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Foundations for Wellbeing

Year 4, lesson 3: Exploring different thinking habits



Exploring different thinking habits

This is the third of five lessons on self-regulation, mental health and emotional wellbeing, for year 4. This lesson focuses on habitual thoughts and emotions, and how these can be managed or changed.

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 about different ways of thinking and how this impacts wellbeing.

Pupils will be able to:

- describe how the brain reacts differently to pleasant and unpleasant experiences
- assess a range of strategies to develop positive thinking habits
- describe how repetition of these strategies over time makes them easier and supports wellbeing

Resources required

- Box or envelope for questions
- Resource 1: *The race – teacher copy* [to be used if whiteboard sound is not working, or if a written copy is required to support pupils with auditory processing difficulties]
- Resource 2: *A menu of strategies* [one per pair]
- Resource 3: *Advice for Meena* [one per pupil]
- Resource 3a: *Helping Meena love running again* [support option, as required]

Climate for learning

Make sure you have read the accompanying teacher guidance 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

Reconnecting activity and baseline assessment (Slides 9-11, 3 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 write their question on a piece of paper, anonymously or with their name, and put it in the question box.

Using slide 10, briefly remind pupils that last lesson, they learnt about emotions – and today's lesson will build on this by exploring different thinking habits.

Show slide 11 and ask the class to imagine that Max is having these thoughts while on a school trip. On mini whiteboards, ask pupils to note down their responses to the four questions shown.

Ask pupils to hold up their mini whiteboards so you can get a sense of their starting points, and consider whether any adjustments need to be made to the lesson. For example, in response to question 3, have pupils suggested the imagination strategies learnt last lesson (seeing thoughts as e.g. leaves on a stream, pop-up adverts or bus passengers)? If not, you may want to briefly recap this learning.

Introduction (Slide 12, 2 mins)

Introduce the learning objective and outcomes. Explain that today's lesson will explore the way the brain responds to different experiences and strategies that people can use to develop more positive thinking habits. Make sure pupils understand what 'thinking habits' means, and link this to their prior learning on patterns of thoughts and feelings.

Core activities

How did you feel the race went? (Slides 13-16, 10 mins)

Show slide 13 and explain that the class are about to hear a runner (Meena) describing what it was like to run the school race. Ask pupils to draw the table on the slide on their mini whiteboards (or in their books) and, as they listen, make a tally mark in the relevant column each time they hear a pleasant or unpleasant experience.

Play the audio clip (or read out the text on **Resource 1: The race – teacher copy**) while pupils keep a tally. Then share the post-race interview on slide 14. In pairs, ask pupils to discuss what they think Meena might say, before revealing her response. Briefly ask the class, did Meena's answer surprise them or not?

Using slide 15, explain that, like everybody, Meena's brain reacts differently to pleasant and unpleasant experiences – in fact, humans' brains can find it easier to focus on unpleasant experiences! Emphasise that scientists think this was something that brains learnt to do in the past to help with all the risky, dangerous things that people used to face every day – because taking more notice of negative experiences would have helped people to survive back then.

To assess understanding, ask pairs to explain, in their own words:

- Why did Meena say the race didn't go so well? Try to include the brain in your explanation.
- Is focussing on the unpleasant experiences in this situation helpful or unhelpful to Meena?

Take feedback and emphasise that Meena said the race didn't go well because her brain focused on the unpleasant experiences. This strong focus is unhelpful to Meena because it makes her forget the positive things that happened, and it is also likely to affect her emotions (as explored in the next activity).

Advice column: Loving running again (Slides 17-19, 15 mins)

Share the message from Meena on slide 17 and, to check pupils' understanding, ask the class:

- How did Meena used to feel about running? *(She used to love it – it made her feel alive and forget her worries)*
- How does she feel now? *(Frustrated and disappointed)*
- What has caused this change in how Meena feels about running? *(Comparing herself to other runners and thinking she's not fast enough)*

Explain that their task is to think of some advice to help Meena love running again. Give pairs a copy of **Resource 2: A menu of strategies** and, using slide 18, explain that these strategies can be used in many situations to support more positive thinking habits – but the class will need to use them to give specific advice to help Meena with her running.

Ask the class why they think we are looking at a menu of strategies – instead of just one action that Meena could take? *(Draw out that everyone is different so different strategies will work for different people, and at different times or in different situations. This is why it is helpful to know a few different strategies – so people can try them out and see what works).*

Use the prompts on slide 19 to model making the first strategy relevant for Meena.

Then, ask pairs to pick the three strategies from the menu that they think would be most useful to Meena. Give each pupil a copy of **Resource 3: Advice for Meena** and ask them to write down their ideas, using the strategies on **Resource 2: A menu of strategies** as a starting point. Emphasise that they should make sure they use their own words (instead of just copying out the strategies word for word).

Circulate while pupils are writing to get a sense of their understanding and check that they are using a range of strategies. Ask one or two pupils to read out their advice to Meena and draw out that:

- *Meena could be reassured by knowing that the brain makes it easier for people to focus on unpleasant experiences – like not winning a race. But there are lots of strategies Meena can use to help the brain change its focus.*
- *any of the ideas from the strategy menu could help Meena. Giving her a few different options is important because it means she can see what works for her.*

for strategy two, Meena could try things like running with a good friend or ask her adult if she can try running in a different location where she can really enjoy nature and being outdoors. She could also try running for fun instead of in a race – to help her stop comparing herself to others.



Support: Ask pupils to use **Resource 3a: Helping Meena love running again**. For some of their message, they will need to select the most appropriate response by crossing out the other option. Alternatively, pupils could share their advice for Meena orally.



Challenge: Ask pupils to consider how their advice would change if Meena was finding that she wasn't enjoying a different activity – creative writing, for example. How would their advice be similar? How would it be different? The aim of this challenge is to recognise that (though the detail might change) these strategies can apply to many situations.

How will these strategies affect Meena's brain? (Slides 20-21, 5 mins)

Return to Meena's brain on slide 20 and explain that when Meena uses any of the strategies where she shifts her attention, her Prefrontal Cortex (PFC) helps her to do this. And when she focuses on pleasant things that make her feel good, this activates her Ventral Striatum (VS). This is a part of the brain that can help people to enjoy their experiences.

Ask the class, what do you think will happen to the PFC and the VS the more Meena practises these strategies? *(Explain that these parts of the brain will get stronger, and so activate more easily. This means that in future, Meena will find it easier to shift her attention to focus on more pleasant things that make her feel good. If useful, emphasise to pupils that this is the most important thing for them to understand, and they don't need to worry if they find it difficult to remember the names of the parts of the brain.)*

Use animation on slide 20 to reveal the hippocampus and emphasise that this part of the brain helps with memory – so the hippocampus will help Meena to remember the strategies that made her feel better.

Then, using slide 21, ask the class:

- What might Meena notice over time if she keeps practising these strategies? *(The strategies will get easier and eventually her brain will more easily notice the more pleasant things about running and focus less on the less pleasant things.)*
- How do you think this will affect Meena's feelings about running? *(Hopefully, it will mean Meena can really enjoy her running again, and remember why it's important to her.)*
- What other impact might it have on Meena? *(It could support her in other areas of life too, especially if she can start to use these strategies in different situations. This is likely to positively impact her wellbeing, over time.)*

Signposting support

Signposting support (Slides 22-23, 5 mins)

Use slide 22 to share the message from Meena's friend, Fin, and ask the class what he could do. Emphasise that when someone experiences challenging feelings like this that they can't manage on their own, and that stop them from doing activities they want to do, then it's important that they get help from a trusted adult.

Share slide 23 and remind pupils that it's the same for them. If emotions or patterns of thinking are difficult, for example, if they're really strong or really unpleasant, it's important they speak to a trusted adult at home or at school who can help. Pupils can also contact Childline:

www.childline.org.uk/kids.

Reflection and endpoint assessment

Reflection and endpoint assessment (Slides 24-25, 5 mins)

Using slide 24, ask pupils to think of something they really love doing (a bit like Meena loves running). Can they silently reflect on what it feels like to do that activity? What do they love about it? As this is a private reflection activity, pupils should not share their thoughts with others.

Remind pupils that the learning outcomes were to be able to describe how the brain reacts differently to pleasant and unpleasant experiences; assess strategies to develop positive thinking habits; and to describe how repeating these strategies over time makes them easier and supports wellbeing. With these in mind, use slide 25 to return to the sky and cloud image from the start of the lesson. Ask pairs to discuss, if someone has these different thoughts:

- Which of them do you think they'd be most likely to focus on and why?
- What strategies could they use to shift their attention to the more helpful or pleasant thoughts?
- How would repeating these strategies help them over time?

Use this endpoint assessment to get a sense of pupils' progress and identify any gaps or misconceptions that may need to be addressed in future lessons.

Check the question box and respond to any remaining questions.

Closing the lesson (Slide 26)

Finally, using slide 26, 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

Savouring (Slide 27)

Lead an activity that you think the class would enjoy. For example, reading a story they might like, giving them time to draw, or going outside to look at something in nature – this could be as simple as listening to outdoor sounds, or looking to see if there are any plants, birds or bugs in the outdoor area. Ask pupils to note down any pleasant things or feelings that happen in that time. This could include things that feel very subtle – like the feeling of the pencil in their hand or the sense of excitement that they experience when deciding what they are going to draw. Pupils could jot down their ideas on a mini whiteboard during the activity, and share these at the end.

Gratitude (Slide 28)

At the end of each day, can pupils think of three things they are grateful for or appreciate? Or (to put it another way) three positive things they noticed that day? Pupils could note these down in a journal, diary or on piece of paper and keep adding to it over the week. What do they notice? Can they continue adding to this regularly over the course of the school year?