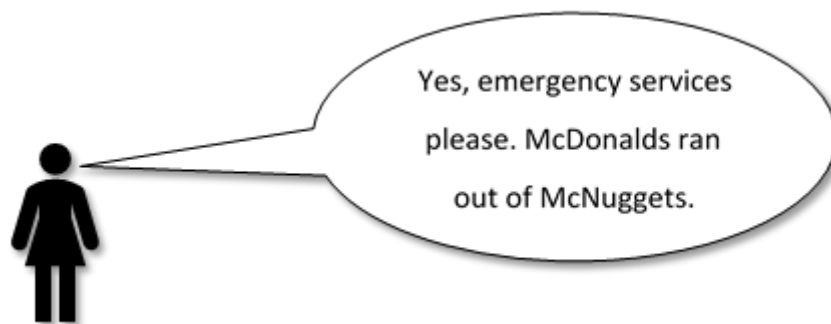
 <p>I am really angry. To calm down I could ...</p>	 <p>I am very sad. To feel less sad I could ...</p>	 <p>I am very excited. I can share my excitement by ...</p>	 <p>I am happy. I can show other people that I am happy by ...</p>
 <p>The classroom is too noisy, my ears hurt. I can ...</p>	 <p>I am worried about something. I could ...</p>	 <p>I think the teacher said something funny, I could ...</p>	 <p>I think my writing was the best in the class, I could ...</p>

Worksheet B: My go-to calm down activities

 <p>In the yard, to calm down I can ...</p>	 <p>In assembly, to calm down I can ...</p>	 <p>At lunch, to calm down I can ...</p>	 <p>During lesson time, to calm down I can ...</p>
 <p>In the library, to calm down I can ...</p>	 <p>Going between lessons, to calm down I can ...</p>	 <p>On the bus, to calm down I can ...</p>	 <p>At lunch, to calm down I can ...</p>

Teaching help-seeking strategies

Asking for help is a complicated concept, which relies on **understanding the level of help required** and **who might provide that help**. For example, it is important to know what actually constitutes an emergency versus what just feels like an emergency to you! This is a particularly hard concept for many students with autism who struggle with the intensity of their feelings and may appear to be highly dramatic. This sense of drama is due to big emotions and is not a deliberate manipulative tactic. It is not just people with autism who struggle with the concept of how serious a situation is, as evidenced by the quote illustrated below from Florida (US) as reported on the news:



Helping students identify *when* to seek help

In order to assist students to assess the seriousness of a situation, it is important to discuss various scenarios, so that they are aware of when they might need to call 000. This should be done sensitively to ensure that students are not traumatised, especially if they have been previously involved in a situation such as a bushfire or car accident.

Teaching activity 16: I might need help because I am hurt when ...

The handout on the next page can be used to help students assess the level of seriousness in relation to responding to physical injury in common situations at school and in the home.

Instructions: Write (or cut out and glue) the scenarios below in the correct box on the handout. Some scenarios may be able to go in more than one box.

Scenarios

I fell over and bumped my knee.	My tummy hurts.
I fell over and cut my leg open.	I have had constipation for a week.
I fell off the monkey bars and my leg bone is sticking out of my leg.	A baby tooth fell out.
I got a paper cut.	I broke an adult tooth.
My hand hurts from writing so much.	



Handout: Scenarios – I might need help because I am hurt when ...

Situation	Requires
	Emergency hospital treatment (call 000)
	Visit to the GP/doctor
	First aid
	Nothing – it will hurt for 5 mins then be ok
	Visit to the dentist

Teaching activity 17: What I can do to get help

Handout A on the next page shows examples of the range of people in a school who can provide help along with effective ways to ask for help. Discuss the examples on this handout with your students.

Then use Handout B to work with students to match school-based situations with how to request help.

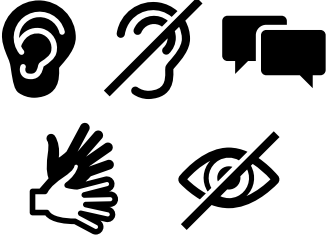
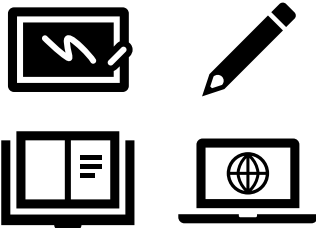

For students who are reluctant to ask for help themselves, it can be useful to create some cards for them to use to ask for help. It is recommended cards be based on a character (from a book, movie or game) that the student really likes. In this way, it is the character asking for help, which can be more comfortable and doable for the student.

Handout C shows some examples of what these cards might look like.

Handout A: Getting help – what I can do to get help examples

The area I need help with	Examples	Who can help me with this	How I can ask them for help or what I can do
Communication	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I don't understand what the teacher is telling me to do. 2. I left my PODD at home so I can't communicate with anyone. 3. I am very anxious today, so I am finding it hard to speak. 4. I can't read the board. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teacher 2. Teacher or TA/SSO 3. Myself 4. Myself or teacher or TA/SSO 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Put my hand up and ask 2. Draw or use a spare PODD 3. Draw or write notes to the teacher or use a spare PODD 4. Ask adult what board says or move closer to board
My work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ I don't know what I am meant to be doing. ➤ I don't understand the work at all. ➤ I started the work but I am not sure what to do next. ➤ I am getting really anxious about not being able to do my work perfectly. 	Myself or teacher or TA/SSO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Ask an adult or peer ➤ Ask an adult or peer ➤ Ask an adult or peer ➤ I can remember it is ok for my work not to be perfect. I can do an interoception activity.
Something that happened to me or someone else	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. I got a papercut and it is bleeding. b. Someone was mean to me in the yard at lunch. c. I saw someone take Jojo's lunch and then Jojo was crying. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Front office b. Teacher on lunch duty c. Teacher on lunch duty 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Ask teacher if I can go to the front office for a plaster b and c. Find the duty teacher and let them know what happened

Handout B: What I can do to get help

The area I need help with	Examples	Who can help me with this	How I can ask them for help
<p>Communication</p> 			
<p>My work</p> 			
<p>Something that happened to me or someone else</p> 			

Handout C: Examples of getting help cards



Photo by [Nynne Schrøder](#) on [Unsplash](#)



Photo by [Grianghraf](#) on [Unsplash](#)

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) System at work when the heart rate slows, muscles relax, and circulation improves.

Perseveration The repetition of a particular response (such as a word, phrase, or gesture) regardless of the absence or cessation of a stimulus.

Sympathetic nervous system (SNS) Part of the autonomic nervous system which 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'.



Student Wellbeing Hub

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