

## Guiding principles

We can't expect students to identify, express or manage feelings if they don't have a basic understanding of what feelings and coping skills are. When talking about feelings and coping skills with students, it is helpful to keep the following guiding principles in mind.

**All feelings are normal and valid.** Feelings are not good or bad, they just are. It is also very normal to feel more than one feeling at a time. Let students know their feelings are normal and that you understand by repeating back what you hear, without judging or interpreting—even if you don't agree with them. When students feel heard and validated, they are more likely to share in the future.

**It's never too early or too late to learn how to express and manage feelings.** There is no correlation between a student's age or grade and their knowledge of feelings and coping skills. Students only know what they have been taught or exposed to, so we can anticipate that different students will have different skill levels—and that's OK.

**Follow the students' lead.** If students are uncomfortable sharing feelings, let them know that is OK and that you, or another trusted adult, are always available if they want to share later. Similarly, if a student does not feel comfortable practicing a specific coping skill, encourage them to find another option they do feel comfortable practicing.

**Be curious.** Sometimes students need help identifying, expressing and managing what they're feeling. Getting curious allows the student to explore their own feelings.

"I wonder" statements are a helpful tool for encouraging students to explore their feelings:

“ I noticed you threw your paper on the floor. **I wonder** if you are feeling frustrated about this assignment. ”

“ **I wonder** if it's too hard to focus on deep breathing right now. Why don't we go for a short walk instead? ”

# Active engagement

You may already be incorporating activities into the day to help your students practice coping skills, and that's great! The next step to enhance those activities is to demonstrate your own investment by actively engaging with your students (this may be something you've done before, always do or haven't tried yet). Students are always watching their teachers, and this is a great opportunity to practice and model healthy ways to cope.

## Tips for active engagement:

- **Start small.** You don't have to participate every time, but start by practicing coping skills with your students once or twice a week.

### For younger students:

Try to join your students when they are doing something active, such as a brain break video. Let them know you will be joining them, and that you are looking forward to trying the video together. Your participation helps them understand that practicing coping skills is normal and that anyone can benefit from them at any age.

### For older students:

Try to join your students in a calming activity, such as deep breathing or journaling. Let them know you will be participating with them. Your participation helps them understand that practicing coping skills is normal and that anyone can benefit from them at any age.

- **Notice and observe.** Does participating in the coping skill lead to any changes in your own emotional state? It may be small, but pay attention to any changes in how you feel. Are you slightly more relaxed, focused or positive? Notice if your students are more engaged when you are doing it with them. Even if it doesn't look like students are more engaged, we know that practicing coping skills with them normalizes them and reinforces that they're something anyone can use at any age.
- **Be a positive role model.** Teaching coping skills proactively is our main goal so that we can rely on them during challenging moments throughout the day. Try modeling coping skills for your students—such as stopping and taking some deep breaths during a tough moment—so they can see you using them in real time as well. Use the opportunity to normalize feelings by sharing something like, "I am feeling tired today, and I need a moment to clear my head so I can focus. Anyone else need a moment to reset and refocus today? Let's try some deep breaths together."