Steps to: Emotional wellbeing success

Steps to emotion regulation

Emotion regulation is a fundamental skill that empowers young people to understand, manage, and respond to their emotions effectively. As educators and parents/caregivers, nurturing this skill in young minds is crucial for fostering overall emotional intelligence and wellbeing. It is not an inherent trait but rather a learned skill that requires intentional nurturing and support.

How Young People Learn to Regulate Emotions: Modelling and Co-Regulation
Young people learn emotion regulation through a combination of experiences, guidance, and continuous practice. Parents and teachers play a crucial, dual role in this process.

The Power of Modelling (Learned Observation)
Children learn emotion regulation primarily by observing and imitating the people around them. From a very young age, they absorb information from their environment, including how to handle feelings.

- Mechanism: When caregivers and educators model healthy emotion regulation–such as expressing emotions constructively and handling stress calmly–children are more likely to copy these behaviors.
- Goal: The goal is to provide positive, visible examples, showing how to learn from mistakes and demonstrating vulnerability.
- Result: The student learns that errors are opportunities for growth (a growth mindset), empowering them to develop these essential skills themselves.

The Core Skill: Co-Regulation
Co-regulation is essential in helping young people build their emotion regulation skills. It is a collaborative, external process where the young person relies on an emotionally regulated adult (caregiver, parent, or teacher) for support in navigating their intense emotions.

- Mechanism: When an emotionally regulated adult shows understanding, validates their feelings, the young person is effectively learning from this experience, building the neural pathways for their own emotional control.
- Goal: This external support builds the foundation for the student's transition to self-regulation. The goal is for them to internalize the adult's response and emotional understanding.
- Result: The student starts internalizing the skills learned from the adult, becoming capable of managing their emotions independently.

Cultivating Emotional Mastery

Emotions are vital tools: they are good for motivation, organising our actions and behaviours, and influencing our communication with others and the environment around us. Crucially, emotional regulation is not about "not feeling" emotions. It is about creating a sense of control or masteryover our emotional experiences and therefore having a choice in how we manage or express our emotions. Every emotion we experience has a function or purpose, so a key part of regulation is learning to tolerate unpleasant emotions without being overwhelmed.

When we master Emotion Regulation we can:

1. Understand the emotions we experience
What can add to an upset feeling quicker than most anything else? Not understanding why you're upset, or what exact emotion you're experiencing. When you understand and can name your emotions you feel less frustrated and make more informed decisions.

2. Decrease unwanted emotions and increase wanted emotions
Everyone will experience unwanted emotions throughout their life, but some people experience these emotions more often than others. When these emotions persist we see emotional dysregulation, and if not supported this can turn into more pervasive mental health difficulties such as mood and anxiety disorders. Emotion regulation strategies look to combat this by actively increasing the pleasant emotions in our lives.

3. Decrease our emotional vulnerability
Reducing emotional vulnerability means that you're less likely to experience unwanted emotions. You are aware of situations or triggers that may make you more vulnerable and are therefore able to problem solve or make a plan to help you before the situation occurs. When we reduce emotional vulnerability we also experience unpleasant emotions with less intensity and distress. We do this by increasing positive emotions, being more prepared for difficult situations and looking after our bodies

4. Increase emotion tolerance
Increasing emotion tolerance means developing the capacity to handle and accept intense emotions without being overwhelmed or reactive, allowing individuals to maintain composure and make rational decisions even in emotionally charged situations.

Putting Emotion Regulation into Practice: Deconstructing the Experience

Understanding the full landscape of an emotion is essential for effective regulation. We can break down any emotional experience by examining its core components. This practice allows students to gain a concrete understanding of their feelings and gives them a point of choice in how to respond.

To effectively manage an emotion, ask yourself (or guide the student to ask):

- Look Like (Behavior): What physical actions do we see? What specific posture or body language is present? What expression is on the face?
- Feel Like (Sensation): What is happening internally in the body? What are the internal body sensations (e.g., tense shoulders, fast heart rate, sinking stomach)?
- Think Like (Cognition): What specific thoughts, perspectives, or cognitions occur alongside this emotion? (e.g., "I can't do this," "They don't like me," or "This isn't fair.")

This process of emotional deconstruction and evaluation is not a one-time event; it is an active form of reflection that, like any skill (such as executive functioning skills), takes repetition and practice to master. Consistent reflection strengthens the neural pathways for self-awareness and self-regulation.

In addition to this self-awareness, considering the context of the emotional event is key for proactive management.

Factors Influencing Emotional Response

- Vulnerability Factors: These are internal or environmental obstacles that make it harder to handle emotions well. These factors–such as hunger, tiredness, physical pain, or personal stressors–make us more sensitive, reactive, or less equipped to deal with big emotions. Recognising them means you can either mitigate the factor (e.g., eat, rest) or accept that emotions will be closer to the surface and plan for increased tolerance.

- Triggering/Prompting Event: This is the spark that initiates the emotional reaction. This can be an external thought, a person, an interaction, or an environment/situation (e.g., a critical comment, a specific academic challenge, or exam time). Identifying the trigger allows you to prepare your self-care or coping strategies, or practice increasing your emotion tolerance to "ride the wave" of the unpleasant emotion.

- Protective Factors: These are internal strengths or external supports that increase a person's ability to cope with stress, resist emotional distress, and maintain wellbeing. They act as buffers against negative emotional experiences.

When we intentionally understand these different internal and external factors–including our physical sensations, thoughts, vulnerability, and protective factors–we gain crucial insights into our emotional experience and are therefore better equipped to regulate and manage emotions more effectively. If a student knows what they are feeling and has a strong sense of why, they can proactively choose effective coping strategies and create a personalised path back to a calm or settled state.

Bringing about this level of awareness of their current state and possible future events empowers young people with the confidence and efficacy that they can handle intense emotions effectively. Emotion regulation is an invaluable life skill that lays the foundation for positive mental health, successful social interactions, and persistent academic engagement.

It is important for educators and caregivers to remember to be patient and understanding during this learning process. Emotion regulation is a complex skill that involves rewiring neural pathways and integrating cognitive function; it takes time, repetition, and practice to develop fully. Young people will inevitably experience setbacks or challenges along the way. Encouraging their efforts, utilizing co-regulation, and validating their emotions–even when they struggle–provides the non-judgmental support necessary for their ongoing emotional development and eventual resilience.



Emotion regulation toolkit

The emotion regulation toolkit helps us “in the heat of the moment” to self-soothe & feel ok or settled enough to join back in when we are ready!

Ideas for your emotion regulation kit:

I. Calm your senses
What do you need to add or remove to calm your senses? Use headphones to play music or block noise, do some calm breathing, feel different textures or use fidget toys. Think about what smells & tastes are comforting to you.

2. Distraction
What can I do to put my thoughts & attention somewhere else? Try some word searches, puzzles, colouring pages, sudoku or read a book.

3. Feel other emotions
What will help you to shift your emotions? Read a joke book to make you laugh, look at photos of family, friends & pets or go outside & enjoy nature.

4. Move your body
Emotions are felt in the body so what can we do to move them on? Go for a walk, bounce a ball, do 10 star jumps.

5. Take a breath
We take our breath with us everywhere. Stop, pause, take a breath.

When you have big feelings, use this toolkit to find things you can do to help you feel better.

Maybe there is a quiet space in your classroom where you can use your toolkit!

What is in your toolkit?

- Get a box or bag to hold your emotion regulation items
- Decorate it to make it special to you
- Fill the toolkit with items that help you calm down
- If an item is too big, re-place it with a smaller object that reminds you of it like a photo.



Emotion map

This exercise is all about practice when its easy so its easy when its hard. You can use the emotion map exercise as a class lesson or work through this individually with students. We can use this resource to support and explore any emotion.

To use this resource start with the box on the left.

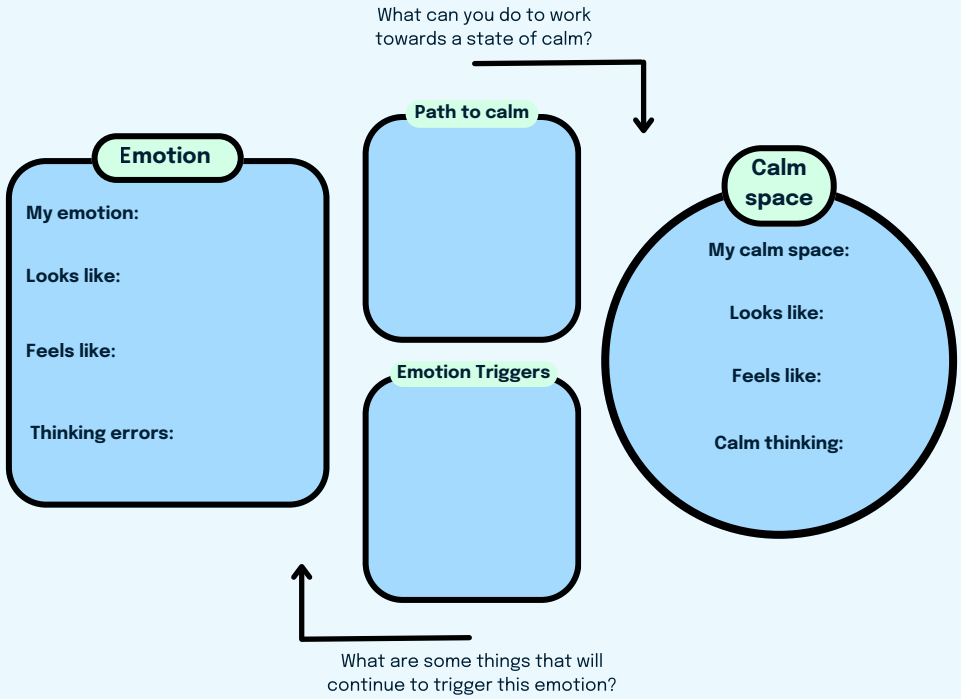
1. Name the emotion - this reduces the intensity of emotion just by simply labelling the emotion, this also supports building emotional vocabulary and emotional awareness.
2. What does this emotion look like? - ask students, what does the outside world see? What would my teacher see what would my peers see?
3. What does this emotion feel like? - consider your behaviours and body sensations.
4. What does this emotion think like? Are their thinking errors or bias present? This step adds perspective to our thoughts and helps students notice emotional bias vs rational thoughts.

When we know what the target emotion looks and feels like we move to the circle on the right.

1. What does my calm space look like? How do I look when I am calm and what physical space do I like?
2. How do I feel when I am calm? This builds introspective awareness to what a settled state feels like.
3. How does a calm brain think? Is their positive or more balances narrative or is it quiet and calm?

We then move to the inside squares the most powerful piece.

1. The path to calm. If we know the emotion and we know the calm state we want to get to we need to work out the how. This is where personal strengths and strategies come in.
2. Triggers and what makes us vulnerable. We all have triggers and vulnerabilities. If we know what may push us into our emotion box then we can be prepared to action the path to calm if needed.



Emotion map

What can you do to work towards a state of calm?

Emotion

My emotion:

Looks like:

Feels like:

Thinking errors:

Path to calm

Emotion triggers

Calm space

My calm space:

Looks like:

Feels like:

Calm thinking:

What are some things that will continue to trigger this emotion?

My emotional wellbeing cope ahead plan

A cope ahead plan is a strategy to help you prepare for and handle tough situations. This helps and supports your ability to manage your emotions and behaviors when facing challenges or difficulties. A cope ahead plan focuses on what you know about yourself and the strengths and strategies you have.

Emotional wellbeing in action
(what does it look and feel like? what am I able to do when I am well?)

Things that affect my emotional wellbeing
(triggers, situations, vulnerabilities)

These are the things I can do to improve my emotional wellbeing
(coping strategies, my strengths)

If I need extra support, these are people I can go to:
(who do you have at school or home?)