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Teacher Activity

Big Emotions

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- define “emotion” and identify complex emotions that they have experienced;
- read to understand the brain science behind emotions;
- analyze how emotions affect decision-making;
- create a goal for using an emotional regulation strategy to help make healthy decisions.

Overview

In this prevention education activity, students will explore the complexity of emotions—including the science behind where they come from and the power they have in the decisions we make. Students will begin by identifying emotions they have experienced from a comprehensive list. They will then read to gain a better understanding of the brain science behind their emotions. Student pairs will answer discussion questions that prompt them to reflect on how emotions can affect healthy decision-making. The session will conclude with the topic of emotional regulation. Students will review emotional regulation strategies, consider the strategy(s) that may be most effective for them, and ultimately develop a goal to use one of the strategies in the future!

Grade Range

5–8

Timing

45–60 minutes

Materials Needed

- [List of Emotions](https://tinyurl.com/printable-emotions) (tinyurl.com/printable-emotions), one per student
- Optional: Device with internet access
- Excerpts of the *How Do Emotions Work* [article](#), one copy per student or projected for the class to read together

Specifically, the sections titled:

- *What Causes Emotions*
- *What Happens During an Emotion*
- Discussion Cards (cut out in advance), one set per student pair
- Emotional Regulation Strategies handout, one per student



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Procedure

1. Warm-Up Activity

- Begin by asking students to share an emotion they have felt in the past week. Keep a list on the board and place a check mark next to those that are mentioned by more than one student.
- Tell students that when asked to describe how they feel, people tend to use only a handful of vocabulary words—but in reality, there are dozens of words that can be used to describe our emotions.
- Pass out the List of Emotions to each student and instruct them to take out a writing utensil or highlighter. Challenge students to read through the emotion list slowly and circle or highlight any emotions that they believe they have experienced over the course of their lives.

Tip: *It may be helpful to have a device accessible with a dictionary loaded, ready for students (or you) to look up the meaning of emotions that are new to them.*

- Wrap up by again asking students to share an emotion they have felt this past week, this time using an emotion vocabulary word that is as precise as possible.
2. Tell the class that an important part of understanding their feelings is understanding *why* we feel emotions. Explain that:
- Our brains have parts called the amygdala, prefrontal cortex, and hippocampus that help us process, feel, and react to emotions.
 - When we experience something, like a scary event or a happy moment, chemicals called neurotransmitters send signals between brain cells to create our emotional response. Understanding how emotions work can help you manage them, and in return, make healthy decisions in moments when it may be challenging—like saying NO to peer pressure or standing up for yourself or a friend.
 - There are many factors that can influence how and why people feel emotions. Today the class will investigate some of them!

3. Project or distribute the *How Do Emotions Work* article excerpts to each student.

4. Call on students to read the *What Causes Emotions* section aloud, paragraph by paragraph. When the section is complete, discuss as a class: How do our thoughts, both conscious and unconscious, affect our emotions?

Be sure students understand that certain thoughts often lead to certain emotions, and those can lead to taking certain actions.

We can better understand our emotions if we ask ourselves questions about our thoughts (like the questions mentioned in this article). Sometimes we think through these questions consciously and it's easy to understand why we feel what we feel. Other times, if we're experiencing an emotion and we're not sure why, it can be helpful to ask ourselves these same questions—because it's likely our brains processed the answers unconsciously.

5. Continue to read the *What Happens During an Emotion* section aloud as a class. When the section is complete, encourage students to jot a one-sentence answer to the question in the section's title.

Call on a few students to share and ensure that students understand that during an emotional reaction, the brain creates a physical response in your body, your thinking changes, and you want to behave differently than usual.



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6. Next, instruct students to find a discussion partner and give each pair one set of Discussion Cards. Guide them through this portion of the activity by performing the following:
 - Explain that the cards contain reflection questions meant to prompt students to reflect on how emotions may affect decision-making (both in general and when it comes to their own decisions).
 - Instruct students to place the cards face down in front of them. Partners should take turns drawing a card, reading it aloud, and discussing the answer together.
 - Give students about 15 minutes to complete this portion of the activity.
7. Then, bring the class back together. Tell students that while it's normal for emotions to affect decision making, adolescents are extra prone to having their emotions get the best of them... and it's all because of brain science! Explain:
 - Adults tend to make more logical decisions with a region of their brain called their prefrontal cortex, which controls reasoning and helps them think before they act. This part of the brain isn't fully developed yet.
 - Adolescents rely more heavily on a part of their brain called the amygdala to make decisions. This part of the brain is known for quick, immediate reactions... which can make it hard for tweens and teens to think before they act!
8. Ask the class: How can being aware of how your developing brain works, as well as reflecting on the power of your own emotions, help you make more healthy decisions like not giving into peer pressure?
9. Explain that learning how to regulate and manage emotions can help keep them from making decisions entirely based on emotions. This can make it easier to say no to taking dangerous risks and make healthy, safe decisions.
10. Next, pass out one Emotional Regulation handout, and explain that this handout contains a list of strategies to help students manage their emotions so they have time to think before they make decisions. Encourage students to:
 - Read through the list and star one or more strategies that they think may be most effective for them.
 - Complete the goal statement at the bottom of the handout in which they will select an emotional regulation strategy for managing an emotion that tends to impede their decision-making.
 - Put their goal statement in a location that is private but easily accessible.
11. **Wrap-Up:** Finish the session by bringing students back together as a class. Conclude with a final full-class discussion around the question: Why is it important to reflect on your emotions before making a decision?
Follow up: Periodically remind students to review their emotional regulation goals (and revise them if needed!). You may also provide the opportunity for them to discuss their progress.



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Extensions

To help students learn more about the importance of making healthy and safe decisions, these resources explain how alcohol affects the adolescent brain and gives them the information they need to say "NO" to underage drinking:

- Video: [How Alcohol Affects Your Developing Brain](#)
- Video: [How Alcohol Affects Your Developing Hippocampus](#)

National Health Education Standards

- Standard 5: Students demonstrate effective decision-making skills to enhance health.

Common Core ELA Standards

- R.2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
- SL.1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing one's own clearly and persuasively.

Do you think your emotions play an important role in your decision-making? If so, how? If not, why not?

Do you think it's better to make a decision based on emotional thinking, logical thinking, or a combination of the two? Why?

Can you describe a time when your emotions negatively affected a decision you made? What could you have done differently?

How can emotions be helpful when you are trying to make a decision?

How might strong emotions affect how you respond to a situation involving peer pressure, such as making a risky decision like trying alcohol?

Have you ever felt like your emotions were hard to control when you were in a situation with your peers where you knew you should say "no"?

In what ways can emotions be detrimental (or harmful) when you are trying to make a healthy decision?

Can you describe a time when your emotions positively influenced a decision you made? How so?

How may understanding and managing your emotions help you make better decisions?

Can you think of a time when someone else's emotions affected your decision-making process? What happened?

The strategies listed below can help you control your emotions so you are able to make safe and healthy decisions. Read through the list and draw a star next to any strategies that you think may work for you!

- Take deep breaths. Breathe in as long as you can, hold it for 2–4 seconds, and then slowly blow all the air out of your lungs. Repeat 5 to 10 times, until you feel you have calmed down.
- Write down a list of affirmations about yourself. In other words: What is something positive you can say about yourself? Write down as many affirmations as you can, but aim for at least five.
- Meditate: Find a quiet spot and try to clear all of the thoughts from your mind. Focus on the sound and feeling of your breathing. Push away your thoughts anytime they enter your mind. Try to do this for five minutes.
- Take a break! Move away from what whatever is making you upset and do something for at least 20 minutes to distract your mind: Go for a walk, ride your bike, read a book, or even watch TV.
- Talk with a good listener. Find someone who will let you vent, and share everything that is on your mind.
- Journal. Writing how you feel, or anything that comes to mind, can help you make sense of what you are thinking.
- Draw how you feel! Sometimes drawing is easier than finding words.
- Move! Exercise is proven to reduce stress and improve moods.

Reflect

What is an emotion that often gets in the way of you making a responsible decision?

What emotional regulation strategy can you use to calm yourself the next time you feel this way?

Set a Goal

When I feel _____, I will _____
_____.

Once I am calm, I will make my decision.