



Greater Good in Education  
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

# NAVIGATING CHALLENGING EMOTIONS DURING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

*"Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else: you are the one who gets burned."*

—Buddha

## OVERVIEW

Students will practice noticing and labeling bodily sensations and feelings (e.g., anxiety, anger, fear, shame) as they arise before, during, and after challenging conversations, and practice multiple coping strategies for navigating their emotions.

## PLANNING FOR IT

### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To help students prepare to navigate difficult conversations
- To help students explore and develop coping mechanisms to manage challenging emotions
- To build the practice of respectful discourse across difference within your classroom

### TIME REQUIRED

- Multiple Sessions ( ≤ 30 minutes, for 2 class sessions)

### LEVEL

- Middle School
- High School

### MATERIALS

- [Difficult Discussions Coping Strategies List](#) (for each student)
- Chart Paper
- Student journals (optional)
- [General Coping Skills Masterlist](#) (for teacher reference)
- Timer

## LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Reflect on and identify what happens in their body when they have emotional responses
- Practice strategies for navigating their emotions in difficult conversations
- Brainstorm lists of coping strategies they can use before, during, and after difficult conversations

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)
- [Facilitating Bridging Discussions: Preparing Your Classroom](#)

## CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Perseverance
- Introspection
- Compassion

## SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness

## MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Focused attention
- Non-judgment
- Open awareness

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Recall a time when you were having a difficult conversation.
  - What made the conversation difficult?
  - What emotions did it bring up for you?
  - Where did you feel it in your body? In what ways?
- What coping mechanisms did you use or do you wish you had used to regulate your emotions?
- Were you able to communicate your thoughts and needs while continuing to listen and have empathy across differences?

- How do you integrate coping skills into your daily life? What coping skills work best for you? How are the coping skills that work for you influenced by your background and culture?

## INSTRUCTIONS

### DAY 1: MANAGING EMOTIONS IN A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

#### Before students arrive:

- Print out copies of the [Difficult Discussions Coping Strategies List](#) for each student.

#### Part 1: Journaling (10 minutes)

- Explain to students that everyone experiences discomfort in conversations sometimes. Today they will have an opportunity to reflect on what happens in their bodies when they are having a difficult conversation. As they gain self-awareness, students can build healthy coping strategies to help them manage challenging emotions and build empathy across differences. If helpful to your class, share the following definition of coping skills.
  - **Coping Skills:** A coping skill is a tool you can use to help you manage difficult situations and move from one emotion (sad or angry) to another (happy or calm). For example, if you are stressed about homework, you can take a five-minute break to walk outside and come back to your work.
- Ask for a few volunteers to share why some conversations can be difficult. To add to student comments, you can share that everyone comes from different backgrounds, hold different values and opinions, and at times make assumptions about people who are different. Not all people react in the same way to the same topic or conversation. It's important to work towards having important conversations across differences to learn about others and stand up for your values. Understanding emotions and managing difficult emotions is one part of this process.
- Next, give students three minutes to identify and then write briefly (1-3 sentences) in their journals (or on a sheet of paper). Ask them to describe a memory of a moderately-difficult conversation (for example, a conversation they would rate as a 5 on a scale from 1-10) they had recently that they would like to explore more deeply. It shouldn't be their most difficult conversation as this might trigger intense or overwhelming emotions. It could be a conversation with a parent, friend, teacher, sibling, etc.
- Second, give them two minutes to identify what emotions it brought up for them. They can write as many emotions as they can recall. If helpful, write common emotions on the board or an anchor chart for student reference.
- Share that in addition to producing emotions, our bodies respond to emotional stress in the same ways they respond to safety threats—by producing stress hormones that can cause physical sensations as well.
  - People might feel butterflies in their stomach, feel sweaty, hot or shakey, have a hard time focusing, feel their heart beat faster, feel their breathing become shallow, feel like they need to move around, etc.
  - These physical sensations happen to everyone and are normal, but they are also a clue we can use to help us know when we need to focus on regulating our response.

- Finally, ask students to reflect on and write about sensations they experienced in their bodies (different from what emotions they experienced) when they were having the difficult conversation (2 minutes).
- As the teacher, share with the class some of the feelings and sensations you have experienced in difficult conversations. You might say something like “ Sometimes when I am having a difficult conversation I experience these emotions..., and some of the physical sensations I have experienced include...”
- After you have shared, invite volunteers to share the emotions and sensations that they have experienced.
- Optional: Because this exercise may bring up challenging emotions or memories for students, you might want to insert a short break or exercise to help them transition to the next part. For example, you might try [Shake It Off](#).

### **Part 2: Regulating during a difficult conversation (15 minutes)**

- Explain that there are lots of different strategies people can use to help them navigate their emotions. Learning about different strategies can help students pick ones that will best address their emotional response and their setting.
- Emphasize to students that while we will explore coping strategies we can use to stay engaged in a conversation, sometimes conversations can feel too harmful, and removing yourself from the situation is what you need. During times like these, identifying someone you can talk to (a parent, friend, teacher, therapist, etc.) to process your emotions first is important. You can focus on reengaging in the conversation after having some time to heal and process with someone you trust.
- Pair up students and provide them with the [Difficult Discussions Coping Strategies List](#).
- Together with their partner, invite students to discuss:
  - Which coping skills do you think might have helped you in the difficult conversation you wrote about?
  - What other coping skills can we add to the list?
  - Invite students to try a few strategies in their pairs and then highlight, star or underline 2-3 coping strategies they would like to use the next time they notice their body having a stress response during a conversation.

### **Closure (2-5 minutes)**

- Instruct students to save their [Difficult Discussions Coping Strategies List](#) as they will be able to add some other coping strategies to it during their next class.
- Encourage students to use some of the strategies they learned about today between now and their next class as they notice their bodies responding to stress.
- If you have time, consider using a new coping strategy together as a class.

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## DAY 2: NAVIGATING EMOTIONS BEFORE AND AFTER A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

### **Before students arrive:**

- Prepare 4 sheets of chart paper with the following headings and definitions:
  - **Distraction Coping Skills:** Take a break from your thoughts and whatever is causing you stress, sadness, or another difficult emotion.

- Example: Reading a book
- **Energy & Movement Coping Skills:** Release built-up energy with a movement activity that you enjoy.
  - Example: Play a sport
- **Grounding & Sensory Coping Skills:** Help your mind and body calm down by being present and grounded using your senses.
  - Example: Do a breathing exercise
- **Processing Coping Skills:** Process your thoughts, emotions, and feelings in difficult moments.
  - Example: Talk to someone you trust

### Part 3: Introduction (2 minutes)

- Not only is it important to learn how to respond to our emotions during conversations with others, but there are also strategies we can use before and after to help us prepare, calm down, and feel good in our bodies.

### Part 4: Four Corners Brainstorm (15-20 minutes)

- Break the class into four groups.
- Each group should be designated to a separate corner with a piece of chart paper labeled with the coping style for which they will brainstorm ideas.
- Share that each group will start by brainstorming ideas for coping skills that belong to their category. Consider providing an example for each category using the [General Coping Skills Masterlist](#).
- Students will work together to generate as many coping skills as possible.
- Set a timer, and have student groups rotate to a new group every two minutes.
- Give students longer if you think it will be helpful.
- When each group has rotated through all four coping styles, give students five minutes to read the ideas listed in each corner of the room.
- Invite them to write down coping skills they would like to try on the back of the [Difficult Discussions Coping Strategies List](#) they used last class, on a new piece of paper, or in their journals.

### Closure (5 minutes)

- Invite students to add a few coping strategies into their calendar or planner so they can be intentional about working them into their weekly routines.
- If you have time, consider using a coping strategy together as a class.

## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- What worked or didn't work in leading this practice? How did the students respond to the practice? Would you change anything for next time?
- How can you model and support students in using coping strategies during class discussions?
- Have you noticed any changes in your students' self-awareness and emotional regulation?
- Have you noticed any changes in the way students are engaging in conversations in class?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

A [study](#) of 152 adolescents ages 12-17 (89% white, 5% African-American, 3% Latino, and 3% from other ethnic groups), mainly from working and middle-class U.S. families, found that those who experienced greater emotional intensity and exaggerated changes in levels of anxiety and anger were more likely to experience depression. Emotionally intense and rapid changes in feeling anxiety and sadness were related to behavior challenges.

In addition, participants who used coping mechanisms such as avoidance, denial, or other types of disengagement, or who acted impulsively or ruminated on the emotions sustained higher levels of challenging emotions.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Students who are able to [manage their emotions](#) in a healthy way are more academically successful, potentially because the inability to regulate emotions inhibits students' executive function skills, e.g., working memory, planning, and attention. They also experience [greater mental well-being](#), and engage in less risky behavior. And they have stronger social skills and fewer behavior challenges, both of which lead to more positive relationships with teachers and peers.

Ultimately, healthy [emotion regulation](#) skills will serve students in the long-run. Studies have found that [adults](#) who can manage their emotions in a positive way have greater mental and physical well-being, and stronger relationships.

(Note that emotion regulation strategies and outcomes vary by culture. Click [here](#) for more information.)

## SOURCES

<https://copingskillsforkids.com/>

<https://www.mindfulschools.org/implementation-stories/mindful-communication-what-matters-most-in-the-moment/>

<https://hbr.org/2001/07/taking-the-stress-out-of-stressful-conversations>

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1CwnOnvnYHba6CTs2HL8whs6N8112xLk/view>

[Making Caring Common](#), Emotional Regulation