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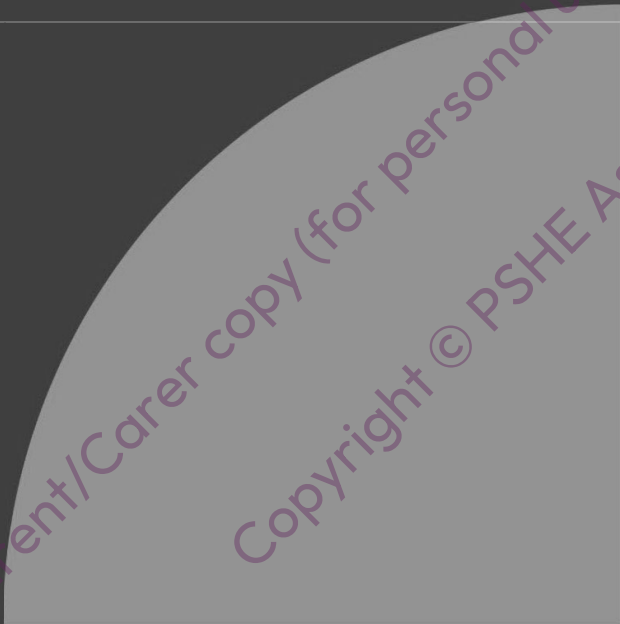
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Foundations for Wellbeing

A research-led primary mental health and wellbeing curriculum (Reception & KS1-2)



*Please read this Teacher Handbook
before teaching the lessons

Teacher Handbook

Welcome to *Foundations for Wellbeing*, an evidence-based mental health and wellbeing curriculum for Reception and key stages 1 and 2 from the PSHE Association which was developed in collaboration with the University of York. This handbook will support you to teach the *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons with confidence, and effectively embed the curriculum at the heart of your whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing.

Contents

Teacher Handbook	2
Teacher guidance	4
Introduction	4
Why teaching about mental health and wellbeing is important in the primary phase	4
Useful subject knowledge	5
Mental health and wellbeing	5
Theory and evidence informing the lessons	5
Teaching self-regulation strategies	6
Teaching neuroscience	7
Embedding learning within a wider whole-school approach	8
Preparing to teach	8
Creating a safe learning environment	8
Safeguarding	9
Pupils with additional vulnerabilities	9
Assessment and personal reflection	10
Signposting support	10
Support for you and your colleagues	10
Support for pupils	10
Self-regulation strategies	12
Self-regulation strategies part 1: Emotion regulation	12
What is emotion regulation?	12
Why is emotion regulation important?	12
What types of emotion regulation strategies are there?	12
Can emotion regulation strategies be learnt?	12
Will pupils prefer some emotion regulation strategies over others?	13
Are the emotion regulation strategies evidence-based?	13
How can I teach emotion regulation strategies safely?	13
Emotion down-regulation strategies	13

Naming	13
Pausing	13
Distracting	14
Sensory focus	14
Slow breathing	14
Progressive muscle relaxation	15
Watching thoughts	15
Reappraising	15
Seeking support	16
Emotion up-regulation strategies	16
Spotting	16
Savouring	16
Appreciating	16
Planning	16
Reflecting	17
Connecting	17
Emotion regulation strategies posters	17
Self-regulation strategies part 2: Attention regulation	17
What is attention regulation and why is it important?	17
Are distractions always unhelpful?	17
Does everyone get distracted?	18
Can attention regulation strategies be learnt?	18
Will the strategies work equally well for all pupils?	18
Can the strategies inform a whole school approach?	18
How can I teach the strategies safely?	18
Attention regulation strategies	19
Identifying	19
See, hear, move	19
Watching thoughts	19
Choosing	19
Changing	19
Focusing	19
Remembering	20
Responding	20
Attention regulation strategies poster	20
Acknowledgement	21
Appendix 1: Links to the Programme of Study and DfE's statutory guidance on Relationships, Sex and Health education	22

Learning objectives.....	22
PSHE Association Programme of Study	22
DfE statutory guidance	22
Appendix 2: My amazing brain! poster	27
Appendix 3: Our strategies posters	28
Further reading	31
References	31

Teacher guidance

Introduction

This handbook accompanies the PSHE Association's *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons, classroom posters and animated guides. It includes guidance, sections on emotion and attention regulation strategies, classroom posters on the neuroscience and self-regulation strategies taught in the lessons, and curriculum links. The lessons, for Reception and key stages 1 and 2, focus on teaching pupils how to monitor and manage their attention, behaviour and emotions to support their mental health and wellbeing.

There are 35 lessons in total, with five for each year group, including Reception. While the curriculum's progression has been carefully sequenced, it is possible to teach the lessons even if pupils have not been taught them in previous years.

The *My amazing brain!* and *Our strategies* classroom posters (Appendices 2–3), and the animated guides to slow breathing and progressive muscle relaxation, can be used to support and reinforce pupils' learning during and between lessons.

Please read this guidance before teaching the lessons.

Why teaching about mental health and wellbeing is important in the primary phase

Teaching pupils about how to take care of their mental health and wellbeing is arguably more important than ever, with official statistics indicating that almost one in six (15.7%) 8 to 10-year-olds and almost one in four (22.6%) 11 to 16-year-olds in England had a probable mental disorder in 2023 ^[i]. The nationally representative Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study in England also found that approximately one in four (26%) 11-year-old boys and almost one in two (45%) girls of the same age were either experiencing low mood or at risk of depression in 2022 ^[ii]. However, as a teacher, you can help to lay foundations for good mental health and wellbeing now and in the future, by equipping pupils from the early years and throughout key stages 1 and 2 with knowledge and understanding of how they can take care of their mental health and wellbeing, including how to recognise when and how to seek help.

Based on neuroscience and the latest developmental and psychological research, these lessons will empower you to implement a planned, proactive, strengths-based approach to teaching knowledge, understanding and skills that will support your pupils' mental health and wellbeing, as part of a whole-school approach ^[iii]. They will also allow you to meet the Department for Education (DfE)'s statutory guidance for Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE), which

requires that pupils are taught about mental wellbeing ^[iv]. Among other requirements, the guidance states that by the end of primary school, pupils should know that mental wellbeing is just as important as physical health, how to recognise and name a range of emotions using varied and precise vocabulary, and when, as well as how, to seek support if they are worried about their own or someone else's mental wellbeing.

Useful subject knowledge

Mental health and wellbeing

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as 'a state of wellbeing' in which:

- *the individual realizes his or her own abilities,*
- *can cope with the normal stresses of life,*
- *can work productively and fruitfully, and*
- *is able to make a contribution to his or her community* ^[v].

The WHO suggests that this is experienced during childhood when children develop:

- *a positive sense of identity,*
- *the ability to manage thoughts, emotions,*
- *as well as to build social relationships,*
- *and the aptitude to learn and to acquire an education,*
- *ultimately enabling their full active participation in society* ^[ibid.].

Importantly, while some researchers have argued that mental health and subjective wellbeing are related but distinct concepts ^[vi], it has been found that several factors associated with experiencing better mental health are also associated with experiencing higher levels of subjective wellbeing ^[vii]. The *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons leverage this insight to teach pupils knowledge, understanding and skills that will support both their mental health and wellbeing, helping them to flourish now and in the future.

To learn more about this topic and the factors that impact mental health and wellbeing, especially during childhood and early adolescence, please visit our [self-guided online courses on mental health and wellbeing](#), which are available to all School Plus members.

Theory and evidence informing the lessons

The *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons are based on neuroscience and the latest developmental and psychological research. A critical review of this research led to the development of the neurodevelopmental theory of mental health and wellbeing capacities (NDeTeC) ^[viii], which has informed these lessons.

The NDeTeC focuses on how knowledge, understanding and skills that support mental health and wellbeing develop from birth until later life. It organises these skills according to two complementary, interdependent and modifiable capacities. These capacities are referred to as the 'self-regulation' and 'self-world' capacities and are especially malleable during childhood.

You are likely to have encountered many of the evidence-based concepts and theories that the NDeTeC integrates, such as problem solving, self-compassion, growth mindset, awe and gratitude, among others. The *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons reflect the way the NDeTeC carefully integrates these concepts and theories, organising them according to shared characteristics.

In essence, the self-regulation capacity is related to our ability to monitor and manage our attention, behaviour and emotions, to support our mental health and wellbeing. And the self-world capacity is related to our ability to nurture a positive, socially-connected sense of self.

The lessons are organised around various facets of the self-regulation capacity, but also promote elements of the self-world capacity.

In each year, pupils learn about five main topics – one per lesson:

- **Lesson 1:** how to notice and name feelings and emotions.
- **Lesson 2:** how to direct attention and manage distractions.
- **Lesson 3:** how to manage negativity bias and develop more positive thinking habits.
- **Lesson 4:** how to manage worries and rumination.
- **Lesson 5:** how to manage stress, tension and reactivity.

The lessons revisit and expand upon each topic yearly, as part of a spiral curriculum that consolidates and builds pupils' knowledge, understanding and skills. Strategies are introduced and reinforced that should then be promoted, practised and embedded through a whole-school approach, to become part of pupils' daily lives.

To learn more about the theory and evidence informing these lessons, please visit our [self-guided online courses on mental health and wellbeing](#), which are available to all School Plus members.

Teaching self-regulation strategies

Self-regulation strategies can be used to manage our attention, behaviour and emotions. The *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons introduce nine groups of emotion regulation strategies which pupils can use to help them reduce the intensity of strong, unpleasant or uncomfortable emotions. These are sometimes referred to as emotion down-regulation strategies^[ix], and include:

- **Naming:** acknowledging and naming the feeling(s) and emotion(s) being experienced.
- **Pausing:** stopping momentarily and 'taking a step back'.
- **Distraction:** redirecting attention away from the source of distress or discomfort.
- **Sensory focus:** taking part in absorbing activities that engage the senses.
- **Slow breathing:** taking several slow breaths, possibly extending the outbreath slightly.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation:** iteratively tensing and relaxing muscle groups.
- **Watching thoughts:** observing thoughts from a more distant, objective perspective.
- **Reappraising:** thinking differently about a situation and adopting more helpful thoughts.
- **Seeking support:** asking for help from a trusted adult, such as a teacher.

As the lessons progress, the breadth and complexity of the emotion down-regulation strategies gradually increases, so that pupils develop a varied and versatile repertoire of strategies for managing their emotions. Individual pupils are likely to prefer some emotion regulation strategies to others and their preferences may change over time and across different situations. To learn more about the emotion regulation strategies in these lessons, please read the emotion regulation strategies section on pages 13-24.

The lessons also introduce a variety of self-regulation strategies which pupils can use to help them initiate, sustain and amplify pleasant emotions, and focus on activities that they care about or enjoy. These strategies are described in the emotion and attention regulation strategies sections on pages 18-24. Some of the attention regulation strategies are also displayed in the *Our strategies* classroom posters (see *Our strategies for managing distractions*, in Appendix 3).

In year 6, pupils are introduced to a five-step approach to strategically preventing and managing distractions. The steps are based on the 'process model of self-control'^[x], and include:

- **Choosing** environments that are less distracting (e.g., a quiet place).
- **Changing** environments to make them less distracting (e.g., turning off TV).
- **Focusing** attention and ignoring distractions.
- **Reminding** oneself of the reasons why the task or activity matters or is important.
- **Responding** to urges or impulses by using emotion regulation strategies (e.g., pausing).

Teaching neuroscience

The *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons incorporate relevant neuroscience because understanding this enhances mental health and wellbeing literacy and pupils often find it enlightening, engaging and empowering. Precisely what pupils are expected to learn about neuroscience in each lesson is clearly explained in the lesson plans and PowerPoints. Nevertheless, the key brain regions that the lessons introduce, and their main 'job roles' within the context of the *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons, include:

- **Amygdala:** fear, unpleasant and unhelpful (e.g., worrisome or self-critical) thoughts.
- **Ventral striatum (VS):** enjoyment, motivation and pleasant thoughts.
- **Hippocampus:** learning, memory and remembering emotion regulation strategies.
- **Prefrontal cortex (PFC):** focusing, reasoning, and calming the amygdala.
- **Anterior cingulate cortex (ACC):** monitoring attention, behaviour and emotions.
- **Insula:** noticing emotionally-relevant bodily sensations (e.g., dry throat or 'butterflies').

The lessons also introduce pupils to the fact that different parts of the brain, and the connections between them (allowing them to communicate), can adapt and change (e.g., be rewired or strengthened) via a process called brain plasticity (or 'neuroplasticity'). For example, pupils are taught that using the self-regulation strategies introduced in the lessons can strengthen both the PFC and the connections between the PFC and the amygdala, making it easier for the PFC to calm the amygdala when it is 'ringing the alarm bell'. Pupils are also taught that, with repeated practice, using the self-regulation strategies becomes easier, more automatic and less effortful, and that this is partly because the hippocampus helps us to learn and remember to use them.

You could display the *My amazing brain!* poster (in Appendix 2) in your classroom to help your pupils learn and remember the parts of the brain that are introduced during the *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons.

Embedding learning within a wider whole-school approach

Self-regulation, mental health and wellbeing should not be viewed as a ‘topic’ to be delivered in isolation. Whilst these discrete lessons teach specifically about self-regulation, mental health and wellbeing, the knowledge, understanding, skills and strategies pupils learn in the lessons and the attributes they need to put that learning into practice to self-regulate and promote their own mental health and wellbeing, should be developed throughout your entire PSHE education programme.

And for pupils to learn how to use the self-regulation strategies taught in these lessons more automatically, autonomously and effectively, it is important that they are encouraged and supported to use them outside of their PSHE education lessons. So, we recommend regularly revisiting these self-regulation strategies and, if possible and appropriate, sharing them with parents. Displaying the emotion and attention regulation strategies (*Our strategies*) posters (in Appendix 3) in the classroom can support you to remind pupils of the strategies they have learnt, and to encourage them to practise them in everyday life after the lessons.

There are at least two activities to extend and embed the learning at the end of each lesson, although you are encouraged to develop your own activities as well, tailoring them to meet the specific needs of your pupils. You can also use the resources introduced in the lessons, such as the feelings thermometer and emotions chart, to create classroom displays, broaden emotional vocabulary and inform your whole-school approach to promoting mental health and wellbeing. To learn more about how the *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons can inform, or underpin, your whole-school approach to promoting mental health and wellbeing, please visit our [self-guided online courses on mental health and wellbeing](#), which are available to all School Plus members.

Preparing to teach

The *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons are not designed to be taught in isolation and should form part of your school’s PSHE education programme. Please see Appendix 1 for curriculum links to the PSHE Association Programme of Study and DfE’s RSHE statutory guidance.

The lesson plans for key stages 1 and 2 are based on 45-minute lessons. The timings given are the minimum time required to deliver the activities. Whilst it is always important for PSHE education lessons to be pacey, it is equally important to meet the needs of your pupils. More may be gained from spending longer on an activity, so long as you feel pupils are progressing towards the lesson objective. When this is the case, it may be more appropriate for your group to extend the lesson plan across two lessons.

Creating a safe learning environment

A safe learning environment helps pupils feel comfortable with sharing their ideas and opinions without attracting negative feedback, and will help you to manage discussions on sensitive issues confidently. The lessons have been designed to support the following safe practice principles:

Teachers should:

- work with pupils to establish ground rules about how they will behave in discussion, such as:
 - We treat each other with respect.
 - We use kind words and kind actions.
 - We don’t share stories about ourselves, our family or our friends.
 - We all have the right to be heard and respected.

- We comment on what was said, not the person who said it.
- We don't put anyone on the spot, and we have a right to pass.
- offer opportunities for pupils to discuss issues in small groups as well as sharing views with the class
- make a box/envelope available for pupils to put questions or concerns in (anonymously if they wish), to avoid having to voice them in front of the class
- provide factually accurate, up to date information
- be sensitive to the needs and experiences of individuals – some pupils may have direct experience of the issues covered
- use distancing strategies to discourage personal disclosures in the classroom, allow pupils to explore topics objectively, and to keep the learning environment safe
- always work within the school's policies on safeguarding and confidentiality
- link PSHE education into the whole school approach to supporting pupil wellbeing
- make pupils aware of sources of support, both in and outside the school.

Further guidance on creating a safe learning environment is available from the [PSHE Association](#).

Safeguarding

While appropriate disclosures by pupils about mental health issues should be seen as a positive impact of this learning, it is important that if pupils make personal disclosures to school staff, they do so in a suitable, one-to-one setting. It is not appropriate to encourage pupils to talk about sensitive personal matters in front of other pupils. If safeguarding concerns arise during these lessons, they should be reported to the Designated Safeguarding Lead, in line with your school policy.

Pupils with additional vulnerabilities

You may not know of any current issues amongst your pupils, however you should prepare all lessons on the assumption that there will be at least one member of the class who is personally affected by the lesson content. Making the lesson safe for that pupil will help to ensure the lesson is safe for everyone.

Additional safeguards to put in place:

- Let the mental health/wellbeing lead and other relevant pastoral and safeguarding staff know about the topic you will be covering and encourage them to discuss the lesson content with any pupils who are accessing support for related issues. It can be helpful to alert parents too – ensuring they know how to provide appropriate support.
- When introducing emotion regulation strategies such as slow-paced breathing and progressive muscle relaxation, remember that some pupils may find focusing on their breath or bodily sensations uncomfortable. If this is the case, allow them to stop taking part, reassure them and support them to try a different emotion regulation strategy, such as a distraction-based strategy. Alternative emotion regulation strategies, including distraction-based emotion regulation strategies, are described in the emotion regulation strategies section below.
- Do not ask pupils to close their eyes or lie down when introducing them to slow breathing or progressive muscle relaxation, as this can cause flashbacks (e.g., of drowning or choking) and is not a trauma-informed practice ^[xi]. We have developed trauma-informed animated guides to help you introduce your pupils to slow breathing and progressive muscle relaxation, which can be found [here](#) and [here](#).
- Ensure any characters, scenarios or case studies you use are unlike any members of your class. The scenarios in these lessons are designed to reflect general experiences common

to most pupils, so they are relatable. However, if necessary, adapt the characters' names so they are different to those of your pupils and any scenarios that directly reflect the current or past personal experiences of any pupils in the class.

- Signpost sources of support during and after the lesson.

While there may be clear physical or emotional indicators that a pupil is vulnerable to the issues discussed, sometimes there will be no such indicators. Some children and young people work hard to keep their problems hidden, so ensure your lessons are universally safe and never make assumptions about the mental health and wellbeing or resilience of particular pupils.

Assessment and personal reflection

The main model of assessment used in these PSHE lessons is ipsative assessment. This compares where a pupil is in their learning at the end of a lesson or series of lessons, against where they were at the start of the lesson(s). To assess learning and progress effectively, the *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons include:

- baseline assessments to gauge pupils' existing knowledge, understanding, skills, strategies, beliefs, and attitudes, and to identify any gaps or misconceptions
- formative assessment opportunities embedded in the lessons
- endpoint assessments to allow pupils to demonstrate, and teachers to gauge, the progress they have made from their starting point.

For more information and guidance on assessment in PSHE education, see our [assessment guides](#).

While it should not be 'marked', personal reflection in PSHE education lessons is essential. Pupils need opportunities to consider how new learning will be relevant in their lives, now and in the future. Personal reflection is therefore a valid, and valuable, component of PSHE education assessment. Sometimes pupils may reflect in writing or through discussion. Equally, pupils may not feel comfortable sharing their personal reflections with peers or teachers, or it might not be appropriate to ask them to share their thoughts on certain topics. It is, therefore, perfectly acceptable to pose questions for private reflection only.

Signposting support

Support for you and your colleagues

Teaching about mental health may affect teachers personally. Before teaching a lesson on mental health, it may be helpful to talk to your line manager or other colleagues about any concerns. And encourage colleagues to do the same, if you are the PSHE Lead. You may also be faced with managing disclosures from pupils, which can take an emotional toll, so it is important that you are supported by colleagues. Note also that [Education Support](#) provides a free helpline and support for teachers by trained counsellors.

We have included further information about how to take care of your own mental health when teaching about mental health and wellbeing in our self-guided online course, [Mental health and wellbeing: whole school approach](#), which is available to all School Plus members.

Support for pupils

The lesson plans all include a section on signposting support, to help you ensure pupils know where they can seek help and further advice, now and in the future, if they have questions or concerns related to their mental health and wellbeing. Remind them that they can ask for help

and advice from trusted adults at home, outside the home, in school or from appropriate organisations. Share the following website and phone details with pupils:

- Childline www.childline.org.uk/kids; 0800 1111

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Self-regulation strategies

This section describes the emotion and attention regulation strategies that are introduced in the *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons.

Self-regulation strategies part 1: Emotion regulation

This section describes emotion regulation strategies that can be used by pupils to help them reduce the intensity of strong, unpleasant or uncomfortable emotions, as well as strategies that can be used by pupils to initiate, sustain and amplify pleasant emotions. Also see the *Our strategies* classroom posters (in Appendix 3), which you can display to support pupils to learn, and remember to use, the emotion strategies introduced during the lessons.

What is emotion regulation?

Emotion regulation is an aspect of self-regulation and refers to our ability to monitor and manage our emotions^[xii]. It is sometimes referred to as emotional self-regulation or emotion-related self-regulation^[xiii]. Emotion regulation complements problem solving and self-care, which the *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons also support pupils with.

Why is emotion regulation important?

Better emotion regulation is associated with better mental health and wellbeing, as well as other favourable outcomes, during childhood, adolescence and adulthood^[e.g., xiv, xv, xvi]. To discover more about the relationship between emotion regulation and mental health and wellbeing, please visit our self-guided online course, [Mental health and wellbeing: Building your knowledge and understanding](#), which is available to all School Plus members.

What types of emotion regulation strategies are there?

Set out below are nine groups of emotion regulation strategies that can be used by pupils to help them reduce the intensity of strong, unpleasant or uncomfortable emotions. These are sometimes referred to as emotion **down**-regulation strategies^[xvii]. There are also six groups of emotion regulation strategies that can be used by pupils to help them initiate, sustain and amplify pleasant emotions. These are sometimes referred to as emotion **up**-regulation strategies^[ibid.].

Can emotion regulation strategies be learnt?

With support and encouragement, pupils of all ages can learn to use these emotion regulation strategies to monitor and manage their emotions, although older pupils will generally be able to use them more independently^[xviii]. This is especially true for more cognitively demanding strategies, such as reappraisal.

As the *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons progress, the breadth and complexity of the emotion regulation strategies gradually increases, allowing pupils to develop a varied and versatile repertoire of strategies for monitoring and managing their emotions.

Foundations for Wellbeing provides approximately a half term's PSHE education lessons each year. It is therefore important to encourage and support pupils to use the emotion regulation strategies outside of PSHE education lessons throughout the year as well, because they will benefit most from the strategies if they practise them repeatedly. We also recommend sharing them with parents.

Will pupils prefer some emotion regulation strategies over others?

Pupils are likely to have, or develop, individual preferences for specific emotion regulation strategies. For example, some pupils may prefer using distraction-based strategies over slow breathing to reduce the intensity of strong, unpleasant or uncomfortable emotions. So, the lessons introduce a variety of strategies and offer pupils opportunities to reflect on which may be most helpful for them in different situations. Individual pupils' preferences may also change as they grow older.

Are the emotion regulation strategies evidence-based?

The emotion regulation strategies set out below, such as naming feelings and emotions, slow-paced breathing, and viewing thoughts from a more distant, objective standpoint, are based on neuroscience and psychological research [e.g., xix, xx, xxi]. Furthermore, it has been consistently reported that pupils benefit from learning emotion regulation strategies [xxii]. However, the emotion regulation strategies will not work equally well in every situation or for every pupil. So, please support your pupils to carefully experiment with using them in a spirit of curiosity and inquisitiveness.

How can I teach emotion regulation strategies safely?

Offer pupils the opportunity to try the emotion regulation strategies using gentle, invitational language. If pupils find any of the strategies uncomfortable, allow them to stop doing them, reassure them and offer an opportunity to practise an alternative emotion regulation strategy. Do not ask pupils to lie down or close their eyes when practising any of the emotion regulation strategies, as this can cause flashbacks (e.g., of drowning or choking) and is not a trauma-informed practice [xxiii].

For more information on how to adapt your lessons to meet the needs of pupils with vulnerabilities, see the 'Pupils with additional vulnerabilities' section, above, and the descriptions of slow breathing, progressive muscle relaxation and reappraisal, below.

Emotion down-regulation strategies

These emotion down-regulation strategies can be used to help reduce the intensity of strong, unpleasant or uncomfortable feelings and emotions, such as anger, apprehension, disappointment, frustration, sadness and overexcitement.

Naming

Naming or labelling our feelings and emotions can help us to monitor and manage them. For example, naming strong, unpleasant or uncomfortable emotions can both reduce their intensity and make it easier for us to choose appropriate and effective ways of managing them. The *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons first introduce pupils to naming their feelings and emotions during Reception, before incrementally expanding their emotional vocabulary.

Older pupils can be encouraged to consider writing expressively about their feelings and emotions in private diaries or journals, as this may help them to make sense of, and navigate, their experiences.

Pausing

Pausing momentarily and 'taking a step back' at regular intervals, or in response to uncomfortable, upsetting or frustrating situations, can help us to monitor and manage our

emotions. For example, pausing momentarily in response to frustrating situations can both allow potentially distressing feelings to begin dissipating and make it easier for us to evaluate the situation, **name** our feelings or emotions and carefully consider how best to respond.

You could encourage pupils to use pausing strategies to signify that it is time to pause, such as:

- slowly counting to five
- taking a slow, deep breath
- placing their hands together
- feeling their feet on the ground
- pushing the air down with their hands

Distracting

Distracting oneself by redirecting attention away from sources of discomfort, distress or excitement can help us to manage strong, unpleasant or uncomfortable feelings and emotions. Distraction can be very useful for younger pupils, as well as pupils who are finding more cognitively demanding emotion regulation strategies too challenging. Distraction can also be especially useful during frightening situations. It is best that distraction is used as a time-limited emotion regulation strategy and alongside other emotion regulation strategies, rather than relied on exclusively. This is because excessive use of distraction can encourage avoidance of everyday situations and inhibit problem solving.

The *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons introduce a variety of distraction-based emotion regulation strategies, such as:

- imagining a calming image
- reflecting on a pleasant memory
- looking for three things of the same colour ('What Three Things')
- looking for three things of the same colour or shape, listening for three things, and making three body movements ('See, Hear, Move')

The lessons first introduce pupils to using distraction to manage their emotions during Reception, although older pupils are also encouraged to reflect on situations when using distraction may be useful. Also see **sensory focus**, below.

Sensory focus

Sensory focus, which arises from taking part in enjoyable and absorbing activities that engage our senses, can be thought of as another form of distraction. It is especially useful for interrupting - and redirecting attention away from - persistent, worrisome thoughts, particularly when these are difficult to ignore or change. Fortunately, there is a wide range of activities that can facilitate sensory focus. For example, crafting, crocheting, painting, gardening, dancing, Thai Chi, listening to music or playing a musical instrument – the list is infinite. Younger pupils can take part in simpler activities, such as playing with sand, while older pupils can take part in activities that centre on their increasingly distinct interests.

Slow breathing

Taking several, slow-paced breaths for one to two minutes can reduce the intensity of strong, uncomfortable and unpleasant feelings and emotions, although pupils may not intuitively know how to do this and for this reason benefit from clear guidance. Younger pupils can be encouraged to visualise smelling a flower as they breath in and gently blowing bubbles as they breath out, or waves rolling in and out, although visualisations of this type can also be used with older pupils and are even used by professional actors!

Older pupils can also be encouraged to gently extend the outbreath because this can help to slow the heart rate and can contribute further towards helping us to feel calmer. One way of doing this is by breathing in to a count of four and out to a count of six. This is referred to as '4-6 breathing' in the *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons, although this is not introduced to pupils until Year 3.

Do not ask pupils to lie down, close their eyes or focus on their bodily sensations (other than the feeling of the breath) when taking part in slow breathing, as this is not trauma-informed practice^[xxiv]. And do not encourage pupils to practise slow breathing for longer than two minutes. Some pupils may find focusing on their breath uncomfortable (e.g., if they have respiratory problems). If this is the case, reassure them and support them to try a different strategy, such as a distraction-based emotion regulation strategy.

We have developed a trauma-informed animated guide to help you introduce your pupils to slow-paced breathing, which can be found [here](#) and is linked to in the relevant lesson plans. Our animated guide features British Sign Language (BSL).

Progressive muscle relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation can be used to reduce tension. It involves purposefully tensing and releasing muscle groups, one at a time, and is especially useful when feeling tired, tense or frustrated. Like slow-paced breathing, younger pupils may not intuitively know how to practise progressive muscle relaxation and so benefit from clear, age-appropriate guidance.

Do not ask pupils to lie down or close their eyes when taking part in progressive muscle relaxation and be aware that some pupils may prefer not to focus on their bodily sensations. If this is the case, reassure them and support them to try a different emotion regulation strategy.

We have developed a trauma-informed animated guide to help you introduce your pupils to this progressive muscle relaxation, which can be found [here](#) and is linked to in the relevant lesson plans. It also features BSL.

Watching thoughts

'Watching thoughts' covers a range of emotion regulation strategies that can be used to observe subjective thoughts from a more distant, objective standpoint. These strategies can be used to create space between oneself and unhelpful thoughts (e.g., self-critical or worrisome thoughts) and reduce the intensity of strong, unpleasant or uncomfortable emotions. In the *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons, examples of strategies that involve watching thoughts include visualising thoughts as:

- pop-up adverts, which can be closed
- leaves on a stream, which can be allowed to drift away
- clouds, which can be allowed to pass
- balloons, which can be allowed to fly away

Reappraising

Reappraisal involves thinking differently about a situation and adopting more helpful thoughts. For example, after making a mistake, changing the thought 'I'm no good at this' by reminding oneself that everyone makes mistakes and that mistakes offer opportunities to learn. One way of introducing pupils to the idea of reappraisal can be to compare it looking at an object from a different angle.

While reappraisal can be used to manage our thoughts and emotions, a downside to it is that it is cognitively demanding – it requires a lot of cognitive resources and can be difficult to do, especially for younger children and when we are tired or experiencing very strong emotions. It is

partly for this reason that it is important to learn how to use other emotion down-regulation strategies as well. It is also important to note that reappraisal should not be used to forcibly deny thoughts and emotions. Instead, it should be used to gently shift or reframe the way in which situations are being interpreted, allowing for more helpful thoughts and less intense emotions to be experienced.

Seeking support

Seeking support from others is another way of managing emotions in a variety of situations. Sources of support should be signposted at the end of every lesson (see the teacher guidance and lesson plans for more information).

Emotion up-regulation strategies

Emotion up-regulation strategies can be used by pupils to help them initiate, sustain and amplify pleasant feelings and emotions, such as awe, enthusiasm and joy. Regularly using emotion up-regulation strategies may help pupils to slowly develop more positive thinking habits and experience pleasant feelings and emotions more often.

Spotting

Spotting involves looking (and listening) out for everyday things that can make us feel cheerful, joyful or amazed, such as the sound of birdsong, the smell of flowers, the feeling of a cool breeze, the shape and colour of leaves or clouds, the vastness of the sea or sky, instances of kindness, animals being warm and playful, artwork and music. The list of things that can be spotted is endless, but many can go overlooked in busy, day-to-day lives. So, it can be helpful to make a conscious effort to spot them.

Savouring

Savouring involves paying closer attention to pleasant or enjoyable experiences, such as a meal, hobby or opportunities to spend time with friends or family. Many **sensory focus** activities, as well as the things listed under **spotting**, can be savoured, extending or deepening the enjoyment gained from them.

Appreciating

Appreciation involves expressing gratitude for things that we are thankful for. This can be done privately (e.g., by using a diary) or publicly (e.g., by writing a letter of appreciation or discussing things that we are thankful for with friends). Regularly practising gratitude can help us to **spot** and **savour**; initiate, sustain and amplify pleasant emotions; feel valued; and form stronger social relationships. Gratitude can be expressed for anything positive, big or small – friends, family, opportunities and instances of kindness, for example, can all be appreciated!

Planning

Planning involves planning to do things that we enjoy or care about, such as pursuing personal interests and spending time with friends or family. Planning to do these things increases the likelihood of them happening, which in turn increases the likelihood of pleasant emotions being initiated. It can also induce a joyful sense of anticipation (what is referred to in German as ‘vorfrende’). Planning can also strengthen the prefrontal cortex, which helps us to reason and organise, among other important tasks!

Reflecting

Reflection involves thinking about pleasant memories. For example, of time spent with friends or family, exploring, being in nature, performing (e.g., in a play or athletic competition), being creative (e.g., baking, painting, crafting, or knitting), or learning.

Connecting

Connection involves spending time with friends, family, pets or in nature, in ways that strengthen our relationships with them and allow us to develop a greater sense of connection to others and the wider world.

Emotion regulation strategies posters

We have created a selection of pupil-facing emotion regulation strategies classroom posters (*Our strategies*), which depict some of the emotion down-regulation strategies in this section (see Appendix 3). You can display these to support your pupils to learn, and remember to use, the emotion regulation strategies.

Self-regulation strategies part 2: Attention regulation

This section describes attention regulation strategies that pupils can use to help them manage distractions and focus on activities that they care about or enjoy, such as learning, pursuing personal interest and spending time in nature or with friends and family. This section is also accompanied by a classroom poster displaying strategies for managing distractions (see *Our strategies for managing distractions*, in Appendix 3).

What is attention regulation and why is it important?

Attention regulation is an aspect of self-regulation and is related to our ability to focus on tasks or activities and manage distractions^[xxv]. As mentioned above, one reason why it is important for pupils to learn attention regulation strategies is so that they can learn to use them in an increasingly independent way to help them focus on activities that they care about or enjoy. Psychological research has also found that more frequent spontaneous off-task mind-wandering is associated with experiencing unpleasant emotions more often^[xxvi; see also xxvii], and that better self-regulation more broadly is associated with better mental health and wellbeing, in addition to other favourable outcomes^[e.g., xxviii, xxix].

To discover more about the relationship between self-regulation and mental health and wellbeing, please enrol on our self-guided online course, [*Mental health and wellbeing: building your knowledge and understanding*](#), which is available to all School Plus members.

Are distractions always unhelpful?

As explained in the *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons and emotion regulation strategies section, distractions are not always unhelpful. Distractions can, for example, alert us to danger (e.g., sirens), pass time (e.g., on a long journey), support creativity and be used to manage strong, unpleasant and uncomfortable emotions. Nevertheless, distractions can sometimes be unhelpful. For example, when they make it difficult to focus on activities that we care about or enjoy, as well as when they prompt unhelpful thoughts and uncomfortable emotions.

Does everyone get distracted?

Everyone gets distracted and can find distractions difficult to manage. Distractions can be internal (i.e., arising from thoughts, feelings or impulses) or external (i.e., arising from our environment), as well as helpful or unhelpful. The *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons support pupils to differentiate between different types of distractions and to consider how they can be managed.

Can attention regulation strategies be learnt?

School lessons and activities can significantly improve pupils' self-regulation [xxx, xxxi]. With support, encouragement and patience, pupils of all ages can learn to use the attention regulation strategies in this toolkit to help them focus and manage distractions, although older pupils will generally be able to use them more independently [xxxii]. This is especially true for more cognitively demanding strategies, such as reminding oneself of why a particular task or activity is important, as well as strategies that depend on pupils being able to choose or change their environments.

Some pupils, such as neurodivergent pupils and pupils with additional vulnerabilities, may find directing their attention and managing distractions more difficult than others and require more tailored support. Nevertheless, several studies have found that children who find directing attention and managing distractions most challenging benefit the most from participating in lessons and activities that aim to improve self-regulation [e.g., xxxiii]. In other words, such lessons and activities can contribute towards reducing inequalities in self-regulation.

Learning attention regulation strategies may also support pupils to navigate, and manage their engagement with, the digital world [xxxiv]. In addition, while they are not time management and organisation strategies, they may indirectly improve pupils' time management and organisational skills.

Will the strategies work equally well for all pupils?

The attention regulation strategies in this section will not work equally well for all pupils or across all situations. However, with support, encouragement, repeated practice and reflection, pupils can use them to discover which strategies work best for them in different situations. So, it is important to remind pupils that everyone gets distracted and that distractions can be difficult to manage sometimes, and to praise their efforts to manage distractions [xxxv].

It is also important to note that loneliness, sadness and stress make it more difficult to focus [xxxvi], meaning that alleviating these, if possible, and teaching pupils emotion regulation strategies can indirectly support them to regulate their attention (see the emotion regulation strategies section above).

Can the strategies inform a whole school approach?

As with the emotion regulation strategies, it is important to encourage and support pupils to use the attention regulation strategies throughout the year outside of the *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons as well, because they will benefit most from the strategies if they repeatedly practise them. We also recommend sharing them with parents.

How can I teach the strategies safely?

In the unlikely case that pupils find any of the attention regulation strategies uncomfortable, they should be allowed to stop using them, reassured and offered an opportunity to practise an alternative strategy. For more information on how to adapt your lessons to meet the needs of pupils with additional vulnerabilities, see the **Pupils with additional vulnerabilities** section above.

Attention regulation strategies

Identifying

Identifying involves noticing and naming distractions, as well as establishing whether they are internal or external, helpful or unhelpful. One of the main benefits of being able to notice, name and identify different types of distractions more readily is that it makes it easier to decide what to do about them – respond to them, ignore them or use a strategy to manage them. These lessons first introduce pupils to distinguishing between different types of distractions during Reception, although how to do this is revisited yearly with increasing complexity and independence.

See, hear, move

‘See, hear, move’ involves looking for three things of the same colour or shape, listening for three things and making three body movements. This strategy can be used to reset, by shifting attention away from a distraction before refocusing on the task or activity at hand. Younger pupils can simply look for three things of the same colour or shape (‘What three things’), as remembering all three steps may be too demanding for their working memory.

Watching thoughts

‘Watching thoughts’ has already been described in the section above on emotion regulation strategies. This range of self-regulation strategies can also be used to both observe and let go of distracting thoughts. Whether used for regulating emotions, or for regulating attention, examples of ‘watching thoughts’ strategies include visualising thoughts as:

- leaves on a stream, which can be allowed to drift away if they are unhelpful
- clouds, which can be allowed to pass if they are unhelpful
- balloons, which can be allowed to fly away if they are not helpful
- pop-up adverts, which can be closed if they are unhelpful

Pupils can be encouraged, for example, to visualise off-task or distracting thoughts as clouds, which they can focus on or allow to drift away, depending on whether they think that are helpful or unhelpful.

Choosing

Choosing involves choosing to be among people or in places that are less distracting. For example, choosing to sit among other pupils who are concentrating or in a quiet place, such as a library.

Changing

Changing involves changing places to make them less distracting. For example, turning off the television or politely asking others to be quiet when trying to focus. Older pupils can also be encouraged to turn off or put away digital devices, such as tablets, when they are not relevant to the task or activity at hand, reducing the likelihood that they will become distracting.

Focusing

Focusing involves focusing on the task or activity at hand and ignoring unhelpful distractions. This can be made easier by keeping items that are related to the task or activity nearby or within sight, as visual reminders of what it is that is important to focus on.

Remembering

Remembering involves reminding oneself of the reasons why the task or activity at hand is important and, therefore, deserving of attention. For example, pupils can remind themselves that focusing on schoolwork helps them to learn, focusing on doing things for others (e.g., painting a picture) is kind and will make them feel good, and focusing on a conversation with a friend is respectful and will make the conversation more fruitful. Pupils can also remind themselves of how it will feel to make progress on, or complete, a task.

Responding

Responding involves managing impulses or growing urges to act (e.g., driven by excitement or curiosity). For instance, by pausing or taking a few slow-paced breaths. See the section above on emotion regulation strategies for more examples.

Note: the strategies Choosing, Changing, Focusing, Remembering and Responding are based on the 'process model of self-control' [xxxvii]. The *Foundations for Wellbeing* lessons introduce these strategies together as a five-step approach to managing distracting in year 6, when pupils will generally be able to use them more independently to strategically prevent and manage distractions, including at secondary school.

Attention regulation strategies poster

We have created a pupil-facing managing distractions poster (*Our strategies for managing distractions*), which depict some of the attention regulation strategies in this section (see Appendix 3). You can display this in your classroom to support your pupils to learn, and remember to use, the attention regulation strategies to manage distractions.

Acknowledgement

We are extremely grateful to Dr Dusana Dorjee for her expertise and support in the development of *Foundations for Wellbeing*. Dr Dorjee is a Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) in Psychology in Education in the Department of Education at the University of York, where she designed and leads the University of York's MSc in Mental Health and Wellbeing in Education. She has written over thirty peer-reviewed publications and formulated the neurodevelopmental theory of mental health and wellbeing capacities (NDeTeC), which was outlined in its initial form in a chapter published by UNESCO's Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development^[xxxviii]. The NDeTeC is based on a critical review and integration of the latest neuroscience, developmental and psychological research^[xxxix].

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Appendix 1: Links to the Programme of Study and DfE's statutory guidance on Relationships, Sex and Health education

Reception

Each activity plan has been developed to support learning in the prime area of personal, social and emotional development (PSED) as part of the Early years foundation stage (EYFS) statutory framework. These plans provide early learning experiences to support children's future PSHE education, and are precursory to the Foundations for Wellbeing lessons for key stage 1.

Key stage 1-2

Learning objectives	PSHE Association Programme of Study	DfE statutory guidance
Year 1 Lesson 1: Noticing feelings To learn about feelings. Lesson 2: Distraction To learn about distraction. Lesson 3: Paying attention to pleasant feelings To learn how to pay attention to pleasant feelings. Lesson 4: Helpful and unhelpful thoughts To learn about helpful and unhelpful thoughts.	H12. how to recognise and name different feelings H18. different things they can do to manage big feelings, to help calm themselves down and/or change their mood when they don't feel good H19. to recognise when they need help with feelings; that it is important to ask for help with feelings; and how to ask for it H24. how to manage when finding things difficult H27. about preparing to move to a new class/year group	Mental wellbeing - that there is a normal range of emotions (e.g. happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, nervousness) and scale of emotions that all humans experience in relation to different experiences and situations. - how to recognise and talk about their emotions, including having a varied vocabulary of words to

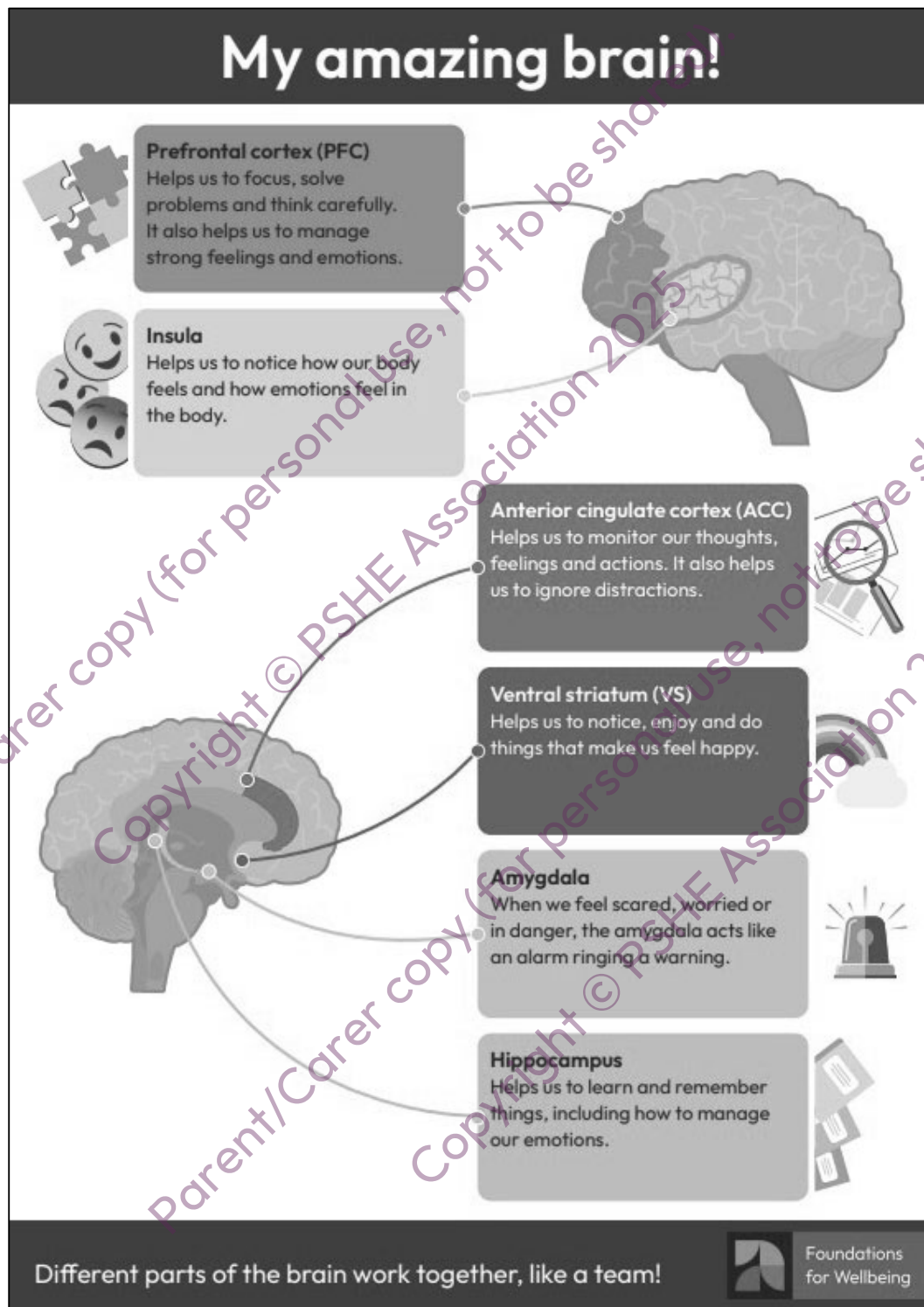
Lesson 5: Reacting To learn about different ways of reacting. Year 2 Lesson 1: Noticing and naming feelings To learn about thoughts and feelings and how noticing them can be helpful. Lesson 2: Different distractions To learn about different kinds of distraction. Lesson 3: Changing thoughts and feelings To learn about different ways of changing thoughts and feelings. Lesson 4: Managing unhelpful thoughts To learn how to manage unhelpful thoughts. Lesson 5: Reactions and responses To learn about ways of managing reactions and responses.		use when talking about their own and others' feelings. - where and how to seek support (including recognising the triggers for seeking support), including whom in school they should speak to [...] Respectful relationships, including friendships - practical steps they can take in a range of different contexts to improve or support respectful relationships.
Year 3 Lesson 1: Exploring emotions To learn about noticing thoughts, feelings and emotions, and how emotions vary in strength. Lesson 2: Understanding distraction	Programme of Study H15. that mental health, just like physical health, is part of daily life; the importance of taking care of mental health H16. about strategies and behaviours that support mental health – including how good	

To learn about different kinds of distraction and some ways they can be managed. Lesson 3: Managing thoughts and emotions To learn about helpful patterns of thoughts and emotions. Lesson 4: Managing worries To learn how to recognise and manage worry. Lesson 5: Managing responses To learn how feeling calm can help us to manage our responses. Year 4 Lesson 1: Describing emotions To learn how describing emotions and their intensity can help to manage them. Lesson 2: Managing internal and external distractions To learn about internal and external distractions and how they can be managed. Lesson 3: Exploring different thinking habits To learn about different ways of thinking and how this impacts wellbeing. Lesson 4: Different ways to manage worries	quality sleep, physical exercise/time outdoors, being involved in community groups, doing things for others, clubs, and activities, hobbies and spending time with family and friends can support mental health and wellbeing H17. to recognise that feelings can change over time and range in intensity H18. about everyday things that affect feelings and the importance of expressing feelings H19. a varied vocabulary to use when talking about feelings; about how to express feelings in different ways H20. strategies to respond to feelings, including intense or conflicting feelings; how to manage and respond to feelings appropriately and proportionately in different situations H21. to recognise warning signs about mental health and wellbeing and how to seek support for themselves and others	
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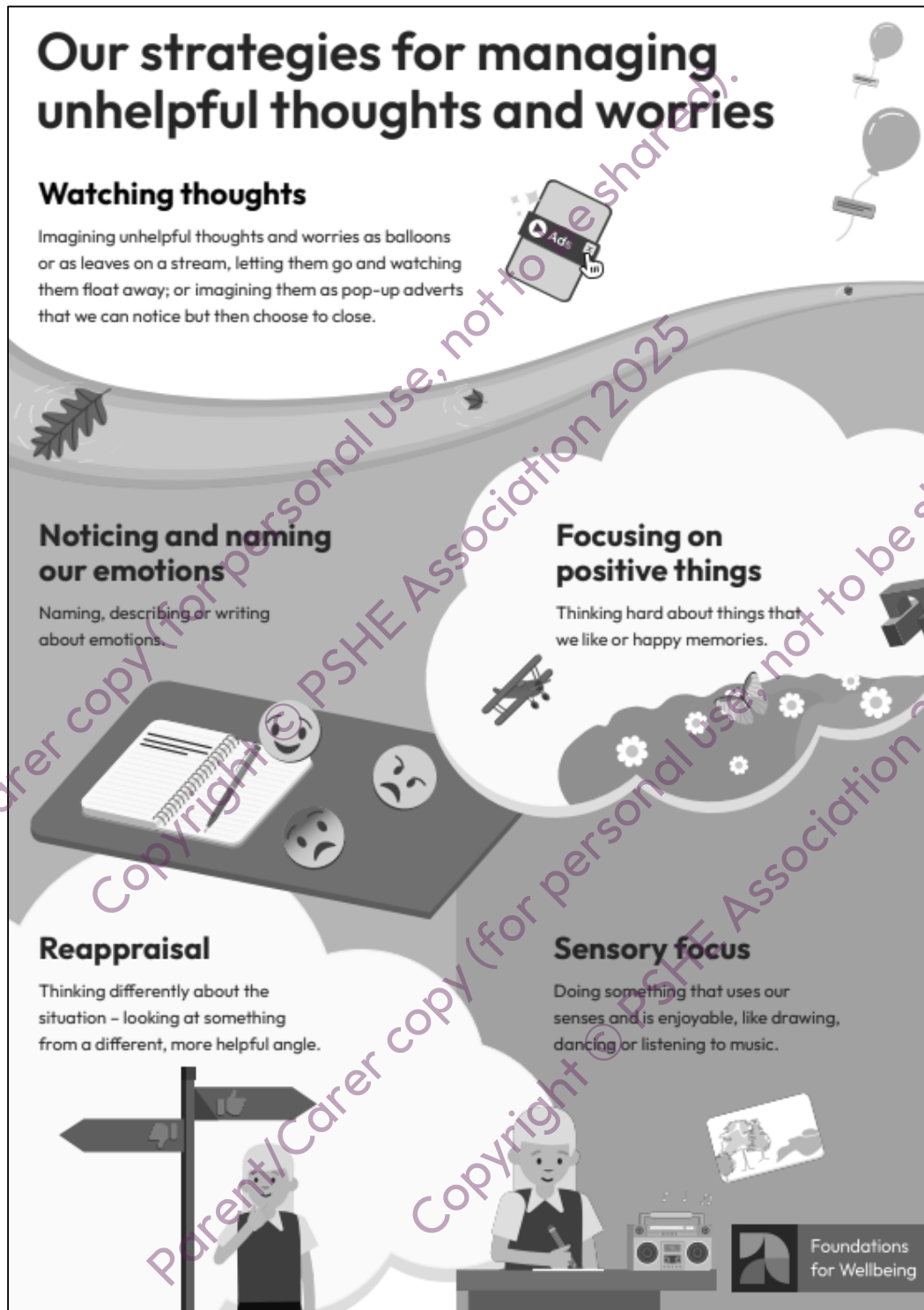
To learn strategies that can help manage worries and positively impact emotions and behaviour. Lesson 5: Strategies for calm To learn strategies that can help someone manage their responses.	H29. about how to manage setbacks/perceived failures, including how to re-frame unhelpful thinking	
Year 5 Lesson 1: Noticing and naming emotions To learn about managing thoughts and emotions in everyday situations. Lesson 2: Directing attention and managing distractions To learn about helpful and unhelpful distractions and strategies to manage them. Lesson 3: Changing thinking habits To learn about brain plasticity and how changing thinking habits can support wellbeing. Lesson 4: Rumination and worry To learn how changing the way someone thinks about an event can support wellbeing. Lesson 5: Managing reactivity To learn how managing reactivity can support wellbeing.	H17. to recognise that feelings can change over time and range in intensity H24. problem-solving strategies for dealing with emotions, challenges and change, including the transition to new schools H35. about new opportunities and responsibilities that increasing independence may bring H36. strategies to manage transitions between classes and key stages	

Year 6 Lesson 1: Regulating emotions To learn how noticing and naming emotions can help someone to regulate them. Lesson 2: Managing distraction To learn a variety of strategies for managing internal and external distractions. Lesson 3: Developing positive thinking habits To learn about developing positive thinking habits and how this supports wellbeing. Lesson 4: Managing rumination and worry To learn about the impact of rumination and worry on emotions and behaviour, and strategies for managing rumination and worry. Lesson 5: Managing stress To learn about managing stress.		
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Appendix 2: My amazing brain! poster



Appendix 3: Our strategies posters



Our strategies for managing strong emotions and reactions

Watching thoughts

Imagining unhelpful thoughts and worries as balloons or as leaves on a stream, letting them go and watching them float away; or imagining them as pop-up adverts that we can notice but then choose to close.



Pausing

Pausing for a moment before deciding what to do next. Taking a deep breath or counting to five might help us to do this.



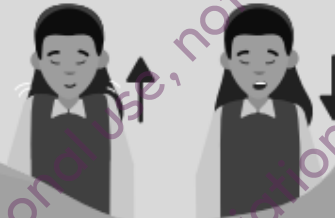
Noticing and naming emotions

Noticing and naming our emotions helps us to work out how to manage them.



Progressive muscle relaxation

Tensing and relaxing our muscles, one group at a time.



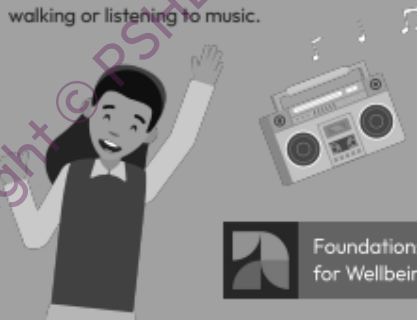
Taking a few slow breaths

Taking four to six slow breaths, breathing in as though we're smelling a flower and breathing out as though we're gently blowing bubbles.



Sensory focus

Focusing on something that uses our senses and is enjoyable; like drawing, walking or listening to music.



Foundations
for Wellbeing

Our strategies for managing distractions



See, hear, move



When we're distracted, looking for three things of the same colour or shape, listening for three sounds and moving three body parts, can help us to focus again.



Watching thoughts

When we're distracted by thoughts, imagining them as balloons or as leaves on a stream that float away, can help us to let them go. We can also imagine them as pop-up adverts that we close.



Taking a few slow breaths

Taking four to six slow breaths can help us feel calmer when we're distracted by strong emotions, such as excitement: breathing in as though we're smelling a flower and breathing out as though we're gently blowing bubbles.



Remembering why the task or activity matters

When we're distracted, reminding ourselves of reasons why the task or activity is important to us can help us to focus on it.



Choosing to be in quieter places or with people who are less distracting



Changing the space around us to make it less distracting

For example, by putting toys away or turning off the TV.



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Further reading

To learn more about the theory and evidence informing the Foundations for Wellbeing curriculum, please visit our [self-guided online courses on mental health and wellbeing](#), which are available to all School Plus members. You may also wish to deepen your understanding by reading the following publications:

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