



Learner Manual for Parents and Guardians

Promote Mental Health

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Contents

1 Promoting Positive Mental Health	2
1.1	1
1.2	1
How to Cope with Stress	3
Activity: Reducing Stress by Learning to Breathe	5
Parent Tip Sheet: Stress Management	6
1.3 Emotional Awareness	7
Parent Tip Sheet: Managing your Emotions	8
1.4 Positive Thinking	9
Parent Tip Sheet: Positive Self-Talk	10
1.5 Positive Communication: The Importance of Being Assertive	11
Parent Tip Sheet: Assertive Communication	13
Parent Tip Sheet: Positive Discipline	14
Activity: Reflection	15

1 Promoting Positive Mental Health

Learning Outcomes of this Unit:

1. Learners will be able to identify triggers of their own stress and they will be able to use simple practical exercises to better understand their own mental health.

1.1 Overview of this Unit

This unit aims to make individuals more familiar with concepts such as emotional health, resilience, meditation and relaxation, positive thinking and positive communication.

1.2 Stress

Do you know what stress is? Stress is what you feel when your body feels threatened and produces chemicals and hormones that spread through your body. This makes your body temperature and heart rate go up, you might even start sweating or trembling. When you are stressed your body prepares you to either fight, run away (flight) or sometimes even freeze. When the 'danger' is over and you do not feel threatened anymore, your body will eventually relax again. Too much stress or having stress for too long is not good for your health.



However, stress is not necessarily a bad thing. It is what helped our early ancestors to survive, and it's just as important in today's world! Have you ever been able to work nonstop to meet a tight deadline? This is a situation where stress helped you keep going. We all feel stressed at times, but keep in mind that what one person finds stressful can be very different from what someone else experiences as being stressful.

The key point is that stress should be temporary. Once the alarming moment has passed, your heart rate and breathing should slow down and your muscles should relax. Slowly, your body should return to its natural state with no lasting negative effects. However, if you experience too much stress too often, you might not be able to go back to this natural state of relaxation anymore and you could develop what we call a 'chronic' state of stress. This could have severe long-lasting effects on both mental and physical health. You might for example have heard of 'burn-out', which is one of the possible consequences of constant stress.

Now, how can we prevent this from happening? As our lives get busier, it sometimes seems impossible not to feel stressed, so you are probably glad to hear you have much more control than you think!

How to Cope with Stress

In this section, you will find strategies to help you better understand what might cause you stress and how to overcome this:

- **Identify the sources of stress in your life:**

Big stressful events, such as fear of getting fired, moving, or getting a divorce are easily recognised, but people most likely also have sources of stress in their everyday life. A useful tool to find out what makes your everyday life stressful, is to start a stress journal. This can help you to recognise certain patterns.

- **Exercise: The 4 A's of Stress Management:**

Sometimes, your stress can build up to a certain level where you don't have any control anymore. For example, when your child wants to ask you a question, but you had a bad day at work, you feel tired and worried because your mother is sick, so you react angrier than you want to. Probably, you would like to prevent these situations from happening. The 4A's of stress management might help you with this!

The 4 A's of stress management:

- **Avoid unnecessary stress:** Although it's not possible to eliminate every stressful situation, you would be surprised by the number of things you can actually avoid without too much effort. For example:
 - Learn to say no (know your limits and stick to them) in a respectful way,
 - Avoid people who stress you out,
 - Try to take control of your environment. For example, if watching the news makes you anxious, turn off the TV or the radio,
 - These little things will seem unimportant at first but will make a direct impact in your daily life.
- **Alter the situation:** If you cannot avoid a situation that causes you stress, try to change it. For instance, if you have a tight deadline that is unavoidable, you could ensure you have a calm environment to work in by communicating the need of a quiet environment to the people you live with. Communication is key to respectfully asking others to change their behaviour, but you will have to be willing to do the same for them.
- **Adapt to the event that causes stress:** If there is something stressful that you cannot avoid or alter, perhaps it is best to adapt yourself to it. This will help you regain your sense of control. Try to look at your problems from a different perspective, look at the big picture. Ask yourself how important it will be in the long run. Is it really worth getting stressed and upset over it?

- **Accept the things you cannot change:** Some sources of stress are unavoidable and unchangeable. You will not be able to prevent a serious illness, the death of a loved one or a national recession. In such cases the best we can do is to accept the reality of the situation. Do not try to control the uncontrollable. If applicable, try to learn from mistakes, or try to look at something from a positive side. When something tragic happens, you might feel overwhelmed by your emotions. In this case, it is useful to share your feelings and talk about it with someone who is dear to you, or with a therapist.



An important part of stress management is to connect with others and talk about how you feel. Knowing who to reach out to might not always be easy. Here are some tips:

- Reach out to a colleague at work.
- Have lunch or coffee with a friend.
- Call or email an old friend you haven't seen in a while.
- Meet new people through volunteering.
- Ask a loved one to check in on you regularly.
- Go for a walk with a workout partner.
- Accompany someone to the movies or a concert.
- Schedule a weekly dinner date with someone important to you.
- Meet new people by taking a class or joining a club.

Activity: Reducing Stress by Learning to Breathe

Today's current lifestyle is making us forget to take time to relax our mind. However, it is just as important to have a healthy and balanced diet as it is to dedicate some space of our time to calm our minds and organise our thoughts.

An easy exercise to calm our minds that does not require too much time or effort, is the Karate breathing relaxation, also called Mokuso. Follow the instructions below:

1. Sit in a comfortable position. You may sit with your legs beneath the buttocks and knees directly in front, or you can sit cross-legged or in whatever position you find yourself more comfortable.
2. Close your eyes, but keep your back straight, your shoulders relaxed, head up.
3. Take a deep, cleansing breath, expanding your stomach and keeping your shoulders relaxed. Hold it in for the count of six.
4. Exhale gently, and repeat twice more. Then breathe normally and focus on your breathing.
5. As you breathe, inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth, still expanding your stomach rather than moving your shoulders up and down.
6. If your thoughts drift away toward the stresses of the day ahead or the day behind you, that is perfectly fine. If that happens, just go back to focussing on your breathing. Try to stay in the present moment. Do not worry about doing it wrong, as there is no right or wrong in this exercise. Feel the air move in, and feel the air move out. That's it.




Continue for as little or as long as you like, and notice how your body might feel more relaxed and your mind becoming more centred.

If you did not feel relaxed at all, just remember that breathing exercises and meditation require exercise, even a short breathing exercise during the day can already bring some stress relief. So, just keep practising!

Parent Tip Sheet: Stress Management

Even when it seems like there is nothing you can do to ease your situation, here are some small tips that might be useful to relieve the pressure and regain control over your life:



Ease down your own expectations

Keep a positive attitude.

Accept that there are events that you cannot control.

Learn and practice breathing and relaxation techniques.

Exercise regularly.

Eat healthy, well-balanced meals.

Practice good sleep hygiene.

Give yourself regular breaks.

Learn to manage your time more effectively.

Set limits appropriately and learn to say no to requests that would create excessive stress in your life.

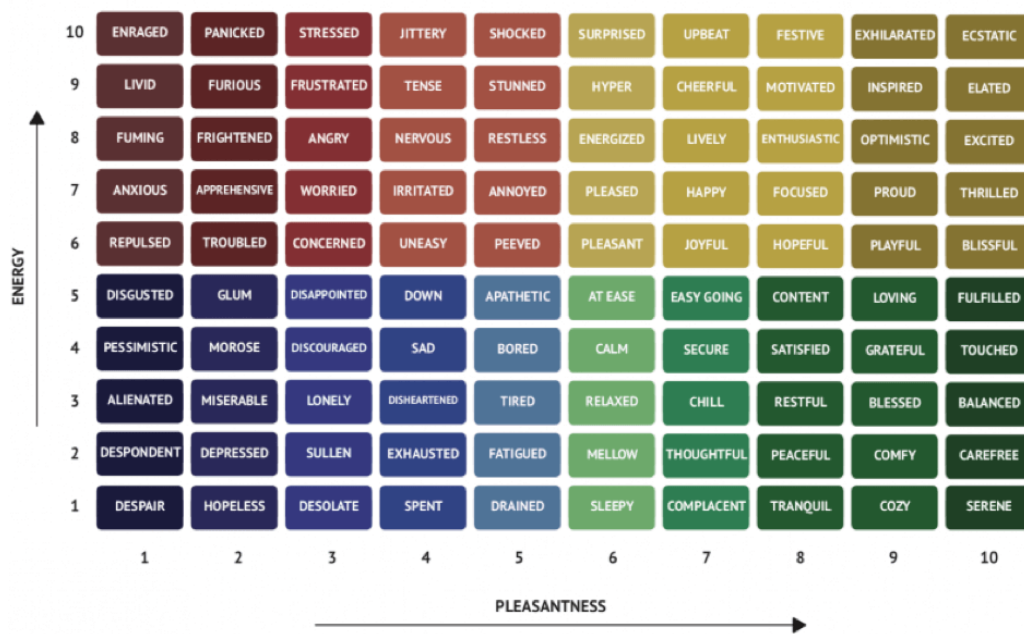
1.3 Emotional Awareness

Do you sometimes feel overwhelmed by emotions such as anxiety, stress, sadness, or anger? Do you often act impulsively, doing or saying things you know you shouldn't, only to regret it later? Or do you sometimes have the impression you do not feel anything at all? These can all be signs that you need to work on building your emotional awareness. The ability to experience and express what you are feeling is more important than you might realise.

Being aware of your emotions means that you understand what you feel, why you feel like this and how to react appropriately to these feelings.

Emotions are an essential part of who we are, but they can be hard to understand at times. Knowing what you are actually feeling, reflecting on them and talking about these emotions is a key part of developing emotional health.

One of the best ways to improve your emotional awareness is learning how to name your feelings so you can properly express yourself.



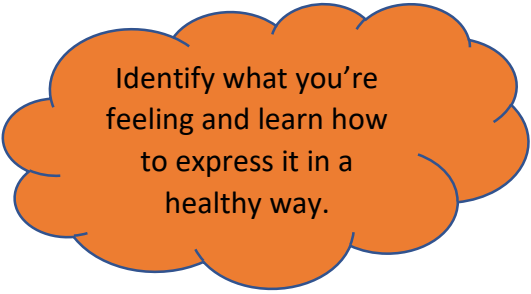
Here are 20 basic emotions that differ from each other in their level of pleasantness and energy. Choose 2 emotions from each colour in the chart (red, blue, yellow, green) and imagine yourself feeling this way. What happens in your body when you are imagining this emotion? What are you feeling? Where in your body are you feeling this? You might for example start smiling if you think about feeling satisfied, or you might feel nervous in your stomach when you imagine feeling angry. How we experience our feelings is different for everyone, so there is no right or wrong.

For parents, learning to manage our emotions and expressing what they feel in a healthy way is of special importance. Author and parent educator Laura Markham, Ph. D., has a straightforward message: Your number one job as a parent, after assuring the safety of the children, is to manage your own emotions.

Parent Tip Sheet:

Managing your Emotions

Being able to understand and manage your emotions is linked to our overall well-being. However, not all of us know how to control them. Here you can find some pointers to set you up.

An orange, multi-lobed cloud graphic with a thin blue outline, containing text.

Identify what you're feeling and learn how to express it in a healthy way.

Trying to manage your emotions does not mean suppressing them.

Try to find out what you are feeling.

Accept all your emotions, not only the pleasant ones.

Know when and how to express yourself.

As a parent, you know that sometimes emotions can get the best of you. Somehow your child can push those buttons you didn't even know you had, and before you know it, you yell from the top of your lungs.

You're not the first to do that and you certainly won't be the last; your feelings of parental frustration are normal. However, it's still important to learn to switch from a yelling monologue to a respectful dialogue. Feeling overwhelmed or angry will make you raise your voice, but this will rarely solve your situation. Yes, it may quiet the children and make them obedient for a short while, but it won't make them correct their behaviour the way you want them to. To put it simply, it will teach them to fear you rather than to understand the consequences of their actions.

Obviously, no matter how good your yelling prevention strategy is, sometimes you will end up raising your voice. And that's ok. However, learn to own it and apologize to your children and it will teach them an important lesson: we all make mistakes, and we all need to apologize sometimes.

1.4 Positive Thinking

Positive thinking is the practice of focusing on the good in any given situation. It can have a huge impact on your physical and mental health and, if you know how to express yourself in a positive, assertive way, it can also allow you to establish stronger relationships with your family members.

POSITIVE THINKING: WHY TALKING TO YOURSELF IS A GOOD THING

Research is starting to show that positive thinking is about much more than just being simply happy or displaying an upbeat attitude. Positive thoughts and optimism can be really good stress management tools.

Negative emotions narrow your mind, shut off the outside world and limit the options you see around you. For example, the stress of a deadline that you have to meet can take you to a point where you no longer can think of anything else, you might even feel paralysed by how long your to-do list has become.

It's easy to lose objectivity when you're stressed. One negative thought can lead to another, and soon you think things like: "I am horrible with money, and I will never be able to control my finances." Whereas it might be more positive –and more correct- to say: "I made a mistake with my money, but these things can happen. I will get through it."

Negative thinking and self-talk usually can be brought back to the following four categories:

- *Personalizing*: You blame yourself for everything.
- *Magnifying*: You focus on the negative aspects of every situation.
- *Catastrophizing*: You always expect the worst.
- *Polarizing*: It's either black or white, good or bad. There is nothing in between and no middle ground.


You probably recognise yourself in one of these thoughts, as we all have a little inner critic voice that comes along now and then. However, there are ways to turn those thoughts into more positive thinking. Obviously, this will take practice and time, but it will make you feel better about yourself and improve your relationships.

Experiencing positive emotions such as love, contentment and joy can make you see more possibilities in your life. These feelings broaden your sense of possibility and open your mind to search for more options.

If you find it hard to do and you feel that your negative thoughts keep taking over, it might be good to seek help and for example ask some support from a therapist. They can help you identify the sources of your negative thinking and learn how to turn the situation around.

Parent Tip Sheet: Positive Self-Talk

Forming new habits takes time and effort, but positive thinking can become your norm. These tips might be useful to you.



Seek joy, play often
and pursue
adventure!

- **Identify negative self-talk traps:** Learn to assess your thinking and stop before it becomes too negative. Ask yourself how you can turn it around.
- **Check in with your feelings:** Try making a habit from checking in with how you are feeling, as negative thoughts are often related to, or even caused by them. Then, try to acknowledge that.
- **Find the humour:** Laughter is a great stress and tension relieve. Find ways to laugh, even if it's just watching a fun video or a comedian.
- **Surround yourself with positive people:** Some people might be too much sometimes. They can become absorbent and drain you out in no time with their negativity. Choose positive people that will lift you up every time you can.

1.5 Positive Communication: The Importance of

Being Assertive

Assertiveness is usually defined as a communication style in which the person neither attacks nor submits to the will of other people, but rather expresses their convictions and defends their rights.

Assertive communication within your family means expressing opinions in a conscious, clear, direct and balanced way. Its purpose is to communicate your ideas and feelings without hurting the people you care about the most. It is an important asset in order to strengthen your relationships.

Being assertive is not an easy thing to do. In fact, we might even be more familiar with two other communication styles, namely passive or aggressive communication:

Passive behaviour: This is a style of communication where people avoid showing their feelings or thoughts out of fear from being rejected, being misunderstood or fear from offending other people. They undervalue their own opinions and needs and give a higher value to those of others.

Aggressive behaviour: A communication style characterized by the overvaluation of our own personal opinions and feelings, ignoring or even despising those of others. These people might think that if they don't behave this way, they will be too vulnerable; they place behaviour patterns in terms of win-lose. They might even think that some people deserve to be punished. While talking to them you will realise that they often fight, accuse, interrupt, threaten, or assault others without taking their feelings into account.

For parents, learning how to be assertive and to use positive communication is of special importance in order to build your children's self-esteem. Being supportive but not overprotective is key. It's important to praise your children in a way that teaches them to be proud of their efforts and accomplishments, even if they don't meet their goals. It helps to ask them to explain what they did that led to success.

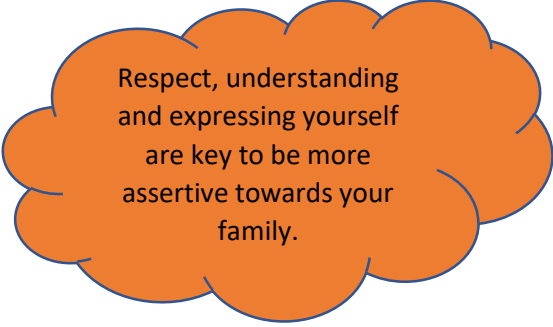
GIVING PRAISE TO YOUR CHILDREN IN ORDER TO BUILD THEIR SELF-ESTEEM

Situation	Try saying...	The self-praise connection
The project you are looking at is good, but you know they could have put more effort into it.	<p>"That looks like a great start"</p> <p>"How do you like it?"</p> <p>"Do you think this is your best effort?"</p>	This approach helps children reflect on whether their work measures up to their expectations. It also asks them to consider how hard they worked and whether they are proud of the effort they put in.
Your child has done something well, but is downplaying the positive	"You may not think it's a big deal, but it was kind of you to stick up for your friend."	This approach points out what you think is worthy of praise and what you value.

actions and success of the effort.	“It sounds like you are proud. What did you do that made you feel this way?”	It also asks children to think about what they are proud of and what they value.
You know your child worked hard but still did not meet the goal.	“It is nice that you enjoyed the books you did read, even though reading can be hard for you.”	This approach asks kids to reflect on what worked, not just what needs improvement. It also helps children learn to be OK with doing things they like to do, but are not great at.
Your child aces a test—and knows it.	“I would love to know how you did it! What strategies did you use?” “Wow, I can see why you are excited. You worked really hard.”	This approach reminds kids that consistently doing something well takes effort—even if they didn’t doubt they could do it. It asks kids to look at what they did that led to success. And it helps them acknowledge and take pride in their effort and success.
Your child behaves according to the expectations you talked about ahead of time.	“Thank you for listening/following the rules. I know it took hard work to do that.”	This approach gives children specific feedback they can directly match to the expectations. It also allows them to start paying attention to how they are measuring up to what is expected of them.
<i>Extracted from “How to Give Praise That Builds Your Child’s Self-Esteem” by Amanda Morin.</i>		

Parent Tip Sheet: Assertive Communication

Remember that many things are learned through good role models. Be an example and install an assertive communication style so everyone in your family follows through. Some key points to assertive communication with your family are:



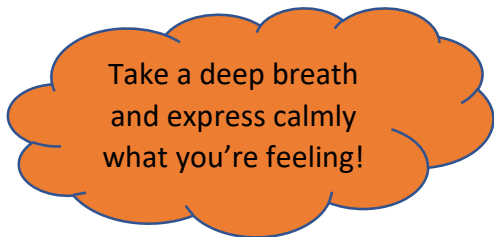
Respect, understanding and expressing yourself are key to be more assertive towards your family.

- **Make no comparisons:** It's usual for parents to compare their children to others or within themselves to point out their mistakes or to manipulate them in some other way. You might do this unconsciously, but it's important that you understand that this generates insecurity and feelings of inferiority, resentment, and unhealthy competitiveness; comparisons are unfair to your children.
- **Be empathetic:** Learn that assertive communication starts with respect towards others. If all members of the family try to understand how everyone is feeling, it will be easier to engage in a healthy dialogue.
- **Ask for an opinion:** Not allowing children to express how they are feeling when it comes to decisions that affect them is a way of telling them their opinion is not important to you. Let them participate and give them a voice. You will help them develop their self-esteem and self-confidence.
- **Express yourself:** If you do not express your own feelings, you cannot possibly expect your children to do so. Tell them about your day, your interests, your concerns, without being overwhelming. And pay

Parent Tip Sheet:

Positive Discipline

When a child feels safe and loved no matter what, you are more likely to develop a positive relationship with them and eventually, they are more likely to listen to you. Did you know that practising positive discipline starts with your own attitude as a parent?



Take a deep breath
and express calmly
what you're feeling!

- **Give yourself a timeout:** Stop yourself before getting so angry that you lose control and give yourself the chance to reassess and breathe deeply, which will help you calm down.
- **Talk about your emotions:** Talk about whatever you are feeling and encourage your children to do the same. It will help them develop a much more respectful attitude towards themselves and others.
- **Address their bad behaviour calmly, but firmly:** Misbehaving while growing up is a normal thing. Talk to them in a firm way that makes clear that their behaviour won't be tolerated, but try to keep their dignity intact. Get down to their eye level instead of speaking to them from high up or far away.
- **Use consequences, but leave out threats:** In the long run, using threats and punishments will create more angry feelings, resentment, conflicts and a lack of inner discipline. They humiliate and shame your children, making them feel insecure.

Activity: Reflection

This section is to help you think about what was covered in the unit, what you learnt, what you found interesting and what changes you might make as a result. Fill some of the sections in at the end of the unit then go back to it during the week especially when you have shared information with your children.

Fill in some of your thoughts below at the end of the session then add to it during the week.

Something I learnt today:

Something I found very interesting:

Something I'm not sure about:

Something I will do now:

Any other thoughts:

Related Health@Home Comics:

- Keep Fit and Have Fun
- The Football Game
- Don't Panic
- The Mean Avatar
- Night, Night!

Related Health@Home WebQuests:

- Finding my own way
- Shape your mind
- Healthy mind, healthy body
- Knowing and naming your emotions
- Why should I stay active?
- Minding your mental health
- 10 exciting ways to be active
- Be fit!
- Welcome to Snoozeville!

