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Navigating unsettled times
A guide for teachers

When uncertainty increases in the wider community, you may notice subtle shifts in your classroom. Some students may appear more restless or reactive. Others may seem quieter, more fatigued, or disengaged. You may also notice changes in yourself. These are nervous system responses.

The window of tolerance - the zone in which students can think clearly, regulate emotions and engage socially - may temporarily narrow. When this happens, behaviour becomes more about protection than learning.

It's important to remember that your presence is a powerful signal of co-regulation.

You may notice that students might:

- Seek reassurance more often
- Ask repeated questions
- Show lower frustration tolerance
- Withdraw socially
- Experience sleep disruption
- Check devices more frequently
- Have difficulty sustaining focus

These responses are common during periods of perceived instability.
Before addressing behaviour, consider regulation.

Regulation before education

Beginning lessons with two or three minutes of nervous system settling can significantly widen the window of tolerance. Here are some activities you might like to try:

Belly breathing

1. Invite students to place one hand on their stomach.
2. Breathe in slowly through the nose so the belly rises.
3. Slowly breathe out through the mouth. Inhale for 4, exhale for 6.
4. Repeat 5 times.

Explain that this signals to the brain that it is safe to relax.

Psychological sigh

Invite students to take 2 short inhales through the nose, followed by a slow exhale through the mouth.

Repeat as needed when anxious or tense.

This is one of the fastest ways to calm the stress response.

Grounding through the senses
Ask your students to:
Notice five things they can see,
Four, they can feel,
Three, they can hear,
Two, they can smell,
One, they can taste.

Sensory grounding helps by bringing attention back to the present moment, reminding the brain and body that you are safe right now.

Butterfly hugs
Also known as bilateral stimulation, instruct students to cross their arms over their chest, resting a hand on each upper arm. Then alternate tapping each side one after the other. Try this for 2 minutes.



Sensory stomp & shake
This exercise helps students release excess energy or emotion by engaging in movement.

Ask students to stomp their feet & shake their bodies for 30 seconds. Followed by a deep breath in & out

This promotes regulation, allowing students to settle & reduce stress by releasing tension before grounding. This is a great activity to do between lessons.

Colour breathing
Ask students to choose a colour that they find soothing, relaxing & calming.

Then share the following instructions: "Whilst breathing through your nose, imagine breathing the colour & the feeling in & send it through your body. Imagine the colour dispersing as you release the breath through your mouth."

Repeat as required or encourage them to use it to self-soothe when stressed.

Emotions wheel
Sometimes uncertainty creates unspecified feelings of "something isn't right." Helping students build emotional literacy by identifying their feelings increases regulation.

You can:
- Display an emotion wheel in the classroom
- Begin the day with a quiet "check-in"
- Invite students to name one word that describes their state

When students can name an emotion, its intensity often decreases. This is called the "Name it to tame it" approach, you can validate the emotion whilst also encouraging the students to diffuse the emotion by recognising it as temporary. For example: "It makes sense that you might feel unsettled, distracted, or even irritated. Emotions are information. We can notice them without letting them take over."

Maintaining structure
Routine remains one of your strongest tools. Clear lesson openings, visible schedules, transition warnings, and predictable expectations create containment.
If discussions about regional events arise, acknowledge calmly and briefly. Provide reassurance without detail. Then return focus to what is within control in the classroom. For example: “Developments are happening in our region. Adults are monitoring carefully. Here, we are safe and focusing on today’s work.”

Containment prevents emotional escalation.
When students bring up worries or strong feelings, simply reacting with reassurance, correction, or more information can sometimes increase anxiety. Containment is about providing a calm, steady presence that acknowledges feelings without amplifying them. By responding in a regulated way - using a calm voice, clear boundaries, and brief, factual statements - you help students feel heard and safe while preventing emotions from spiralling.

Teacher self-care & professional sustainability
You cannot co-regulate if you are depleted.
Periods of uncertainty can increase hypervigilance – constantly checking updates, scanning for risk, feeling mentally “on edge.” Over time, this narrows your own window of tolerance. Be kind to yourself; this is normal. To help widen your window of tolerance, you can lean into protective strategies, small practices that help you regulate, ground yourself and relieve tension in your body.

Protective strategies include:
- Setting specific times to check the news rather than continuous scrolling
- Taking 3 slow belly breaths between classes
- Brief outdoor movement during breaks (where safe to do so)
- Eating regularly and staying hydrated
- Sharing concerns with trusted colleagues

At the end of the school day, consider a “sunset reset”:
1. Pause.
2. Take 3 slow breaths.
3. Name 1 thing that went well.
4. Consciously release 1 thing that did not.
5. Small resets prevent cumulative stress.

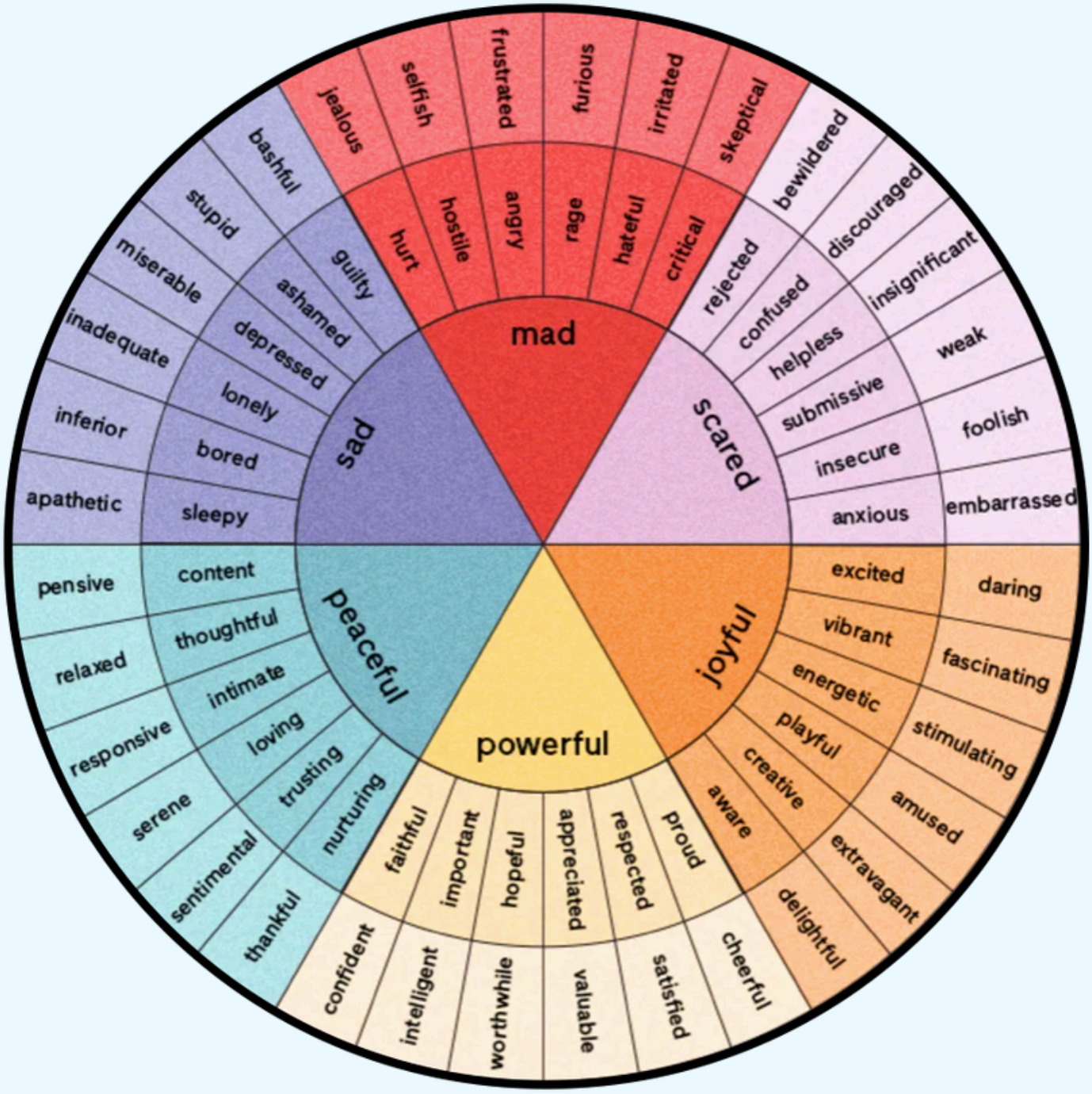
In times of uncertainty, it’s important to remember that stress responses are normal, and students’ (and our own) windows of tolerance may temporarily narrow. Maintaining predictable routines helps restore stability, while supporting emotional literacy builds resilience and strengthens the capacity to learn.

Focusing on regulation and fostering connection is protective for both students and staff. Schools do not need to solve global uncertainty - their most important role is to remain steady, providing a safe, calm, and supportive environment for everyone.

Emotion Wheel

What emotion are you experiencing?

We all feel a range of emotions. Emotions are not “good” or “bad.” We experience these in different intensities and the first step is to name the emotion we are feeling.



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