

Feeling Safe: Breathing, Bodies and Belonging

Psychology Flows Context-Sensitive Lesson | Early Years | psychologyflows.com/resources
Psychology Flows • Dr Kayleigh Sumner, Educational Psychologist (Doctorate in Education and Child Psychology) • psychologyflows.com/resources

Year Group Early Years / Reception	Age Range Ages 3–5	Duration 25–30 minutes	Approach Skills-based — no disclosure required
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Learning Objective: Children can name a feeling in their body, use a simple breathing tool and identify one person who helps them feel safe.

Why This Approach — What the Research Tells Us

Young children cannot process uncertainty through conversation the way adults can. What they need most during periods of disruption is **co-regulation** — the experience of being with a calm, warm, predictable adult whose nervous system helps to settle their own. Research by Bruce Perry shows that for children under six, relational safety is more powerful than any cognitive intervention.

This lesson works entirely through the body and through belonging. It does not ask children to name or discuss worrying events. Instead it gives them three things: a way to notice how their body feels, a breathing tool they can use independently, and a reinforced sense that there are safe people around them.

For the Teacher — Read Before Delivering

- You do not need to mention current events at any point in this lesson.
- Keep your own voice slow, warm and steady throughout — children co-regulate with you.
- Some children may be more clingy or tearful than usual. This is normal and healthy. Validate it briefly: "It's okay to feel that way. I'm right here."
- If a child becomes very distressed, sit with them quietly rather than asking questions.
- If a child says something that concerns you, follow your school's safeguarding procedures — see the disclosure guidance at the end of this lesson.

Safe Opening — What to Say

Use these words to open the session. They acknowledge that things feel different without asking children to name why.

"Sometimes our bodies have big feelings inside them. That is completely normal and okay."

"Today we are going to practise listening to our bodies and learning a special trick to help them feel calm."

"We are also going to think about all the people who help us feel safe — because you have lots of them."

Step-by-Step Instructions

- 1. Body check-in (3 mins):** Ask children to put one hand on their tummy and one on their heart. "What can you feel? Is your tummy calm like a still pond, or bubbly like a fizzy drink?" Accept all answers. There is no right answer.
- 2. Balloon breathing (5 mins):** Lead balloon breathing together — breathe in slowly, tummy rises; breathe out, tummy falls. Narrate gently. Repeat five times. "Notice — does your tummy feel a little calmer now?"
- 3. My safe people (5 mins):** Ask: "Who are the people who make you feel safe and loved?" Children call out names — family, teachers, friends. Celebrate each one. "Those people are always there for you, even when they're not right next to you."
- 4. Positive emotions circle (5 mins):** Go around the group — each child names one thing that makes them feel happy or warm inside. Model your own first. Celebrate every answer.
- 5. My Strength Star activity (10 mins):** Children complete the activity sheet below. Share and display stars on a class "You Are Amazing" wall.

Safe Discussion Prompts — Skills Focused

These questions build skills without opening up discussion of specific fears or events.

- What does your body feel like when you are calm? And when you feel wobbly?
- What does your breathing buddy help you do?
- Who is one person you could go to if you needed a hug today?
- What is one thing that makes your heart feel warm and full?

Differentiation

■ Support

Adult sits alongside throughout.
Use two feelings only: calm and wobbly.

■ Core

Complete all activities independently with picture prompts.

■ Extend

Teach balloon breathing to a family member and explain why slow breathing helps.

If a Child Discloses Something Concerning

Stay calm. Listen. Do not investigate or ask probing questions. You can say: "Thank you for telling me that. I want to make sure you get the right support, so I am going to speak to someone who can help." Refer immediately to your Designated Safeguarding Lead. Record what the child said in their exact words.

➤ PUPIL ACTIVITY SHEET BEGINS BELOW ➤

— My Strength Star | Early Years

You are amazing — and you have lots of wonderful things inside you. Draw or write something in each part of your star.

■ **Something I am good at...**

■ **Someone who loves me...**

■ Something that makes me happy...

■ A time I was brave...

My name is: _____ Today I feel:

■ Safeguarding

If you have any concerns about a child's welfare or safety following this activity, report these immediately to your school's Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL). Do not investigate concerns yourself. Record what the child said using their exact words. These resources are educational tools — they do not replace professional safeguarding procedures.



My Feelings Toolkit: Naming, Breathing and Growing Kindness

Psychology Flows Context-Sensitive Lesson | KS1 | psychologyflows.com/resources
Psychology Flows • Dr Kayleigh Sumner, Educational Psychologist (Doctorate in Education and Child Psychology) • psychologyflows.com/resources

Year Group KS1	Age Range Years 1–2 Ages 5–7	Duration 30 minutes	Approach Skills-based — no disclosure required
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Learning Objectives: Children can name at least four emotions using the feelings grid; use box breathing or balloon breathing independently; and identify one act of kindness they will carry out this week.

Why This Approach

At KS1, children are developing the ability to name and communicate emotions — a skill that significantly predicts long-term mental health outcomes (Brackett, 2019). The RULER approach (Yale Centre for Emotional Intelligence) shows that teaching children to **Recognise, Understand, Label, Express and Regulate** emotions builds a foundational toolkit that serves them throughout life.

This lesson deliberately focuses on the skill of noticing and naming feelings without asking children to explain why they feel them. Feelings can exist without needing a reason or a story. The kindness component draws on research showing that kind acts increase the giver's wellbeing as much as the receiver's.

For the Teacher — Read Before Delivering

- Do not ask children why they feel a particular way — simply acknowledge and validate the feeling.
- If a child names a feeling like "scared" or "worried", respond warmly: "Thank you for noticing that. All feelings are welcome here."
- Use the feelings grid on the activity sheet as a reference point throughout the session.
- Kindness activities should focus on what children can do — not on what is happening around them.
- See the disclosure guidance at the end of this lesson if a child shares something concerning.

Safe Opening — What to Say

"All feelings are allowed in this classroom. You never have to explain why you feel something."

"Today we are going to build our feelings toolkit — the things that help us when emotions feel big."

"We're going to practise two breathing tools, look at lots of different feelings, and plan some kindness."

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. Feelings check-in (5 mins): Show the feelings grid on the activity sheet. "Point to or tell me one feeling that is somewhere in you right now." Go round the group. Acknowledge every response: "Thank you. That feeling makes sense."

2. Breathing tools (8 mins): Teach and practise both breathing techniques on the activity sheet. Balloon breath first (younger/needs support), then box breathing (1-2-3-4 all the way through). "You now have two tools you can use any time, anywhere."

3. Feelings are like weather (5 mins): "Feelings come and go like the weather. A cloudy day doesn't last forever, and neither does a difficult feeling." Ask: "Can anyone think of a time a big feeling passed?" Do not push for detail.

4. Kindness planning (7 mins): "One of the best things we can do when things feel hard is be kind to someone else — and to ourselves." Children complete the kindness section of their activity sheet.

5. Share and close (5 mins): Share one kindness plan each. Close with one round of box breathing together.

Safe Discussion Prompts

- Which feeling on the grid felt most familiar to you today?
- Which breathing tool did you prefer — balloon or box? Why?
- If a feeling is like weather, what 'weather' are you having today?
- What is one kind thing you could do this week — for someone else or for yourself?

Differentiation

■ Support

Use the feelings grid with picture support. Focus on balloon breathing only.

■ Core

Name four feelings, use both breathing techniques and write a kindness plan.

■ Extend

Create a personal "Feelings Weather Forecast" and teach box breathing to a partner.

If a Child Discloses Something Concerning

Stay calm. Listen. Do not investigate or ask probing questions. You can say: "Thank you for telling me that. I want to make sure you get the right support, so I am going to speak to someone who can help." Refer immediately to your Designated Safeguarding Lead. Record what the child said in their exact words.

✂ PUPIL ACTIVITY SHEET BEGINS BELOW ✂

— My Feelings Toolkit | KS1

Name: _____ Date: _____

How am I feeling right now? Circle or point to your feeling.



My Breathing Toolkit

■ **Balloon Breath**
 Put your hands on your tummy.
 Breathe IN — feel your tummy rise.
 Breathe OUT — feel it fall.
 Repeat 5 times slowly.

■ **Box Breathing**
 Breathe IN for 4 counts.
 HOLD for 4 counts.
 Breathe OUT for 4 counts.
 HOLD for 4 counts. Repeat.

My Kindness Plan This Week

<p>One kind thing I will do for someone else... <i>Big or small — all kindness counts</i></p>	<hr/>
<p>One kind thing I will do for myself... <i>Looking after yourself is important too</i></p>	<hr/>
<p>How I think it will make me feel... <i>Think about the warm feeling kindness gives</i></p>	<hr/>

■ Safeguarding

If you have any concerns about a child's welfare or safety following this activity, report these immediately to your school's Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL). Do not investigate concerns yourself. Record what the child said using their exact words. These resources are educational tools — they do not replace professional safeguarding procedures.



Understanding My Stress Response and Building My Calm Kit

Psychology Flows Context-Sensitive Lesson | Lower KS2 | psychologyflows.com/resources
Psychology Flows • Dr Kayleigh Sumner, Educational Psychologist (Doctorate in Education and Child Psychology) • psychologyflows.com/resources

Year Group Lower KS2	Age Range Years 3–4 Ages 7–9	Duration 35–40 minutes	Approach Skills-based — no disclosure required
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Learning Objectives: Children can explain what stress feels like in their body; identify their personal early warning signs; and select three strategies for their personalised Calm Kit.

Why This Approach

The Zones of Regulation framework (Leah Kuypers, 2011) teaches children to identify their physiological state and use appropriate strategies to regulate it. Research shows that children who understand their own stress response are **significantly better at self-regulating** than those who simply receive generic advice.

This lesson teaches children the science of stress in simple, age-appropriate language — without referencing any specific stressor. Knowing *why* their body feels the way it does reduces fear and increases agency. The Calm Kit ensures every child leaves with a personalised, practical set of tools.

For the Teacher — Read Before Delivering

- Use the word "stress" or "big feelings" — not "worry about the news" or any reference to current events.
- Frame the body's stress response as clever and protective, not scary or wrong.
- Some children may give you clues about what is stressing them through their Calm Kit choices. Acknowledge the feeling, not the cause: "It sounds like you might need some extra calm right now."
- The Calm Kit is personal — celebrate all strategies, even unusual ones.
- See the disclosure guidance at the end if a child shares something that concerns you.

Safe Opening — What to Say

"Has anyone ever noticed their heart beating faster, or their tummy feeling funny, or their hands going a bit tingly?"

"That is your body's alarm system switching on. It is actually really clever — it is trying to protect you."

"Today we are going to understand how that alarm works and build a toolkit to help us when it goes off."

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. Body stress map (8 mins): Ask children to draw their outline on the activity sheet and mark where they feel stress in their body. Share — you will likely find common patterns. "Your body is telling you something

important when this happens."

2. Simple stress science (7 mins): Explain in simple terms: "When our brain senses something challenging, it sends a signal that speeds up our heart, tightens our muscles and quickens our breathing. This is called the stress response and it has been helping humans for thousands of years."

3. Early warning signs (5 mins): "What are YOUR first signs that your stress alarm is going off?" Children complete this section on their activity sheet. Share a few — normalise all of them.

4. Build your Calm Kit (10 mins): Children choose three strategies from the menu on the sheet. Explain each option briefly. "Your Calm Kit is yours — choose what actually helps YOU."

5. Gratitude closer (5 mins): "One of the most powerful ways to calm our nervous system is gratitude. Let's end with everyone naming one thing they noticed today that was good." Go round the group.

Safe Discussion Prompts

- Where in your body do you feel stress first? Is that the same for everyone?
- What is one early warning sign that tells you your stress alarm has gone off?
- Which strategy in your Calm Kit do you think will work best for you? Why?
- How is understanding WHY our body feels stressed different from just being told to calm down?

Differentiation

■ Support

Focus on the body map and one Calm Kit strategy with adult support.

■ Core

Complete all sections and explain why they chose their three strategies.

■ Extend

Research one of their chosen strategies and explain the science behind why it works.

If a Child Discloses Something Concerning

Stay calm. Listen. Do not investigate or ask probing questions. You can say: "Thank you for telling me that. I want to make sure you get the right support, so I am going to speak to someone who can help." Refer immediately to your Designated Safeguarding Lead. Record what the child said in their exact words.

➤ PUPIL ACTIVITY SHEET BEGINS BELOW ➤

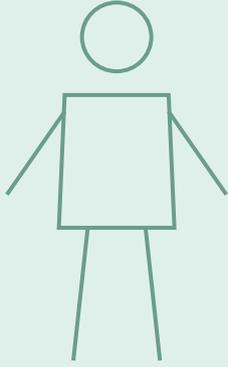
— My Stress Response and Calm Kit | Lower KS2

Name: _____ Date: _____

Part 1: My Body Stress Map and Early Warning Signs

In the box on the left, mark with dots or words where you feel stress in your body. On the right, write your personal early warning signs.

My Body Stress Map



Mark with dots

My Early Warning Signs

The first signs I notice when my stress alarm goes off...

My stress level right now is:

1 Great	2 Good	3 Okay	4 Hard	5 Really hard
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My Calm Kit — Choose 3 Strategies That Work for You

Circle or tick three strategies below. These are YOUR tools — choose what actually helps.

<input type="checkbox"/> Box Breathing 4 counts in, hold, out, hold	<input type="checkbox"/> Wave Breathing Trace up and down your fingers
<input type="checkbox"/> 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Use your 5 senses to settle	<input type="checkbox"/> Movement Break Walk, stretch or shake it out
<input type="checkbox"/> Listen to Music A calming or uplifting song	<input type="checkbox"/> Draw or Doodle Let your hand move freely
<input type="checkbox"/> Talk to Someone A trusted person who listens	<input type="checkbox"/> Write It Down Get the feeling out on paper
<input type="checkbox"/> Cold Water Splash your face or hold cold water	<input type="checkbox"/> Gratitude Name 3 things you are grateful for

My three chosen strategies are: 1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

■ Safeguarding

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My Strengths Shield: Resilience, Character and Positive Emotions

Psychology Flows Context-Sensitive Lesson | Upper KS2 | psychologyflows.com/resources
Psychology Flows • Dr Kayleigh Sumner, Educational Psychologist (Doctorate in Education and Child Psychology) • psychologyflows.com/resources

Year Group Upper KS2	Age Range Years 5–6 Ages 9–11	Duration 40 minutes	Approach Skills-based — no disclosure required
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Learning Objectives: Children can identify three personal strengths using the VIA framework; describe how positive emotions build resilience; and complete a Strengths Shield they can use as a personal anchor.

Why This Approach

Martin Seligman's PERMA model places character strengths at the centre of flourishing. Research shows that children who **know and use their strengths regularly are more resilient, more engaged in learning and report higher wellbeing** — especially during periods of adversity.

Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build theory adds that positive emotions — even brief ones — widen our thinking and help us build psychological resources. This lesson weaves both frameworks together: children identify their strengths, connect them to positive emotions, and create a physical shield they can return to whenever they need a reminder of what they are made of.

For the Teacher — Read Before Delivering

- This lesson is entirely forward-focused and strengths-based — it does not require children to discuss difficulties.
- If children ask "why are we doing this?", a good response is: "Because knowing your strengths is one of the most useful things you can do for your mental health."
- Validate all strengths equally — there is no hierarchy in the VIA framework.
- The Positive Emotions wheel on the activity sheet helps children connect emotions to strengths — keep the focus on when they have felt these, not why they might need them.
- See the disclosure guidance at the end of this lesson if needed.

Safe Opening — What to Say

"Every single person in this room has strengths — qualities that make them who they are and that help them through difficult times."

"Today we're going to find yours, name them and build a shield out of them."

"Research shows that when we know and use our strengths, we are more resilient — better at handling whatever life throws at us."

Step-by-Step Instructions

- 1. Introduce VIA strengths (7 mins):** Share the VIA strengths list on the activity sheet. Read through together. Ask: "Can anyone give me an example of one of these in real life?"
- 2. Identify top three (5 mins):** Children circle or tick their top three strengths — qualities they genuinely recognise in themselves. Allow quiet reflection time.
- 3. Positive emotions connection (8 mins):** Look at the Positive Emotions wheel on the sheet. "Which of these emotions do you feel when you are using your strengths?" Children mark or note the emotions that resonate.
- 4. Build the Strengths Shield (12 mins):** Children complete their personalised shield using the prompts on the activity sheet.
- 5. Gallery and close (8 mins):** Share shields in pairs or small groups. Celebrate each other's strengths specifically. Close: "These strengths are yours. They do not go away. Carry your shield with you."

Safe Discussion Prompts

- Which strength surprised you most when you saw it in yourself?
- Which positive emotion do you feel most often when you are being yourself?
- When has one of your strengths helped you get through something difficult?
- How could knowing your strengths help you in the weeks ahead?

Differentiation

■ Support

Provide a simplified list of eight strengths with descriptions. Focus on one strength and one emotion.

■ Core

Complete the full shield and connect each strength to a positive emotion.

■ Extend

Research how character strengths predict resilience and present findings to the group.

If a Child Discloses Something Concerning

Stay calm. Listen. Do not investigate or ask probing questions. You can say: "Thank you for telling me that. I want to make sure you get the right support, so I am going to speak to someone who can help." Refer immediately to your Designated Safeguarding Lead. Record what the child said in their exact words.

➤ PUPIL ACTIVITY SHEET BEGINS BELOW ➤

— My Strengths Shield | Upper KS2

Name: _____ Date: _____

VIA Character Strengths — Circle Your Top Three

Creativity	Curiosity	Judgement	Love of Learning	Perspective	Bravery
Perseverance	Honesty	Zest & Energy	Love & Kindness	Social Intelligence	Teamwork
Fairness	Leadership	Forgiveness	Humility	Prudence	Self-Regulation
Gratitude	Hope & Optimism	Humour	Spirituality	Appreciation of Beauty	Citizenship

Positive Emotions — Which Do You Feel When Using Your Strengths?

Joy	Gratitude	Serenity	Interest	Hope	Love	Pride	Amusement	Inspiration	Awe
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My Strengths Shield

The shield is divided into four quadrants, each with a different background color and a prompt followed by two horizontal lines for writing:

- Top Left (Purple):** My top strength is...
- Top Right (Blue):** I use it when...
- Bottom Left (Orange):** It helps me by...
- Bottom Right (Green):** My brave motto...

Complete your shield:

My top strength is...

From the VIA list above

I use it when...

Give a specific example

It makes me feel...

Name the positive emotion

My brave motto...

One sentence to carry with you

Four horizontal lines provided for writing the responses to the prompts above.

■ Safeguarding

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Managing Anxiety: Understanding My Brain and Building Resilience

Psychology Flows Context-Sensitive Lesson | KS3 | psychologyflows.com/resources
Psychology Flows • Dr Kayleigh Sumner, Educational Psychologist (Doctorate in Education and Child Psychology) • psychologyflows.com/resources

Year Group KS3	Age Range Years 7–9 Ages 11–14	Duration 45 minutes	Approach Skills-based — no disclosure required
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Learning Objectives: *Students can explain the anxiety response using the brain science; identify their personal anxiety signs; apply at least two evidence-based regulation strategies; and complete a personal Resilience Plan.*

Why This Approach

Psychoeducation — teaching young people about how their brain and body work — is one of the most effective universal interventions for anxiety (Piacentini, 2014). When students understand *why* they feel the way they do, the feelings become **less frightening and more manageable**. Knowledge itself is a regulation tool.

The resilience component draws on the work of Ann Masten, who showed that resilience is built through ordinary strengths and connections — not exceptional ability. The 4S model (Supports, Strategies, Sagacity, Solutions) gives students a concrete framework for mapping what they already have and identifying what they want to build.

For the Teacher — Read Before Delivering

- Do not ask students to share what is making them anxious — focus on the skill of managing anxiety.
- Use universal language: "When we feel anxious" not "with everything going on".
- Normalise anxiety completely before introducing strategies — if students feel judged they will not engage.
- For students who appear highly distressed, check in individually after the session.
- If a student discloses something that concerns you, follow the guidance at the end of this lesson.

Safe Opening — What to Say

"Anxiety is something every single human being experiences. It is not a weakness — it is literally built into our brains."

"Today we are going to understand exactly what happens in the brain when we feel anxious and learn how to work with it, not against it."

"You do not need to share what makes you anxious. We're focusing on the skill — understanding the pattern and building our toolkit."

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. Brain science (8 mins): Explain the amygdala and threat response simply. "The amygdala is like a smoke detector. It is brilliant at sensing danger — but sometimes it goes off when there's no actual fire. When it fires,

it reduces access to the thinking part of your brain." Draw the simple diagram from the activity sheet on the board.

2. My anxiety signs (7 mins): Students complete the anxiety body map and identify their early warning signs on the activity sheet. "Everyone's signs are slightly different — there are no wrong answers."

3. Three regulation strategies (10 mins): Teach box breathing, 5-4-3-2-1 grounding and cognitive reframing. Practise each briefly. "These work because they interrupt the threat response and re-engage the thinking brain."

4. Resilience planning (12 mins): Introduce the 4S model briefly. Students complete their Resilience Plan on the activity sheet. "Resilience is not about being tough — it is about knowing what you have and using it."

5. Gratitude close (8 mins): "End every difficult week with gratitude — it is not denial, it is neuroscience. Three things you noticed today that were good." Students complete the gratitude section and share one item each.

Safe Discussion Prompts

- What happens in your body when your "smoke detector" goes off?
- Which of the three strategies felt most useful for you personally?
- What is the difference between helpful anxiety and unhelpful anxiety?
- Looking at your Resilience Plan — which S is your strongest right now?

Differentiation

■ Support

Focus on the anxiety body map and one regulation strategy with support.

■ Core

Complete all sections independently and explain the science behind one strategy.

■ Extend

Research the neuroscience of anxiety regulation and evaluate two evidence-based approaches.

If a Child Discloses Something Concerning

Stay calm. Listen. Do not investigate or ask probing questions. You can say: "Thank you for telling me that. I want to make sure you get the right support, so I am going to speak to someone who can help." Refer immediately to your Designated Safeguarding Lead. Record what the child said in their exact words.

➤ PUPIL ACTIVITY SHEET BEGINS BELOW ➤

Managing Anxiety and Building Resilience | KS3

Name: _____ Date: _____

How the Anxious Brain Works

1. Trigger	Something challenging or uncertain happens — real or imagined.
2. Amygdala fires	Your brain's alarm (the amygdala) sends a threat signal.
3. Stress hormones	Adrenaline and cortisol flood the body — heart rate rises, muscles tighten.

4. Thinking reduced	Access to the prefrontal cortex (thinking brain) is reduced.
5. We regulate	Using a strategy re-engages the thinking brain and calms the response.

My Anxiety Signs

<p>My body feels like this when I am anxious... <i>e.g. heart racing, tummy tight, hard to breathe</i></p>	
<p>My thoughts do this when I am anxious... <i>e.g. racing, blank, going to worst case</i></p>	
<p>My behaviour does this when I am anxious... <i>e.g. avoid, snap, go quiet, fidget</i></p>	
<p>My first warning sign is usually... <i>The earliest signal that anxiety is building</i></p>	

My anxiety level right now is:



My Resilience Plan — The 4S Model

Resilience is built from four things. Fill in yours below.

<p>■ Supports People who help me <i>Who are the people I can turn to? Name them.</i></p> <hr/> <hr/>	<p>■ Strategies What I do <i>What regulation or coping strategies work for me?</i></p> <hr/> <hr/>
<p>■ Sagacity What I believe <i>What do I know or believe that helps me keep going?</i></p> <hr/> <hr/>	<p>■ Solutions What I do next <i>What is one action I can take this week?</i></p> <hr/> <hr/>

My Gratitude for Today

Something I noticed today that was good...	_____
Someone I am grateful for right now...	_____
One thing I am looking forward to...	_____

■ Recommended Mindfulness & Meditation Resources

Headspace (Teens) Guided meditations for stress, sleep and focus — free for students	headspace.com/students
.b (Mindfulness in Schools) Secondary-age mindfulness curriculum, used in 80+ countries	mindfulnessinschools.org/b-curriculum
Smiling Mind Free app with age-specific guided meditations for 7–18	smilingmind.com.au

■ Safeguarding

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Thriving Under Pressure: Stress, Strengths and Hope

Psychology Flows Context-Sensitive Lesson | KS4 | psychologyflows.com/resources
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Year Group KS4	Age Range Years 10–11 Ages 14–16	Duration 50 minutes	Approach Skills-based — no disclosure required
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Learning Objectives: *Students can distinguish between challenge and threat stress; apply cognitive reframing to unhelpful thinking patterns; complete a Strengths and Hope Plan; and identify specific actions to maintain wellbeing under pressure.*

Why This Approach

Kelly McGonigal's research on the "stress mindset" shows that **believing stress is harmful makes it harmful**, while viewing stress as a natural response to something that matters actually improves outcomes. This reframe is one of the most powerful and transferable tools available to young people under pressure.

Combined with Snyder's Hope Theory — which shows that hope is a learnable cognitive skill (goals + pathways + agency) rather than just a feeling — this lesson equips Year 10–11 students with an integrated framework for thriving under genuine pressure. No specific stressor needs to be named. The tools work for any difficulty.

For the Teacher — Read Before Delivering

- Do not reference exams, the news or any specific stressor — frame all content as universal.
- Year 10–11 students may be sceptical of wellbeing content. Lead with the research — "This is what the science shows" is more effective with this age group than "this will make you feel better."
- Validate that things are genuinely difficult before introducing any strategies. Toxic positivity is counterproductive.
- If students become distressed or disclose concerns, follow the guidance at the end of this lesson.

Safe Opening — What to Say

"I want to start by being honest with you: right now, many of you are under a lot of pressure. That is real and I'm not going to pretend otherwise."

"What the research shows — and this is genuinely interesting — is that HOW we respond to pressure matters enormously for the outcome."

"Today we're going to look at the science of stress, what it does and doesn't do, and build a toolkit specifically for high-pressure situations."

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. Stress mindset science (8 mins): Explain the difference between challenge stress (energising, improves performance) and threat stress (draining, impairs performance). "The difference is largely in how we interpret

the stress — not in the stress itself. McGonigal's research showed that believing stress is useful changed its physical effects."

2. My stress relationship (5 mins): Students complete the stress audit on the activity sheet. "No judgement — just honest reflection. This is private."

3. Cognitive reframing (10 mins): Introduce two common distortions: catastrophising and black-and-white thinking. Teach the reframing process: identify the thought, examine the evidence, find the most balanced view. Students apply this to one current thought on the sheet.

4. Strengths and Hope Plan (15 mins): Students complete the combined Strengths and Hope section of the activity sheet. "Hope, according to Snyder, is not a feeling — it is a skill with three parts: knowing your goal, knowing your pathways and believing you can use them."

5. Gratitude and close (7 mins): "End with gratitude — even brief gratitude reduces cortisol. Three things from this week that were genuinely good." Share one each and close.

Safe Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between challenge stress and threat stress? Which do you experience more?
- What does your inner critic usually say when things feel hard? How accurate is it really?
- What is one strength you have that you have not been using enough lately?
- What would hope about the future look like for you right now — not perfect, just possible?

Differentiation

■ Support

Focus on the stress audit and one reframing example with teacher support.

■ Core

Complete all sections including the Hope Plan independently.

■ Extend

Research McGonigal's stress mindset study and Snyder's Hope Theory, and critically evaluate the evidence.

If a Child Discloses Something Concerning

Stay calm. Listen. Do not investigate or ask probing questions. You can say: "Thank you for telling me that. I want to make sure you get the right support, so I am going to speak to someone who can help." Refer immediately to your Designated Safeguarding Lead. Record what the child said in their exact words.

➤ PUPIL ACTIVITY SHEET BEGINS BELOW ➤

— Thriving Under Pressure | KS4

Name: _____ Date: _____

My Stress Audit

Rate each area of your life right now from 1 (low pressure) to 5 (high pressure). Be honest — this is for you.

Schoolwork and exams

1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5

Relationships and friendships

1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5

Home and family life	1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5
My physical health and sleep	1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5
How I feel about the future	1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5
My overall stress level today	1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5

Cognitive Reframing — Finding the Balanced View

The unhelpful thought I notice... <i>Write the thought exactly as it appears</i>	_____
What kind of thinking is this? <i>e.g. catastrophising, all-or-nothing, mind-reading</i>	_____
What evidence supports this thought? <i>Be honest — what facts back it up?</i>	_____
What evidence challenges this thought? <i>What does the thought leave out or exaggerate?</i>	_____
The most balanced, realistic thought is... <i>Not perfect — just more accurate</i>	_____

My Strengths and Hope Plan

■ My top three strengths right now are... <i>From VIA: Creativity, Bravery, Kindness, Perseverance, Hope...</i>	_____
■ How I will use a strength this week... <i>Be specific — what will you actually do?</i>	_____
■ One hope I am holding onto... <i>A goal or positive possibility — not perfect, just possible</i>	_____
■ One pathway towards that hope... <i>What is one step you could take?</i>	_____

■ Evidence that I can do it...

What have you already done that shows you have what it takes?

My Gratitude for This Week

Something that went better than expected this week...

Someone I am genuinely grateful for right now...

Something I am proud of — however small...

■ Recommended Mindfulness & Meditation Resources

Headspace (Teens)

Guided meditations for stress, sleep and focus — free for students

[headspace.com/students](https://www.headspace.com/students)

.b (Mindfulness in Schools)

Secondary-age mindfulness curriculum, used in 80+ countries

[mindfulnessinschools.org/b-curriculum](https://www.mindfulnessinschools.org/b-curriculum)

Smiling Mind

Free app with age-specific guided meditations for 7–18

[smilingmind.com.au](https://www.smilingmind.com.au)

■ Safeguarding

If you have any concerns about a child's welfare or safety following this activity, report these immediately to your school's Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL). Do not investigate concerns yourself. Record what the child said using their exact words. These resources are educational tools — they do not replace professional safeguarding procedures.