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Foundations for Wellbeing

Year 2, lesson 4: Managing unhelpful thoughts



Managing unhelpful thoughts

This is the fourth of five lessons on self-regulation, mental health and wellbeing, for year 2. This lesson focuses on managing unhelpful thoughts and worries.

To encourage pupils to use the self-regulation strategies taught in these lessons more automatically, autonomously and effectively, it is important to revisit and reinforce them regularly, as part of a whole-school approach to promoting mental health and wellbeing. The extension activities are designed to support this (for more information, see the [Teacher Handbook](#)). To learn more, please visit our [self-guided online courses](#), which are available to all School Plus members.

The lesson plan is based on a 45-minute lesson. The timings given are the minimum required to deliver the activities, but you may wish to spend longer exploring each activity.

Learning objective and outcomes

To learn how to manage unhelpful thoughts.

Pupils will be able to:

- identify how helpful and unhelpful thoughts might affect someone's feelings and behaviours
- explain different ways to change unhelpful thoughts to helpful ones
- explain how some types of distraction can help us manage unhelpful thoughts

Resources required

- Box or envelope for questions
- Flipchart paper and pens
- Resource 1: *Kayla* [support option, as required]
- Resource 2: *Helpful thoughts grid* [one per pair]
- Resource 3: *List of thoughts* [Extension option as required]
- Resource 4: *Positive affirmations* [Extension option as required]

Climate for learning

Make sure you have read the accompanying teacher handbook notes before teaching this lesson. They include guidance on establishing a safe learning environment, supporting pupils with additional vulnerabilities, using assessment and personal reflection effectively, and embedding the learning. They also outline useful subject knowledge on the theory and evidence informing these lessons, self-regulation strategies and relevant neuroscience.

The lesson plans should be used flexibly, and you are encouraged to adapt them to meet the specific needs and abilities of your pupils. It is also important to consider sensitivities and prior knowledge about specific pupils' circumstances. If safeguarding concerns arise during this lesson, these should be reported to the Designated Safeguarding Lead, in line with your school policy.

Baseline assessment

Introduction (Slides 9–11, 2 mins)

Establish or revisit ground rules. Explain that if pupils have worries or questions during or after the lesson that they do not want to raise in front of the class, they can speak to you individually or write their question on a piece of paper, anonymously or with their name, and put it in the question box.

Using slide 10, begin by briefly recapping the learning from last lesson.

Introduce today's learning objective and outcomes. Explain that this lesson will focus on helpful and unhelpful thoughts, how they might change how we feel and act, and how we can try to focus on the helpful thoughts.

Baseline assessment activity (Slide 12, 5 mins)

Show pupils the scenario about Kayla – she is struggling with her work in a lesson and thinking: *'I can't do this, I'm bad at literacy'*. Ask them to respond to the following questions in their exercise books or on a sheet of paper.

- How might Kayla be feeling?
- What might she do because of how she is feeling?
- What might she be thinking about the next literacy lesson?
- What might be a more helpful way of thinking?
- How can Kayla change the way she is thinking?

Pupils should work on their own and without prompting. Use the responses to gauge their knowledge and understanding about the topic and aim to adapt teaching to address any misconceptions or gaps in understanding. For example, if pupils need to consolidate the link between helpful and unhelpful thoughts and feelings and behaviour, you could spend more time on the first activity.



Support: Ask pupils to draw and talk about their responses using **Resource 1: Kayla**.

Core activities

Helpful and unhelpful (Slides 13–15, 10 mins)

Share examples of people having helpful and unhelpful thoughts using slide 13.

In small groups, ask pupils to discuss:

1. Which thoughts are helpful, and which are unhelpful?
2. How might the person be feeling in each case?

Take feedback and draw out the key learning:

Helpful thoughts:

'I could take a small bite and see if I like it' and *'It's okay if I'm not perfect'*.

They might feel: curious, interested, excited.

Unhelpful thoughts:

'I won't like it; I don't want to try' and 'I won't be good at this, so I won't try it'.

They might feel: nervous, worried/scared.

Then, for each example, ask them how unhelpful thoughts might affect behaviour (what someone does)?

New food: *they won't try the food and may not try others in the future, stopping them from finding new foods that they might really enjoy.*

Trying a new activity: *they won't get to try the activity and might not try others in the future, they might miss out trying new things in the future, they might miss making new friends.*

Finally, ask them: How might having helpful thoughts affect behaviour (what someone does)?

New food: *might be more willing to try new foods again in the future and find things they really like.*

Trying a new activity: *they'll try their best at the new activity, they might learn a new skill; they might meet new people; have fun.*

Highlight that, just like in the example of Kayla, having unhelpful thoughts about something can mean that we have unhelpful thoughts or feelings about it next time too. Using slide 15, explain that this is because our brains remember and often repeat the same feelings and thoughts. Tell pupils that it is possible to change unhelpful thoughts to more helpful ones, and that with practice, this becomes easier.

Changing unhelpful thoughts (Slide 16, 10 mins)

In pairs, ask pupils to complete **Resource 2: Helpful thoughts grid** by describing the unhelpful thoughts someone might have in the second column and suggesting helpful thoughts in the final column. Take feedback and draw out key learning:

1. Tao

Trying a challenging puzzle.

Unhelpful thoughts: This is too hard; I should give up; I'll never get it right.

Helpful thoughts: I can try my best; it's okay to make mistakes - I can learn from them; I'll keep going even if I don't get it right first time.

2. Meena

Going to a birthday party alone.

Unhelpful thoughts: I will be lonely because I won't know many people; I should stay at home because I won't know how to play the games; what if no one wants to play with me?

Helpful thoughts: I can make new friends; it might be fun to play some games; I can talk to someone new and have fun with them.

3. Zam

Making a mistake in an art lesson.

Unhelpful thoughts: My drawing is ruined; everyone will think I can't do art; I shouldn't try anymore.

Helpful thoughts: Everyone makes mistakes; mistakes are part of learning; I can make my mistake into something new; it's okay if things don't work out as planned.



Explain that everyone has unhelpful thoughts and feelings sometimes; they're just one way of thinking and feeling. Remind pupils that the brain can help us change these thoughts to more helpful ones, which becomes easier the more we practise it.

Challenge: In their exercise books, ask pupils to create their own scenario, and then describe the unhelpful and helpful thoughts.

Using distraction (Slide 17, 10 mins)

Using slide 17, share a new scenario about Meena from the previous activity:

I'm trying to think about having fun at the party, but then my heart starts beating really fast, I feel sweaty, my tummy has butterflies and I start worrying about not knowing many people!

Remind pupils of the meaning of 'distraction' from lesson two, explaining that a distraction isn't always useful, such as when it draws our attention away from something we are trying to do. However, sometimes it can be useful to distract ourselves from unhelpful thoughts, especially when they are difficult to change.

In pairs, ask pupils to discuss how Meena could distract herself from the unhelpful thoughts?

Pupils might suggest: play a game; do something enjoyable; read a book; do something creative; exercise; do some breathing exercises, for example relaxed/deep breathing; counting to 10; think pleasant thoughts about something else; remember that feelings of worry can't hurt her and won't last forever.

As an additional example, ask pupils to look around the classroom and spot three things in the same colour. Allow them a minute to do this and then explain that doing this can distract someone, interrupt the unhelpful thought, and then help them pay attention to what they want to focus on and have more helpful thoughts. This is also a good opportunity to lead the class in this slow-paced breathing exercise, so that pupils can see how it can help them to feel calmer.

Endpoint assessment

Endpoint assessment (Slide 18, 5 mins)

Reminding pupils of the learning outcomes, ask pupils to return to their responses to the questions in the baseline assessment. Using a different colour pen, ask them to add to and, if they think needed, change their original ideas. Use this as evidence of progress and to inform future teaching.

Check the question box and respond to any remaining questions.

Signposting support

Signposting support (Slide 19, 3 mins)

Explain that if they have unhelpful thoughts often, or they are difficult to manage, it's important to speak to a trusted adult at home or at school. Pupils can also contact Childline: 0800 1111.

Closing the lesson (Slide 20)

Finally, using slide 20, reinforce the key learning by summing up for the class what they have achieved in today's lesson.

Activities to extend and embed the learning

Sorting thoughts (Slide 21)

Ask pupils to sort helpful and unhelpful thoughts using the examples from **Resource 3**.

Useful distractions (Slide 22)

Ask pupils to create a bank of useful distractions for when having unhelpful thoughts. These could be displayed in the classroom or kept in a box for pupils to refer to when they are feeling worried or upset.

Positive affirmations (Slide 23)

Positive affirmations can be repeated to promote positive thinking. Explain and suggest some to pupils using Resource 4, and then ask them to create their own. These could be kept in a box or jar.