

English and School Education

Supporting students during difficult times

A guide for teachers

Developed by Marie Delaney

About the author

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Her publications include for Worth Publishing 'Teaching the Unteachable' 'What can I do with the kid who?' and 'Attachment for Teachers'. and for Oxford University Press, 'Into the Classroom: Special Educational Needs '. She is co-author of the British Council teachers' course materials on Inclusion and the Language for Resilience research report.

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Introduction

These activities are designed to support teachers who are working with students affected by trauma. It is recognised that the teachers may also have been affected by trauma and may still be working in traumatic circumstances. It is recommended therefore that attention is paid to their own self-care and support networks. For this reason, teachers may find some of the activities useful for themselves, particularly the grounding and regulation activities.

School as a protective factor

Schools can provide many factors which we know help to enhance children and young people's resilience at times of crisis, even in the most traumatic times. These factors include:

- Having a relationship with at least one caring adult
- Having someone or some way to make sense of the experience, to understand why it happened or is happening
- Having a sense of belonging and connection
- Having responsibility for someone or something e.g. a specific job
- Having empathy and being able to see another's perspective
- Having a sense of optimism
- Knowing and acknowledging your strengths

In addition, the key needs for all the school community who have experienced a severe collective trauma will be:

- Safety – physical and emotional
- Predictability and routine
- Connection and belonging
- Flexibility
- Choice and control
- Community
- Authenticity
- Fun

How to use this guide

This guide is meant to be used with the accompanying slides. These activities have been designed to give teachers some resources for supporting students during these times and to try to meet some of these needs. Teachers can choose to use one or more of these activities at a time, balancing them with other learning material and activities as appropriate.



The activities have been divided into six sections.

1. Focussing attention language activities
2. Grounding activities
3. Naming and expressing feelings
4. Drawing activities
 - 4.1. Activities to explore internal thoughts and feelings
 - 4.2. Drawing around your hand exercises
 - 4.3. Resilience building activities
 - 4.4. Self-esteem building activities
5. Using stories
6. Check In and Check Out Activities



1. Focusing attention language activities

Slide number 3: Find the words

Write a very long word on the board or spell it out to students. Ask them to work in small groups to find as many smaller words as possible in the long word. For example, from the word 'Mediterranean', we can make 'ran, red, edit, tear,' They can only use the letters in the word.

Slide number 4

Start your class by putting some word puzzles on the board and asking students to work out the trick to be able to read them. These logical puzzles help to get students' attention in the room when their minds might be full up of other thoughts.

1. Devowelling – all the vowels are taken out of the words
2. Run it all together – all the words are run together without any spaces between words
3. Reading it backwards – read the sentence from the right which is not usual in English.

These are English language activities, but teachers could make up their own puzzles in their own language or ask students to do it. Students often like to make up puzzles for each other

2. Grounding activities

Rationale: Activities to release stress

When students are very stressed or have been very affected by traumatic events, they are not able to talk about it logically or engage in learning tasks which require rational thinking. Students affected by trauma often revert very quickly to their old reptilian brain, the fight/flight/freeze response. When this happens, the neo-cortex or thinking part of their brain becomes unplugged and unable to function. When a person is very anxious, they are not grounded in the present, because they are continually worrying about the future and what might happen. They can be in a state of hypervigilance, which means they are continually on the lookout for danger and find it difficult to settle to learn. Physical and concrete activities can bring the student back into their bodies, into the present moment and help them to regulate physically before they can attempt to learn. These activities can also be sensory focused as people affected by trauma are often not in touch with their own senses.

Slide No 5

Physical activities

- Shake it out – Sometimes we need to do something physical to release stress. Stand up, shake your left leg, then your right leg, then your left arm, right arms, keep shaking all of them and shake your head and body.
- Stomp – stomp your feet hard and then blow away the anxiety in a big out-breath.
- Muscle tense and then relax – Tense all your muscles, hold it for a few seconds, then relax and breathe out or shout out
- Balloon breathing – Breathe in through your nose and then breathe out slowly through your mouth and with your hands hold an imaginary balloon which you are blowing up. As you breathe out, make the shape of the imaginary balloon bigger and bigger.
- Shoulder roll breathing – Sit comfortably, then roll your shoulder back as you breathe in through your nose and roll them back as you breathe out through your mouth. Do this a few times.
- Five Finger breathing – This exercise gives students a physical focus as well as breathing. It can be easier for younger students to do. Ask students to sit comfortably. Tell them to slowly trace around each finger of one hand with their forefinger from the other hand. As they move their finger up each finger they should breathe in deeply through their nose and when they move their finger downwards they should breathe out deeply through their mouth.
- Tree pose – Imagine you are a tree, put your feet firmly on the floor, stand tall, imagine your feet are the roots, your body is the trunk, reach out your arms high and wide for the branches
- Teach the Power Hug – Put your left hand on your right shoulder, your right hand on your left shoulder, tap twice on your shoulders, squeeze the top of your arms, squeeze each arm twice, say something positive to yourself

- Inner smile visualisation – Sit comfortably. Imagine you have a big smile in your stomach and it is getting bigger and bigger and bigger. Smile as you think about it.
- Focus on the room – Count the bricks, find everything that's green, count the squares

Mindful breathing exercises

Mindful breathing exercises are breathing exercises which help the student to focus on their own breathing and to control it so that they can calm down and relax. These are useful techniques to learn but teachers need to be careful when introducing them. Students affected by trauma often find it difficult and even unsafe to sit quietly with their thoughts. Physical activities such as balloon breathing and shoulder roll breathing are a good introduction because students have something to do, which distracts their thinking. Do the more physical exercises before attempting any mindful breathing exercises.

- 4/7 breathing: Ask students to sit comfortably, with their eyes closed or looking at the floor if they do not want to close their eyes. Ask them to focus on their own breathing for a moment, to notice how they are breathing. Then to breathe in through their nose for a count of 4 and then breathe out slowly with a long breath, through their mouth, for a count of 7. Do this a few times and let students do it at their own pace. Then ask them to take a few deep breaths normally and bring their attention back to the room.
- Square breathing: Ask students to find a comfortable seated position and to close their eyes or defocus by looking at the floor. Let them know that they can always make adjustments during the exercise. Quiet moves will not disturb the relaxation. Ask them to help their body to begin to relax by taking a few slow, deep breaths. Then, breathe in slowly while counting to four. Then hold their breath and count silently to four. Then let their breath out in an easy, soothing way while counting to four. Then wait and count silently to four before breathing in for four again and continuing to do the exercise again. Continue this for a few more minutes. Then take a few deep breaths normally and bring their attention back to the room.

Slide number 6: Alphabet activities

Doing activities which require students to use their left logical brain can bring the brain out of flight or flight and distract from anxious memories and emotions.

Ask students to write the letters of the alphabet down the side of their page and then to do one of the following:

- Alphabet – write down things which begin with A-Z, one thing for each letter
- A-Z – how many feeling words can you write? Write one feeling for each letter
- A-Z – things about me. Write something about yourself for each letter. For example, something you like doing, an adjective that describes you, a food you like etc
- A-Z – things that help me feel better. Write one thing for each letter.
- Combine with clicking and tapping in rhythm. When students have thought of some things, ask them to read them aloud and to click or tap their fingers or clap their hands as they say each thing. This releases stress and regulates the body.

Slide number 7: Sensory activities

- Ask students to take a sip of water and roll the water around in their mouth, noticing how it feels in different parts of their mouth.
- Ask students to notice and name: 5 things I see, 4 things I hear, 3 things I feel, 2 things I smell, 1 thing I taste
- Ask students to notice and name: 5 colours I see, 4 shapes I see, 3 soft things I see, 2 people I see, 1 book I see
- Ask students to press and draw around their hand.
- Mindful walking – ask students to walk around the room quietly and notice how their feet feel on the floor, how they are breathing, how the air feels on their body
- Ask students to focus on an object in room and think about it – what do you see, smell, touch, taste
- Senses dictation. Tell students to draw 5 columns on their paper. Put the following headings:

I see	I hear	I touch/feel	I smell	I taste
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Then dictate some words which the students know, perhaps words you want to revise from a class topic. Ask the students to notice how they experience the word when you say it – do they see it, hear it, touch or feel it, smell it or taste it? For example, if you say 'rain', do they see rain, hear rain, feel rain or have a feeling about it, smell rain, taste rain. Tell them not to think too much about it and just go with their first thought. They can put a word in more than one column if they want to but they should try to notice what happens first in their minds. Then ask students to compare their lists and notice which of their senses they use most. This is a good exercise for students to understand that all our brains work differently and that is a good thing.

3. Naming and Expressing Feelings

Slide number 8: General tips

Students who have been affected by trauma may find it difficult to give a name to their feelings. Being able to name a feeling is important in helping to process trauma. The phrase 'name it to tame it', created by Dr Dan Siegel, means that naming a feeling helps to make it less overwhelming. Giving a name to a feeling takes it from inside the isolation of our own heads and makes it external so it can be thought about. When working with students on naming feelings, the teacher should remember that they cannot fix the students' problems but that giving them a chance to express their feelings in a safe space is very helpful. The teacher needs to show they have heard what has been said by acknowledging the feeling. Ask yourself as a teacher – 'Am I listening to reply?' or 'Am I listening to understand?'

We often do not listen properly because we want to suggest, advise and encourage the student and before they have finished talking, we are already thinking about our answer. We do not always listen to what the student is really saying.

Normalisation and Generalisation

It can be helpful to validate and normalise the student's feelings. Validation is the recognition and acceptance of another person's thoughts, feelings, sensations, and behaviours as understandable. Self-validation is the recognition and acceptance of your own thoughts, feelings, sensations and behaviours as understandable. By being present, by reflecting on what the child tells you and by helping the child to express his or her own feelings and showing that you genuinely understand and recognise these feelings, you may help the child validate his or her reactions and feelings.

For example, if a student is very tired in school and you think there has been difficulties at home, you could say, *'Yes, I know that many boys and girls find it difficult to sleep if they worry about something. It is very common not to sleep well if you are sad, angry or confused about something, especially if it involves someone you love.'*

Generalisation is related to normalisation. The purpose of generalisation is to widen the perspective to make sure that the child realises that many other children share his or her reactions. It is not sufficient for the child to realise that his or her reactions are common and perfectly normal in an unusual situation. It is important to stress that many other boys and girls are sharing the same feelings and reactions. This helps reduce the feeling of isolation and can give hope.

"You may for example say, 'I know a lot of boys and girls who are feeling the same way as you are. Some of them are your age, some are older. I also know some children who are now feeling much better as they talked to someone they trust"

Slide Number 9: Feelings drill

Show the students a picture of an object which you want them to learn or revise. Ask them the question:

What's this? ...

Get an answer e.g. *it's a book*

Then ask them again 'A *what?*' and get the answer 'It's a *book*'.

Repeat this with a snappy rhythm.

What's this?

It's a book.

A what?

It's a book

Then ask them to say the words with certain emotions. e.g.

Say it as if you are...

Happy, sad, bored, angry, scared, excited

This exercise is a fun way to begin to express and work with feelings.

Slide number 10: Guess my feeling

This a miming game. Ask a student to go out of the room and to think of a feeling they can show to the group. Ask them to then walk back into the room as if they were feeling this. For example, walk in as if they are sad, happy, angry, disappointed etc. Have a list of feelings ready so that you can suggest a word if the student cannot think of one. Ask the group to guess the feeling. When someone guesses it correctly, it is their turn to go out of the room and think of a feeling.

This activity can lead into a discussion about the difference between different feelings e.g. angry and disappointed or it can show us that it is important to be aware of other people's feelings.

Slide number 11: Inside and outside my head

Ask students to draw a picture of a head. Then ask them to write or draw thoughts and things that are in their head at the moment and things that are outside their heads, for example what other people can see and hear or things that they are dealing with.

Ask students to share their drawings if they wish with a partner.

Students are often surprised that other people have the same worries and anxieties as them. Putting the thoughts and worries on paper can decrease their intensity as they become external to the student.

Slide number 12: Colour my feelings

Students choose a colour to represent different feelings and if they wish, they can explain them to others. It is important to tell students that there are no right or wrong answers in this exercise as the choice of colour is personal and unique to each student. If students like this activity, you can ask them to use the colours at different stages of the lesson to let the teacher know how they are feeling.

Slide number 13: Use of metaphors

Ask students to think about feelings as a metaphor. For example, complete the sentences

Happiness is like....

Feeling safe is like....

Feeling unsafe is like...

You can give some examples to show students what you mean. For example,

Happiness is like.... a rainbow ...sunshine... hugs... flying high.... opening a present... scoring a goal...

Feeling safe is like... a warm bath...a nice dinner... having a lovely blanket

Feeling unsafe is like... sharks attacking...being frozen... falling down a big hole...

4. Drawing activities

General Information

Drawing activities and using metaphors can be a way of expressing feelings which is safer than talking directly about them. The metaphor of the drawing keeps the feelings contained within a safe boundary. Even putting a box around an activity can make it feel safer than a blank piece of paper.

4.1 Activities to explore internal thoughts and feelings

Slide number 14: Spaceship drawing

Ask students to draw a large circle on their paper. Tell them that this represents the inside of a spaceship. It is their spaceship and they are going on a long journey, for about a year, into space. They should draw inside the ship anything or anyone which they want to take with them or they think they will need. Explain that this is a fantasy so they can design in any way they want and it does not need to be realistic.

Possible feedback: The inside of the spaceship often shows themes from a child's internal world. It can be discussed with the student as a way of starting a conversation or it can lead into a creative story writing activity. The teacher should not interpret it but simply wonder about it with a student. For example, 'I see a lot of doors, I wonder what that means'

Slide number 15: Stick figures - Exploring feelings and thoughts

Ask students to draw a stick figure of a girl, if female, or a boy if male. Then ask them to draw a speech bubble and to write what the girl or boy is saying. Tell them there is no right or wrong answer, they should write whatever comes into their minds.

Then ask them to draw a thought bubble and to write what the child is thinking. Some might choose to draw this.

Finally ask them to draw a heart and write what the child is feeling.

Ask them to share their drawings with their partner and comment on what they notice

Possible Feedback

This activity can sometimes show what a student is really thinking and feeling, particularly a student who is quieter or unable to admit to any difficulties. It can lead to a discussion about how we sometimes say one thing and think another thing. As a classroom activity, it can act as a prompt to storywriting, where students can explore feelings and actions through the stick figure

or simply as a check in which gives an opportunity to share some thoughts and feelings if needed.

4.2 Drawing around your hand exercises

Slide numbers 16-18

1. Ask students to draw around their hand. Then on each finger to write the 5 senses – I see, I hear, I touch or feel, I smell, I taste. Then ask them to think of something for each sense. This can be combined with the Five Finger Breathing exercise. As they trace each finger, they should focus on what they see, hear, touch or feel, smell and taste.
2. Ask students to draw around one of their hands. Then on each finger to write something which helps them feel safe. If necessary, show your own example.
3. Another variation is to ask students to write something on each finger that they would like people to know about them.

Possible Feedback: Pressing down and drawing around a hand can be a grounding activity. It also gives students a safe space to put their thoughts and ideas. It can be kept as a reminder of things which help the student to feel safe when they are feeling anxious or upset.

4.3 Resilience building activities

Slide number 19: My Happiness Shield

Ask students to think about what makes them happy and puts them in a positive mood.

Explain that this can be like a shield which protects them at difficult times. If necessary, give your own examples. For example, thinking about my favourite song.

Ask them to work on their own and draw their happiness shield. Give them time to do this.

Then ask them to share their ideas with a partner.

Possible Feedback: the idea of a shield which protects us from danger can be a powerful support for students. By focusing on things which are good and make them feel happy, they are building their own resilience and coping strategies.

Slide number 20: My Superhero

Introduce the idea of a superhero and give examples, such as Superman. Explain that superheroes try to protect people from bad things. Ask students to imagine they could design a superhero who would help and support them in difficult times or when they are feeling unsafe. Ask them to draw this superhero, to give them a name and decide what their superpowers are.

Ask them to share their superheroes with the group and explain that they can keep this drawing and look at it when they need some extra support.

Slide number 21: Leaves of Hope

If possible, bring in some leaves for students to look at. Ask them to imagine these leaves could bring them hope for the future. Ask them to draw some leaves and to write on each leaf something which brings them hope. For example, having fun with their friends, learning something new. Ask them to keep their leaves and add things to them as they think of them.

4.4 Self-esteem building activities

General Information

When students are experiencing big feelings such as fear, anxiety and anger, they can often feel bad about themselves, believing that somehow the bad things which are happening are their fault. Teachers can help by including activities which remind students of their own identity and their positive strengths.

Slide number 22: My Name Poster

Make a poster of your own. Write your name in the middle of the poster and then draw things around the page which are important to you and tell people something about you. Only draw things which you are happy to share. Include some things which are low risk to share, for example things you like to eat, drink or your hobbies and also something more high-risk and personal, such as your family. Ask students to guess about your picture and what each thing means.

Then ask students to do their own name poster. Explain that they can draw what they want, there is no right or wrong answer but it should be information they are happy to share with others. You will find that some students will follow your examples and might only draw less personal things and some students may decide to draw more personal things.

Ask students in small groups to share their pictures and explain what they mean.

Slide number 23: My star of strengths

Ask students to draw a star and to think about their own strengths and things they are good at. You may need to give some examples and ask for some examples from the group. For example, 'I am a good friend', 'I am good at football'

When they have finished, ask students to share their ideas in small groups and if there is space, put the drawings on a wall and name it '**Our strengths wall**'. This emphasises connection and belonging as well as building positive self-esteem.

Slide number 24: My motivational mirror

This is another way of building self-esteem and focusing on students' strengths. Show them a mirror and ask them to imagine they could look into a mirror which would tell them good things about them. Give some examples of what the mirror might say. For example, 'You are kind', 'You are a hard worker'.



Then ask students to draw a mirror and to write or draw the positive things the mirror might say about their skills, strengths and achievements.

Ask them to share their mirrors in the group. Explain that they can keep this mirror and look at it when they are feeling de-motivated or not good enough and it will encourage them to keep going.

5. Using stories

General Information

Stories can be a valuable resource in helping students to explore feelings and sensitive subjects through the safety of metaphor. Teachers can tell stories which don't always require a response from the listener but can stimulate thinking and ideas for resolving problems. Telling the right story at the right time can be healing and help children to understand themselves and the world around them more clearly. Stories appeal to the imagination and capture the attention of young people. Listening to a story is a way of regulating emotions, calming and soothing anxiety. Because stories bypass conscious reasoning and allow the listener to inhabit an imaginary world, they are an effective way of delivering new patterns of hope and specific suggestions for change. The ancient traditions of storytelling in Arabic culture may have been an early form of psychotherapy as well as a way of passing on patterns of wisdom.

A great story will contain many layers of meaning but has one central message which resonates with the student's own story. It can be useful to collect stories which you want to tell to students. You can also use stories as a basis for students' own writing.

Slide number 25: Changing a story

Ask students to read the story and then to change the ending or to retell it from the point of view of someone else or to write their own version.

Finn MacCool was a giant in Ireland. He did not like a Scottish giant who wanted to fight him. Finn built a road of rocks from Ireland to Scotland so that they could meet. The Scottish giant was called Benadonner. He was very big. When Finn saw him, he did not want to fight him. Finn's wife dressed him as a baby. Benadonner saw the baby and thought the real giant must be very big, so he ran back to Scotland and destroyed the road. These rocks are now called the Giant's Causeway.

6. Check In and Check Out activities

Slide number 26

It is important to have regular emotional check ins and check outs with students, whether you are working online or in a classroom. Acknowledge that all feelings are valid. It is normal to feel angry, upset, scared. Do not underestimate the value of simply listening and acknowledging how a student is feeling.

Examples of check in/ check out activities

- Use pictures or icons and ask students to choose the one which represents how they feel
- One or two words check in – ask students to share one or two words about how they are feeling or to show their feelings using pictures on a feelings board
- Number check in – ask students to give a number 1-10 on how they are feeling or to show with their fingers
- Internal weather report – explain that emotions can be described like weather and ask students what the weather is like inside them e.g. we can feel like a sunny day inside (happy, excited), like it's raining (sad), stormy (angry)
- Film or music – ask students to describe their feelings with a film or music genre or title e.g. comedy (happy), horror (upset), heavy metal (energetic, aggressive)
- Written – have a post box in the classroom so that students can put how they feel on a piece of paper and post it to the teacher. Or use post-it notes.
- Check outs can also be done at the end of a class or session using similar methods to the check-in. They can help students to recognise that things maybe have improved during the time in school.