

Soothing Thoughts

By WILSON McCASKILL

I think it can be safely said that we have all experienced an almost countless number of instances when we have failed to manage our emotions and ended up doing things that we regretted.

I've no doubt that such instances will, for most of us, come again and we will find ourselves doing the wrong thing, knowing it's wrong and unable to stop ourselves.

Hopefully, such instances occur with less frequency over the passage of time and with our increasing self-awareness comes the self-regulation that will help us behave rationally and do what is right even when we don't want to.

This of course may not be the case and for some of us the short fuse that leads to unwarranted emotional outbursts seems to be getting shorter. Self-regulation, especially in trying circumstances, continues to elude us and despite our age we fall victim to emotions with damaging regularity.

It appears that self-regulation is a life long work-in-progress and the journey requires vigilance if the outcome of a calm, contented-yet emotionally fulfilling existence is to be achieved.

Emotions are powerful motivators of action and, from what I understand, we are born with many of them at full power.

Children can get as scared as adults, be as happy, equally upset and similarly disappointed, saddened or disgusted.

These persuasive messages, these emotions surge through our bodies with great intensity and with no respect for our life experience, age or size. It's not as if there is a different emotional output based on body weight or maturity. There's no start gently and build up as one gets older and more experienced.

There are times when I wonder how little bodies, with still developing brains, can survive the sheer wattage of emotions that surge through them. And I'm positively incredulous that puberty and its cocktail of hormones doesn't just make children vaporize.

It seems ironic that the very things that often cause as such difficulty are the very things that make living the worthwhile and profound experience that it is. Our emotions are unstoppable. They are in constant play and they work in an infinite variety of combinations and intensities. They can in an instant turn from friend to foe.

The skill is to keep them being friends, in support of our behaviour and limit their capacity to undermine our beliefs, values and actions.

If we accept, that as adults, there have been many instances when we have found it hard to keep our emotions regulated, and if we are willing to admit that there have been too many times when we have failed, then we can accept and understand how difficult being in control of emotions must be for children. And how much guidance, training and practise it will take to master the self-regulation that ensures appropriate and acceptable behaviour in the broadest range of circumstances.

Self-regulation requires being able to generate thoughts capable of calming the emotions that are moving us towards inappropriate actions.

Finding those soothing thoughts is not always easy and children need many opportunities to practise this skill if it is to come anywhere near being a reflex.

Soothing thoughts (or if you prefer, strong or calming thoughts) can take the form of actual words said to oneself, mental images, music, songs or other mental tricks that divert the onward rush of emotions.

"Our feelings are not a passport to act. They must pass through the checkpoint of thinking before being released as actions."

Constructing soothing thoughts is not easy at the best of times and for people who are well practised at falling victim to their emotions, finding ways to keep them in-check will be significantly harder.

For these people the time between the welling up of emotions and their inappropriate expression can be miniscule. Within a split second an event can trigger enflaming thoughts that release

destructive emotions that will, in turn, require powerfully calming thoughts if there is to be any hope of avoiding a calamitous outcome.

Invariably, no such thoughts arrive and in their place more fuel is added to the emotional fire and an all too frequent pattern of destructive and damaging behaviour is played out.

PUNISHMENT

Scolding, threatening or punishing children teaches them little about how to manage a challenging sequence of events that can be confusing and nearly impossible to understand when they're caught in its powerful grip.

Punishment simply makes children feel bad about not having a capability they have had no instruction in attaining.

There is every likelihood that the role modelling of stable, rational, emotionally controlled behaviour is not prevalent in their daily lives and much as they want to behave appropriately they just don't know how to do it.

This does not mean they don't know what the appropriate behaviour looks like and sounds like. It means, often to their own frustration, annoyance and anger, that they know it but can't do it.

With each consequence for their inability their resentment rises - destructive emotions become more powerful and the belief that self-control is beyond them gains more traction. Eventually there is no point in trying and rather than make the effort and fail, they make no effort at all. They allow their emotions to overwhelm them and appear to deliberately do that which upsets others.

The subsequent emotional discharge of those they upset is proof they are good at something, and any remorse they might have felt is assuaged by the belief they have simply upset those who tried to upset them.

Just as we wouldn't punish a child for failing to process a mathematical procedure correctly or for using the wrong rule when striving for grammatical accuracy, we must avoid resorting to punishment when children fail to master the necessary skills to behave appropriately. Instead, we should resort to education.

Mistakes occur in all areas of a child's development. The understanding and compassion required to help them with their difficulties in core subjects needs to be redirected to helping them with the central subject of behaviour.

WIN-WIN

Educators are skilled at helping children to make sense of things and can undoubtedly help them make sense of the ways and means to manage their emotions.

Think of all the benefits for children, and the adults who work with them, from being skilled at regulating emotions. It's easy to see that learning to do so is not just worthwhile but essential.

A significant side benefit of helping children learn how to self-soothe is that we improve our own ability to do the same.

We only need to think of the last time we had an adult hissy-fit, an emotional outburst, an over-reaction to a situation to see that when it comes to self-regulation there is always room for improvement. Helping children to achieve self-mastery may be the perfect way to help ourselves.

STRATEGY:

STEPS TO SELF-REGULATION

I strongly recommend you read through this process fully and then determine if you want to use every step or just those you feel, for whatever reason, are best suited to your class and circumstance.

I fully expect that most educators will use their own skills, experience and knowledge of the children they are working with to adapt, adjust and apply the process in a manner that achieves the best results.

STEP 1

Gather the class together and share personal stories about times when emotions got the better of reason, resulting in behaviour that was inappropriate, damaging or destructive.

Question the storytellers to find out the details of their circumstances, the sequence of events, the reactions of others and whether or not their behaviour achieved their desired outcome.

***NOTE:** For some children "losing the plot" is an effective way of getting what they want.*

Try not to pass judgement on these stories. Just let them be voiced, shared and considered by the class.

After a few stories, break the class into smaller groups and let students take it in turn to share their stories. As everyone will have a story, it's important to try and get everyone to contribute.

Move around listening and encouraging everyone to be open and attentive. Giving everyone a set time to share their story and respond to questions from their group, will keep things moving and equally participatory.

***NOTE:** It goes without saying that this process should be adapted/adjusted to suit the age and capabilities of the students.*

STEP 2

This can be done immediately after step 1 or later in the day or another day altogether.

As in step 1, share stories about times when emotions DID NOT get the better of reason and self-control that could have been easily lost was maintained and a positive outcome achieved.

***NOTE:** If stories are not forthcoming they can be triggered by asking for stories where students were able to avoid panic.*

EXAMPLES:

- falling into a pool.
- final kick to win the match
- dog running towards you in a park
- a friend fainting
- hurting yourself
- losing your way

- something burning
- late for something important
- breaking something special
- losing something valuable.
- Etc.

STEP 3

Students take a large sheet of paper and divide it into 3 panels. Thinking of a personal circumstance in which they lost control they draw 3 pictures to reveal the journey.

Picture 1 - How it started (beginning)

Picture 2 - How it developed (middle)

Picture 3 - How it ended (end)

Once done, select students who have not previously spoken to the group as a whole to share the story of their picture.

Finish with the class in pairs doing a timed, think and share of their pictures.

STEP 4

Using a second sheet of paper students again divide it into 3 panels. Using the scenario in step 3 they now pictorially interpret it to show how things would have been different had they managed to stay in control of their feelings.

***NOTE:** The first panel usually remains the same with the pictures in panels 2 and 3 being significantly different.*

Finish this step as you did with step 3.

If the capabilities of the children permit, have them draw voice or thought bubbles to reveal what the characters are going through in each panel. They can also write some narration at the bottom of each panel if they wish.

STEP 5

Share this simple definition of an emotion with the class.

"A persuasive message from you to you"

Although there are many emotions it is accepted that there are 7 basic emotions from which all the others derive. They are as follows:

HAPPINESS

ANGER

FEAR

SADNESS

SURPRISE

DISGUST

CONTEMPT

Explore these emotions by asking students to act them out. If students are shy, ask them to pull faces to show the emotions and as they gain confidence ask for full body displays.

This can be done by individual volunteers or by the class as a whole. It can be fun to jump from one emotion to another trying to capture both the external look and internal feel of the emotion.

Having played with the look and feel of each emotion, children will more easily understand, with your help, that emotions want to drive you to action – they want you to do something about them.

Working through the list of emotions, explore what each might ultimately have you doing if they were to have complete control of your mind and body.

If students are willing to share stories about their own behaviour, when overcome by any of these emotions, let them do so.

Ask students to think about the 7 emotions and list them from the ones they experience the most to the ones they experience the least. Younger students can simply nominate the two or three they experience the most.

NOTE: *This can be quite revealing and afford you surprising insights.*

STEP 6

Ask students to add feelings words to the list of 7 basic emotions. This list should become an ever-expanding list that students add to as they discover new words. Encourage them to be on the look out for these words in books, on TV, film, conversation etc. As feelings are added to the list, ask students to suggest possible situations that might generate those feelings.

STEP 7

Only do this step if you think the students can apply themselves to the task and achieve same degree of success.

Sitting in pairs, students take it in turn to share the story of their day so far while tracking the sequence of emotions they experienced.

EXAMPLE:

Referring to the feelings list can be helpful.

"Mum dropped me off at school. I was feeling down. Then I met Stacy and Angie and felt better. We joined up with John and Sarah and John told us a funny story about his dog which made me happy. The siren went and I felt upset because I didn't want to start the day with a maths test. But Miss Jones was in a good mood and that made me feel more confident and relaxed about the test. After the test I felt disappointed because I knew I hadn't done well. Melanie said she had not done well either so I didn't feel so alone etc., etc."

STEP 8

Build a discussion around the idea, ***"If it feels good, do it."***

Your aim is to get students to see why living by this guideline can be dangerous both to individuals and communities. It may work on occasions but as a guiding principle it puts much at risk.

Help older groups to discover why almost all advertising wants people to accept this principle as the way to decide what is right to do.

Deconstructing current adverts will help to drive the point home.

Understanding that children are constantly exposed to this idea makes it essential to use critical thinking to break the idea down and reveal how it exploits them and puts them at risk. Your guidance here will be invaluable.

STEP 9

"Feelings like nothing more than to take charge of actions. Don't let them. They are, and are meant to be, the servants of thought. As servants they reward our lives with a multitude of experiences. As masters they lead us to ruin."

Though usually referred to as "soothing thoughts" you may have a class that would respond better to the term "calming thoughts" or "strong thoughts".

It can also help to stitch the terms together, thereby making each synonymous with the other i.e.

Strong, calming thoughts

Calming, soothing thoughts

or indeed

Strong thoughts that calm and soothe

or

Soothing thoughts strong enough to calm our feelings

Begin the process by asking students to create thoughts that people can use to control emotions. Maintain momentum and motivation by proposing certain scenarios or situations.

Ask students to imagine themselves in that event and consider what they could be saying to themselves to remain in control.

SCENARIOS

- Sitting a test
- Having an argument
- Taking a vital free kick
- Being put down by someone
- Being teased
- In trouble for doing something wrong.
- Finding a task very difficult
- Being the odd one out.
- Meeting someone for the first time.
- Speaking in public
- Trapped in an elevator
- Etc.

Soothing – strong - calming thoughts don't have to be just words of course. Images can help as well. Being able to activate our imaginations to transport us to a different time, place and sensation works very well to calm emotions.

Using the previous scenarios ask students to propose mental pictures that can help change emotional states i.e.

Lying on a cloud

Floating on the ocean

Laughing at your favourite comic scene in a movie

Imaging a mouse crawling up one leg and down another

Fishing with a friend on a perfect day

Standing in a freezing cold shower

After a student proposes a mental image it helps to ask all students to close their eyes and imagine having the experience. Encourage them to get really involved with the mental picture.

This can be done by asking questions that engage their senses.

ie. What can you...

See?

Hear?

Smell?

Feel?

Taste?

The more detail you ask for (within reason) the more immersion they will experience.

Once they have practised this a few times it's time to see if they can create strong responses to the mental images with their eyes open.

To do this, start by asking them to create the experience with their eyes closed and then, when they are ready, open their eyes and keep the sensations happening.

***NOTE:** With practise this becomes quite simple to do and works in the way it needs to work in real life when difficult moments arise. Think of this situation. If you're late for an appointment and crawling along in your car in congested traffic and feel yourself getting more and more irate - imaginatively transporting yourself to the top of a mountain will only help if you can do it with your eyes open. With them closed the only transport you're likely to experience is in an ambulance!*

ACTIVITY

Students can make soothing thoughts banners or images that are pinned up around the room to inspire and assist the class community

Soothing thoughts can also be musical. Some students will find it easier to maintain control if they silently sing to themselves or listen to a tune or song in their head.

This can be fun to experience and practise. Having everyone silently singing the same song to themselves at the same time is very amusing - especially if you ask them to all sing it out loud and then signal them to sing it silently. Get them to cut from silence to sound a few times. It's good for a laugh.

Soothing thoughts, be they words, pictures or sounds divert the supply of enflaming, destructive thoughts that escalate unwanted emotions – thereby diminishing their power and preventing them from taking control of actions.

REMEMBER:

"Our feelings are not a passport to act. They must pass through the checkpoint of thinking before being released as actions."

TRICKS

Another way of creating emotional diversions is to use little tricks. These work especially well when people are in emotionally charged situations with others.

Imaginatively creating physical endowments for the person you are in conflict with works well. Imagining them wearing a dress if they are a boy or with a beard if they are girl can make light of a moment. Humorous imaginings can take the steam out of hot emotions and leave you with an inner chuckle.

Mentally counting your toes in your shoes by moving each one in turn and trying to get to the highest number possible is both consuming and distracting.

Using the tip of your tongue to count your teeth or assigning each tooth one word of the National Anthem and touching each one in turn until the entire anthem has been sung in your head, takes significant concentration.

Keeping a small dice in your pocket for emotional emergencies gives you the opportunity to work out the number of dots on each side using your thumb without anyone seeing what you are doing.

Trying to count the number of times someone uses the word "and" will have you looking like you're listening closely while you are, in fact, only listening for the key word.

Let students suggest possible mental tricks that will help divert emotions and let everyone enjoy checking them out.

“Emotions are like chameleons. They can change from one colour to another by a change of thought and action.”

STEP 10 - BUILDING THE HABIT

Having worked through some or all of the previous steps, your students will have a good understanding of the relationship between thoughts and emotions and hopefully be accepting of the idea that emotional control is a sign of strength.

It also leads to safe communities and does not mean that life is less emotionally rewarding. In fact, being in control of our emotions frees us to participate in a greater range of experiences without fear of being overwhelmed or put at emotional risk.

The journey for the class is to now make the use of soothing – strong - calming thoughts a reflex, a habit that kicks in whenever needed.

You can help to create the habit by asking students to have a soothing thought on standby, ready for use whenever the work they're doing gets uncomfortable or difficult.

Students can select one from those displayed in the room or devise one. The thing is to have it ready for possible use.

Do a spot check of a few students by asking them to share their chosen soothing thought. Get them to say it out loud, repeat it again for all to hear and then give them a moment to say it to themselves.

In the early stages of habit formation I like to get students to say it 3 times - Twice out loud and once to themselves. You can follow this up by asking the whole class to simultaneously callout their selected soothing thought (twice out loud and once to themselves).

With that done, start your work with them. At various times remind them to use their soothing thoughts. If you notice a particular child getting agitated ask them to stop for a second, breathe in

slowly, out slowly, in slowly and say their soothing thought out loud. Ask them to repeat it to themselves and continue to work on.

On some occasions, stop the whole class and either ask them to breathe in, out, in and say their thought or close their eyes and imagine themselves in a soothing situation. That done they can continue with their work.

On other occasions ask them to deliberately soothe themselves prior to giving them something you know will create anxiety and stress.

If students are using images to soothe themselves you can still ask them to share those out aloud.

EXAMPLE: ONE

Teacher: Steven, would you share your soothing thought, please?

Steven: I'm sitting on top of a snowy mountain.

Teacher: Tell me again and tell me a little more please

Steven: I'm sitting on top of a snowy mountain with snow falling and the sun shining in my face.

Teacher: Take a second to close your eyes and imagine yourself in that lovely place.

EXAMPLE: TWO

Teacher: Elizabeth, could you please share your soothing thought with us.

Elizabeth: I can hear my favourite song in my head.

Teacher: Could you please try humming or singing a bit of the song for us.

Elizabeth: (Does so)

Teacher: Could we all try singing it with Elizabeth this time, please? Ready, go. (class sings).
Now, sing it yourself Elizabeth. I can see that it will work well, you're smiling as you sing it to yourself.

The idea is to have students see that you expect them to use soothing thoughts and that you will not only ask them to do so but give them the chance to practise.

You will need to keep your eye out for students whose emotions are building up and who are forgetting to self-soothe. Reminding them to break the cycle and helping them to do so will substitute an old destructive pattern of behaviour for a new, more productive pattern.

"Emotions are not rigid and inflexible. Even the most powerful can be bent and shaped to serve us better."

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

The following is a modification of a technique that Derek Hedgcock used successfully with students when he was principal of Mundingburra Primary School in Townsville.

Derek will be presenting workshops at the **Hands On Education Social and Emotional Learning Conference** in Adelaide, August 18th & 19th, 2011. A great opportunity to benefit from his wisdom and great wealth of strategies. www.handsoneducation.com.au

This is a good technique to learn for those unexpected moments when our emotions are caught off guard and we feel they could quickly escalate and overwhelm us.

It works on associations and needs to be repetitively practised so that it can be used in emotional emergencies to rescue ourselves from falling victim to our emotions.

Having worked through some or all of the previous steps, your students will find embedding this strategy simple and fun.

The first thing they have to do is find a "physical trigger" to initiate the process of emotional control. This should be something barely noticeable to others and easy to do.

Eg.

- crossing your arms with both hands under your arm pits
- pointing your big toes upwards
- touching your pinky finger and thumb together
- crossing your index and middle fingers
- clasping your hands together with fingers interlaced
- curling your toes
- putting one hand behind your back

Having selected the trigger, students now need to think of a well defined situation that brings back strong memories of a pleasurable experience.

Eg.

- favourite birthday party
- best holiday ever
- doing something with you best friend
- enjoying your favourite meal
- having fun with you pet
- dancing to your favourite song
- playing your favourite instrument
- singing Karaoke

LINKING

Now its time to link the physical trigger to the pleasurable experience. To do this, ask the students to employ the trigger while simultaneously transporting themselves to the pleasurable experience.

As in step 9 you can intensify the experience by asking questions and getting the students to focus on the details of their mental images.

Ask students to stay involved in the sensations of the experience for 30 seconds initially and build this up to 2 minutes over time. After holding the state for the requested time ask them to release the trigger and the pleasurable experience.

Discuss the process with the class. Some will have found it easier than others. Sharing the experience will create the opportunity for students to help each other.

Get everyone to try again a few times in a row with short breaks (1 to 2 minutes) between tries. During the breaks students can either go back to their work or talk between themselves etc.

You can trigger each attempt by saying "Link please" at which point everyone uses their trigger and immerses themselves in their pleasurable experience.

With the initial practise done you can inform them that at various times in the day you will surprise them with a call to, "link please" at which point they are to stop what they are doing, use the trigger and transport themselves to the pleasurable experience.

You will need to do this 3 or 4 times a day for 5 or more days until it's an embedded reflex. Remember to increase their imaginative stamina by holding them in the state for anywhere between 30 seconds to 2 minutes.

I like to end each practise by saying something like, "Thank you, you can take that feeling with you and keep going with your work, please."

Students now have a physical action they can use whenever a difficult situation suddenly arises. One that will trigger a sequence of thoughts and sensations that converts unwanted emotions to those that are pleasurable.

Remind students to use his trigger when caught in the unexpected moment. You will need to practise the technique once-in-a-while to keep it in good working order.

You may have to repeat the linking process after a while and ask students to find a new trigger with a new pleasurable experience just to ensure the technique remains fresh and effective.

FINALLY

Attached is a list of some soothing thoughts from children over the years.

I also recommend you look at a very effective piece of creative thinking by Nicky Taylor a South Australian teacher who managed to help her students greatly by asking them to make their own, individual "Soothing Cushions."

Nicky's idea can be found on our website and we thank her for sharing it

<https://www.thegamefactory.com.au/featureschool/SoothingCushions>

There are quite a few quotes in my manual "By Wisdom Not by Face" that will be of help. I have used a few in this article.

Please have a look at pages: 87, 88, 29, 32, 35, 77, 99, 103, 105, 127, 145, 161

SOOTHING THOUGHTS

- Doesn't matter what happens, Mum & Dad always love me.
- Be brave.
- A problem shared is a problem halved.
- If I keep trying I will feel good that I didn't give in.
- Success feels better when it is hard to get.
- It's the struggle that makes us strong.
- Every time I face a challenge, I face fear.
- Courage doesn't mean you don't get scared. It means you don't give in.
- You can't beat a problem if you're always trying to get away from it.
- Imagine being covered in fairy dust.
- Imagine snowflakes are falling to cool you down.
- Imagine you're snuggled up in bed all warm and cosy.
- Think about the holiday you're going on.
- Think about the last thing you did well.
- Think about people who have much worse problems than yours.
- Get over it and get on with it.
- The only way to beat a monster is to turn and face it.
- This is not as difficult as learning to walk and I learnt that.
- Take a few deep breaths and try again.
- This is really hard but it won't kill me.
- I don't need more intelligence - I just need more practice.
- A little bit better is still better.
- If I participate I will progress.
- If I do something I will get somewhere.
- My teacher wants more from me because she respects me.
- This isn't going to kill me.
- If you try you might fail. If you don't you fail anyway.
- It's not about how well I do. It's about how hard I try.
- Count to 10 slowly.
- I'm not the only one finding this difficult.
- I'm not alone.
- Making mistakes are the steps to getting things right.
- Nothing gets better if I run away from it.
- I can't do this YET.