

Understanding Emotional Regulation and Masking

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Making a Difference:
Enabling Positive Change Through Listening, Optimism and Insight

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Setting the scene…

This session today hopes to:

- Talk about what emotional regulation is and why it's important?
- Talk about what masking is
- Provide practical, evidence-informed approaches and strategies to support children to recognise, understand and manage their feelings
- Provide opportunities to share experiences with other parents/carers.

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To help you feel safe…

- Please feel free to ask questions and share your own views/experiences
- Be respectful of others
- Maintain confidentiality
- We will be clear about our role
- Take a break if you need



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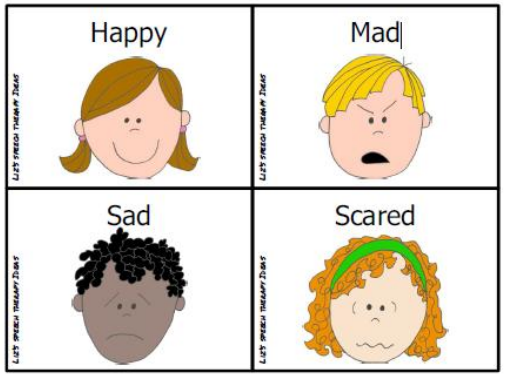
The language of emotions

How many feelings can you think of?



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Basic feelings



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Other feelings



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Discussion



Why is important to recognise our emotions? Why do we need to communicate our emotions and talk about our feelings with others?

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Emotional literacy



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Discussion

How do our children communicate their emotions? What does it look like when they are happy, angry etc? What do you notice?

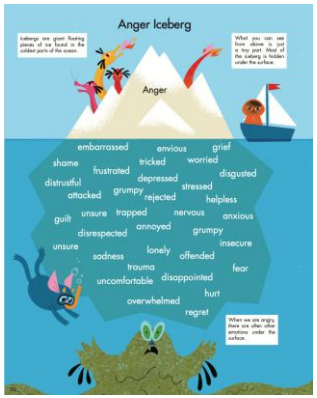


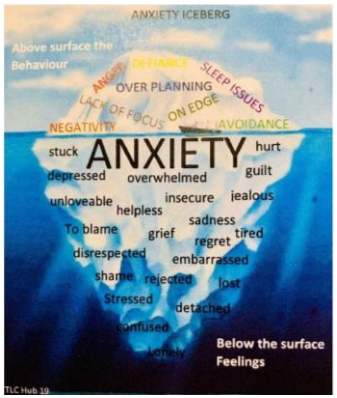
"All behaviour is communication"

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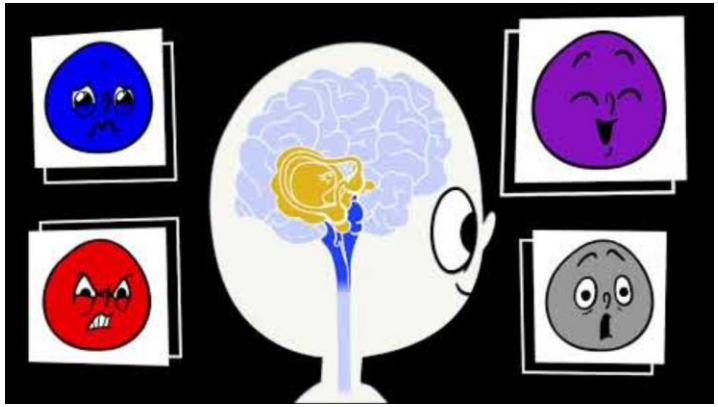
What's happening underneath?





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Flip Your Lid!
Hand Model of Brain



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What can we do support our children?

- Consider your own emotional state first
- Stop, Think, Breathe, etc.
- Be curious – what is their behaviour trying to communicate?
- Are they safe?

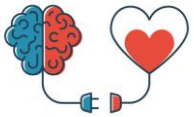


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'Emotion Coaching'

… a practical four-step approach to dealing with behaviour in the moment

- **Step 1** – Recognising, empathising
- **Step 2** – Validating the feelings and labelling
- **Step 3** – Setting expectations
- **Step 4** – Problem-solving



"Connection before correction"

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Examples of scripts

"I wonder whether you might be feeling disappointed right now because we've had to leave the park. It's sad when fun things come to an end isn't it"

"Wow, you're feeling angry right now. I can see that. It's ok to feel angry, but it's not ok to hit me. I am here for you, and when you are calm, we can try and work out what happened".

"I think you might be feeling a bit worried right now because you're clinging onto my hand. It's hard when we have to leave each other, but we're still connected even if we're not together".

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Breathing Practice



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Emotions check-in



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Feeling safe?

Build a ‘cosy corner’



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Use books, films and videos to talk about the feelings



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Books for older children



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Masking

Reflection:
Take a couple minutes to think about:

"Have you ever felt you needed to hide part of yourself to fit in?“

Examples:
- New workplace
- Family gathering
- Social event
- Professional meeting

One word to describe how that felt.

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What is Masking?

Hiding or changing parts of yourself to **fit in, meet expectations, or avoid standing out.** Sometimes deliberately, and sometimes without realising you’re doing it.

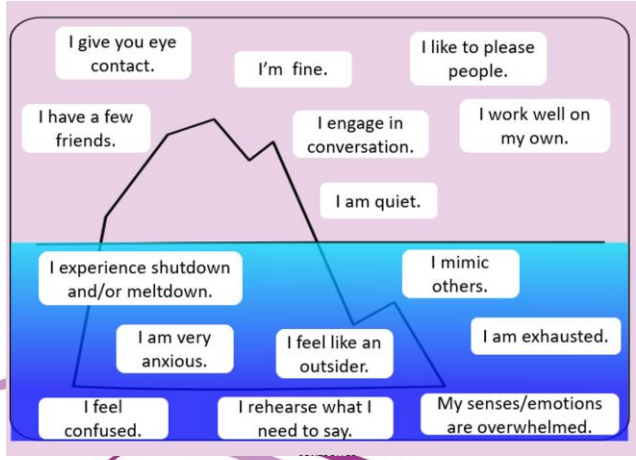
“I hide my feelings, when I pretend everything’s okay when it’s not. I kind of be how they want me to be, how they want me to feel, instead of how I am actually feeling. So obviously people want to see you look happy, so I will look happy and smile because that’s what you do when you’re happy, but I won’t actually feel happy”

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The masking iceberg



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What might masking look like?

At School:
- Appears to be coping well or "doing fine“
- Follows rules and expectations closely
- Rarely asks for help
- Watches and copies peers
- Tries hard not to draw attention to themselves
- Perfectionistic or worried about making mistakes

Discussion:
what might masking look like at home (when the mask ‘comes off’)?



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What might masking look like?

Some children who are using a lot of energy to cope at school may…

At School:
- Appears to be coping well or "doing fine“
- Follows rules and expectations closely
- Rarely asks for help
- Watches and copies peers
- Tries hard not to draw attention to themselves
- Perfectionistic or worried about making mistakes

At Home:
- Exhausted after school
- Increased irritability or emotional outbursts
- Withdrawal to bedroom or preferred activities
- Greater sensory sensitivity
- Difficulty completing everyday demands
- Appears like a "different child" compared to school

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Why do children and young people mask?

- Belonging
- Safety
- Avoid bullying
- Meeting expectations
- Societal stigma
- Lack of empathy from others

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The Cost of Masking

- Emotional impact
- Physical impact
- Impact on identity

"I don't like asking for help. I don't like admitting that I'm struggling. I don't like the attention." (boy, 11)

"When I want to go out, I need to think what I'm gonna say and practice. But when I'm too stressed, I can't practice. I can't work out how to tell people." (girl, 11)

"When I mask all day, I'm more tired when I get home."

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What Drains the Battery?

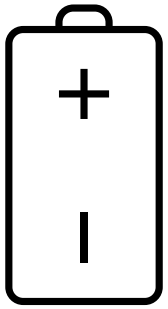
- Masking
- Social expectations
- Noise and crowds
- Unpredictability
- Transitions
- Sensory overload
- Holding emotions in

What Recharges the Battery?

- Trusted adults
- Quiet spaces
- Sensory breaks
- Predictable routines
- Preferred interests
- Movement
- Time to be themselves

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Battery Depletion Model



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How can you help at home?

- Curiosity before correction
  - "I wonder what made today difficult?"
- Plan for decompression
  - Protect recovery time after school.
- Validate feelings
  - Even if school reports a good day.
- Reduce unnecessary demands
  - Prioritise energy for important things.
- Protect interests and strengths
  - Often highly regulating and restorative.
- Celebrate your child's strengths and differences
  - reassure your child that differences are ok



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When My Child Is Working Hard to Fit In	When My Child Can Be Themselves	What Can Help?
Busy, noisy, or unpredictable situations	Calm, predictable environments	Give advance warning and use routines
Feeling pressure to 'blend in' or get things right	Feeling accepted for who they are	Reassure your child that differences are OK
Keeping worries, stress, or sensory discomfort hidden	Able to share feelings and needs	Regular check-ins without pressure
Using lots of energy to cope through the day	Less energy spent on coping	Build in breaks and downtime

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High Mask Environment	Low Mask Environment	Supportive Strategies
Busy, noisy, unpredictable	Calm, predictable, structured	Provide visual schedules, preparation, and quiet spaces
Pressure to fit in socially	Acceptance of differences	Reduce social pressure and offer choices
Hides emotions, stress, or sensory needs	Can express needs openly	Regular check-ins and a trusted adult
High energy spent on self-monitoring	Less energy spent on self-monitoring	Allow movement breaks, sensory tools, and recovery time
Greater battery depletion	Energy conserved and replenished	Opportunities to recharge

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Discussion

What is your child's school already doing to help you child be their true, authentic self (i.e. taking the mask off)?

If you had a magic wand, what else would you like school to do to support your child so that they don't have to mask all day?



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Reflection



What one thing have you learnt from today?

What one thing will you do differently?

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Key messages

- All emotions are ok and there's no such thing as a 'bad' feeling (comfortable and uncomfortable)
- All behaviour is communication – be curious!
- No 'one size fits all' – work out what strategies work best for you and your child
- Self-care – take a moment to notice 'am I calm enough to help my child right now?'
- Be kind to yourself – we're not going to get it right every time!

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Any questions?



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