



## TAKE-HOME SKILL: NAVIGATING EMOTIONS

*"What point is there in being human if you don't let yourself feel anything?"*

—*Sabaa Tahir*

### OVERVIEW

Parents/caregivers and their teens practice using acceptance to move through intense feelings, helping to bolster their sense of competence for bridging differences with others.

### PLANNING FOR IT

#### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To help your teen navigate the anxious feelings and sensations that occur when bridging differences with others who seem different from them

#### TIME REQUIRED

- Multiple Sessions

#### LEVEL

- Middle School
- High School
- College

#### MATERIALS

- N/A

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Recognize that feeling anxious can get in the way of interacting with people who seem different from them

- Practice “acceptance” of challenging feelings that may arise when they meet people who seem different from them and who may have different perspectives
- Reflect on how permitting the experience of these challenging feelings gives way for them to act on their values and be the kind of person they want to be

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)

## CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Curiosity
- Self-compassion
- Courage

## SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management

## MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Open awareness
- Non-judgment

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Before engaging your teen, take a moment for yourself to think back to a time when you were feeling nervous about meeting someone new or having a challenging conversation with someone because your perspectives differed and you weren't sure what to say.
- Where did you feel these jitters in your body? How did your anxious emotions and intense physical sensations prevent you from bringing your full self to this interaction and noticing a connection between you and the other person?
- What strategies did you use to navigate these intense feelings? How helpful were those strategies? Are there other strategies you might use in the future?
- Which strategies might be helpful for your teen? How could you relay these personal stories to your teen in a way that helps them see how these experiences are part of being human (rather than them interpreting that you are sharing these experiences as a way to show them that you know more than they do).

## INSTRUCTIONS

### OVERVIEW

Your teen may be drawn to try to understand the perspectives of people who seem different from them because they value bridging differences and want to act against polarization. But meeting and having conversations with unfamiliar people can lead to a range of emotions. For example, it can be exciting and nerve-wracking at the same time. Being familiar with and using strategies to reduce levels of nervousness and anxiety can help teens interact with people who seem different than them with a greater sense of competence.

### ACTIVITY

- While you're having dinner together or driving to or from school, talk to your teen about a recent challenging conversation you had with someone who seemed different from you. Model for your teen the range of vocabulary for challenging body sensations and emotions by naming what you felt and experienced. For example:
  - Sensations: butterflies in your stomach, tense shoulder muscles, heart racing, shallow breaths, sweaty palms, flushed cheeks, or hot ears.
  - Emotions: panicked, stressed, jittery, tense, frightened, nervous, restless, anxious, apprehensive, worried, troubled, or uneasy.
- With humility, talk about how these experiences are common when you meet people who seem different from you and how these physiological reactions and emotions can get in the way of recognizing ways you can connect with them. With humility, curiosity, and openness, ask your teen about when they've had similar kinds of experiences and share ways that you've responded to these challenging feelings. Note: if your teen can't think of a specific example, ask them to think of how they felt when they were trying something new and unfamiliar. Share that connecting with people who seem different from them might elicit similar emotions because the experience is new or unfamiliar.
- Introduce your teen to *acceptance* as one way of navigating difficult emotions and sensations.
- Acceptance involves being mindfully aware of emotions and physical sensations by purposefully paying attention to your present inner feelings and your body without getting hung up on judging them. Help your teen understand that acceptance is an active—not passive—process of noticing their inner feelings and physiological sensations without trying to change, control, or evaluate them as right or wrong. By doing so, these experiences can flow through rather than get stuck, which may lead them to avoid, deny, or suppress them. Acceptance is a way to move through an unpleasant emotion like anxiety and stay flexible so that you can keep sight of your bigger purpose of being open to see the humanity of people who seem different from you.
- You can take inspiration from and adapt the following key questions to guide your teen through acceptance. Use a familiar conversational style that feels natural for you depending on your teen's unique age needs.
  - *What do I notice in my body—starting from my toes, then moving up to my legs, my abdomen, my chest, my back, my head, and arms? For example, I can describe these sensations as a clenched jaw or a tightened chest.*
  - *How are these physical sensations related to emotions I am feeling? For example, I can name them as feeling jittery, afraid, or panicked.*

- *Can I directly see that my survival will not be threatened by these emotions and sensations? For example, I can identify that I am not in any immediate danger or emergency.*
- *Can I make space to allow my emotions and sensations just to be rather than trying hard to control them? For example, I can recognize and use words to describe my feelings and body without saying that these descriptions are "bad" or "good."*
- *Am I willing to give myself permission to have and allow these feelings of nervousness? For example, can they pass through me so I may take part in an activity I value, e.g., meeting someone who seems different from me because I want to act against divisiveness? Can I hold these emotions while also holding in sight my goal and bigger "why" that is guiding me to take part in an activity to try to bridge differences.*
- Because acceptance isn't always appropriate for every situation, you can also encourage your teen to come to you if their emotions are concerning or overwhelming. Feelings of discomfort, like all feelings, are information about a situation and sometimes feeling unsettled can mean something other than "I'm uncomfortable with difference." Sometimes feelings of discomfort can mean that it might not be OK or safe to interact with someone. Help your teen identify other trusted adults in their lives that they can turn to for support when they're feeling unsettled or overcome by challenging emotions. Knowing who to reach out to is an important strategy for your teen to have at the ready.

## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- How did your teen respond to this exercise? Did it deepen their awareness of their emotions and physical sensations? Did it give them an understanding of a new way to respond when they are having difficult feelings? Are they more prepared to be in conversation with people who seem different from themselves?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Being emotionally agile helps promote resilience and well-being. Generally, [acceptance, or "mindful acknowledgment of emotion without judgment,"](#) is one of the most helpful ways for teens to navigate emotions along with reframing situations as more neutral or positive, problem-solving, and distraction.

In a study of adolescents ages 14 to 21 (55% female; 1% African American, 21% Asian American, 6% Hispanic/Latinx, 1% Native American, 2% Middle Eastern, 58% White, and 11% mixed or otherwise defined), acceptance was one of the most commonly used strategies by teens to regulate their emotions, especially in the morning and by those who felt a range of challenging emotions like unhappiness, irritability, boredom, anger, and anxiety.

Based in [Acceptance and Commitment Therapy](#), acceptance, mindfulness, and other techniques are used to gain distance from unhelpful thought patterns, nurturing more flexibility to pause, notice, and explore these patterns.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

A [review](#) of studies found that mindfulness, or cultivating awareness with an accepting attitude, decreases intergroup bias. How? By reducing factors that contribute to bias like [anxiety about people in social groups](#)

[beyond our own, automatic evaluations based on our memories](#), and [stress](#). Mindfulness also lessens bias by improving [empathy](#) and [cognitive flexibility](#).

Teens' [confidence to](#) interact with people who seem different from themselves and openness to the possibility of making connections rests on a number of factors: low levels of anxiety, positive expectations about contact, positive attitudes about outgroups, empathy, and perspective-taking. Helping our teens navigate challenging emotions can encourage them to bridge differences because they aren't overwhelmed by distress. Instead, they are more open to the commonalities they share with others, catalyzing a social connection.

## SOURCE

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