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Foundations for Wellbeing

Year 6, lesson 3: Developing positive thinking habits



Developing positive thinking habits

This is the third of five lessons on self-regulation, mental health and emotional wellbeing, for year 6. 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 developing positive thinking habits and how this supports wellbeing

Pupils will be able to:

- explain what negativity bias is and how it can be managed
- explain how brain plasticity, including strengthening the reward system, can support wellbeing
- evaluate how different strategies can help someone to develop positive thinking habits

Resources required

- Box or envelope for questions
- Baseline assessments from lesson 1
- Resource 1: *Key word match up* [one per pupil]
- Resource 2: *Strategies diamond 9* [one cut-up set per pair]
- Resource 3: *Tao's forum post* [one per pupil]
- Resource 3a: *Helping Tao* [support option, as required]
- Resource 3b: *Tao's forum post - teacher answers* [for teacher reference only]

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

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 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 the learning objective and outcomes. Explain that today's lesson will explore strategies to develop positive thinking habits and manage negativity bias, building on prior learning about how changing thinking habits can support wellbeing.

Baseline assessment activity (Slides 12–14, 5 mins)

Give pupils **Resource 1: Key word match up** and ask them to match up the key words with the correct definition. Take feedback and share the answers as you click through slides 13–14. Gauge how much pupils have remembered. If they found it difficult to remember the names of the parts of the brain, reassure them that the most important thing to understand is that the more we practise using strategies to help manage our thinking habits, the better our brains become at helping us.

Then, ask pupils:

- Why might someone be more likely to focus on negative experiences?
(The brain is 'wired' to be more alert to danger and in the past focusing on danger helped people avoid it. If someone experiences two different emotions, but one is negative and the other positive, their attention will often be drawn to the negative one more strongly than the positive one. This is known as negativity bias.)
- What could someone do to help manage negative thinking habits?
(Use strategies such as: noticing and savouring positive experiences, doing a calming activity, reappraisal, sensory focus activities, 'watching thoughts' strategies such as imagining thoughts as leaves floating away on a river.)

Circulate during the activity to establish pupils' starting points and consider how the lesson may need adapting, for example spending more time on the first activity if pupils are unable to identify what negativity bias is.

Core activities

Negativity bias (Slides 15-17, 10 mins)

Show the image on slide 15 and ask pupils to discuss the following questions, in small groups:

- Why do you think people's brains focused more on danger in the past?
- Do you think people's brains still need to focus on danger in this way today?
- What impact might focusing on danger have on people today?

Take feedback using slide 16, drawing out key learning:

- *In the past, people needed to be more alert to danger in order to survive. It was more important for them to avoid danger (e.g. dangerous animals) than be rewarded.*
- *Although people are unlikely to experience threats to life in the same way today (for example, we don't usually need to worry about being chased by predators!), our brains are still wired to be alert to danger, so tend to focus on more negative thoughts or information.*
- *This means that if someone experiences two different emotions, but one is negative and the other positive, their attention will often be drawn to the negative one more strongly than the positive one. This means people often remember situations and events with negative emotions better. This is known as 'negativity bias'.*

Next, in the same groups, ask them to brainstorm on paper or mini whiteboards, any examples of negativity bias that they can think of in modern life. For example, a person remembering when someone said something unkind, rather than remembering when someone gave a compliment. Take feedback.

Pupils might suggest: focusing on negative comments online, reading 'bad news' stories, focusing on critical feedback or mistakes on schoolwork or tests, remembering TV shows and films that have sad or disastrous storylines.

Finally, ask pupils to discuss why it might be important for someone to manage how much time they spend focusing on negative thoughts and emotions.

Take feedback, highlighting that if someone spends a lot of time focusing on negative content, thoughts and emotions, it may make them feel less happy and, over time, this may have a negative effect on their wellbeing.



Support: Ask pupils to discuss the statements below and decide which are examples of negativity bias and why.

- Clicking on a news story with a negative headline.
- Remembering what was said in one negative film review, rather than what was said in ten positive ones.
- Writing a list of things that went well and things to practise more after a test.



Challenge: Ask pupils to discuss: 'Is negativity bias always a bad thing?' They could consider

- worrying about an exam
- feeling guilty about a behaviour
- 'bad' news stories

Evaluating strategies (Slides 18–20, 10 mins)

Highlight that sometimes it is helpful to pay attention to negative experiences or emotions. For example, reading about ‘bad’ news can help someone stay informed, or feeling worried about a test can help someone understand when they need to practise something more. But it is important to manage how much time someone spends focusing on negative thoughts and emotions as, over time, this can negatively affect their wellbeing.

Remind pupils, or explain, that when someone ‘savours’ a positive experience, this means that they spend more time focusing on it and making the most of it. Ask them to ‘think-pair-share’ examples of positive experiences someone could savour.

Take feedback.

Suggestions might include: making new friends, spending time with family, being in nature (e.g. watching bugs, admiring flowers, watching leaves on water, feeling the sun or wind on their face), cuddling a pet, having a special day out or holiday, spending time doing an activity they enjoy (e.g. painting, drawing, watching favourite programme), eating a favourite meal.

Before clicking through the animations on slide 19 remind, or explain to pupils, that although the human brain was designed to focus on negative thoughts or experiences, brain plasticity means the brain can change. If someone can strengthen the reward system in the brain, using different strategies, it can become easier to notice and focus on more positive thoughts and emotions.

Click through the animations as you explain that noticing and savouring positive experiences will activate the ventral striatum (VS) and, as someone does this more often, the hippocampus remembers, making it easier to repeat the strategy and strengthen the connections in the brain – it’s a bit like moulding clay! Building these positive thinking habits can help support wellbeing and manage negativity bias.

Next, in pairs, give pupils **Resource 2: Strategies diamond 9**. Ask them to consider the different strategies that could be used to develop positive thinking habits at school and organise the cards in a diamond 9 shape (1,22,333,44,5), with the most helpful strategy at the top, and least helpful at the bottom. You could use the strategies posters (Appendix 3) in the [Teacher Handbook](#), to reinforce the different strategies and how they can help, both during and after the lesson.

Take feedback from volunteers, asking them to share their top strategy and explain why they chose this.

Next, ask them to discuss which strategies would be most helpful in developing positive thinking habits at home, and rearrange the cards accordingly. Take feedback on each group’s top strategy.

Highlight that different people will find different strategies more, or less, helpful, and that this might depend on the context (e.g. at home or at school). It is likely that strategies such as trying a calming activity (for example, spending time in nature), or trying a sensory focus activity (for example, listening to music), will be easier to use when someone is at home. But strategies like the ‘See, hear, move’ technique and focusing on a calming memory might be more helpful at school, when someone needs to interrupt negative thinking in the moment and refocus on what they are doing.

Tao's forum post (Slide 21, 10 mins)

Share the forum post on slide 21 and explain that although starting a new school might feel scary for Tao, there are things he can do to help him change the way he thinks about it.

Give pupils **Resource 3: Tao's forum post** and ask them to reply to the post, responding to each of the prompts:

- Describe two different strategies that Tao could try to help develop positive thinking.
- Explain why it is important for Tao to practise the strategies.
- Suggest some new opportunities that Tao could look forward to, at secondary school.
- Give Tao some examples of positive experiences he could savour.
- Choose one of the negative thoughts from Tao's post and rewrite it as a positive thought.

Ask volunteers to share their advice, using **Resource 3b: Tao's forum post – teacher answers** to support discussions.



Support: Give pupils **Resource 3a: Helping Tao** and ask them to complete the activities to help offer advice to Tao.



Challenge: Ask pupils to suggest solutions to some of the problems Tao has included in his post, for example, what could Tao do if he gets lost or struggles to remember all the teachers' names?

Reflection and endpoint assessment

Reflection and endpoint assessment (Slides 22-23, 5 mins)

Ask pupils to reflect on their own thoughts about moving to secondary school, considering what positive and negative thoughts they have and any strategies they might use to help remember the positive thoughts, manage the negative thoughts, and address any concerns. As this is personal reflection, pupils should not be asked to share their responses.

Remind pupils of the learning outcomes and ask them to revisit question 3 of the baseline activity ('What thoughts might they be having and how helpful or unhelpful might these be?') from lesson 1. Ask them to make any changes to their original answers, or add in any new learning from this lesson in a different colour pen, answering the questions:

- Why might someone find it harder to focus on positive thoughts about moving to secondary school?
- What strategies can someone use to help develop more positive thinking habits at school and at home?
- How can brain plasticity help someone change their thinking habits?

This will help to evidence pupils' progress and highlight any gaps that may need addressing in future lessons on this or related topics.

Check the question box and respond to any remaining questions.

Signposting support

Signposting support (Slide 24, 3 mins)

Remind pupils that if they are finding it difficult to manage negative thoughts, or if negative thoughts are causing them problems, it's important they speak to a trusted adult at home or at school. Pupils can also contact Childline www.childline.org.uk/kids.

Closing the lesson (Slide 25)

Finally, using slide 25, 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

Reflecting on primary school (Slide 26)

Ask pupils to write a reflective piece on positive experiences from primary school - for example, friendships, memorable trips or events, such as sports day or Christmas plays. These could be displayed for the whole class or school to see. Alternatively, create a class mind map of positive experiences from primary school.

Looking to the future (Slide 27)

Ask pupils to create a list of things they are looking forward to when they go to secondary school. Pupils could refer to this when they are feeling worried and think about how potential worries could be resolved, for example, by speaking to a trusted adult.