

Understanding Anxiety

Psychology Flows Lesson Plan | KS3 | Years 7–9 | Ages 11–14 | psychologyflows.com
Psychology Flows • Dr Kayleigh Sumner, Educational Psychologist (Doctorate in Education and Child Psychology) • psychologyflows.com/resources

Learning Objective: Students can explain the anxiety response cycle and apply at least one evidence-based management strategy.

Year Group	Age Range	Duration	Resources Needed
KS3	Years 7–9 Ages 11–14	40–45 minutes	Anxiety cycle diagram (draw on board), strategy cards

Overview

Anxiety is the most common mental health challenge in young people, and yet it is widely misunderstood. Demystifying anxiety — understanding it as a normal biological response rather than a character flaw — is the first step towards managing it.

This lesson is particularly relevant in the current context. Students in Dubai are navigating real threat and uncertainty, and many will be experiencing anxiety responses that feel frightening or out of control. Education and normalisation are powerful interventions.

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. Begin with a poll: "How many people feel anxious sometimes?" Normalise completely — everyone does.
2. Explain the anxiety cycle: trigger → thought → physical response → behaviour. Draw the cycle clearly.
3. Key message: anxiety is a normal biological response evolved to protect us. It is not weakness.
4. Introduce the amygdala and threat response in accessible language.
5. Important distinction: some anxiety is helpful (motivates preparation) — it becomes a problem when it impairs our ability to function.
6. Teach three evidence-based strategies: box breathing, cognitive reframing, grounding.
7. Students choose one strategy to apply to a current worry and write a brief reflection.

Discussion Prompts

- Why do you think anxiety exists? What is it trying to do for us?
- What is the difference between helpful anxiety and unhelpful anxiety?
- When does anxiety become something to seek support for?
- What is one thing you will do differently next time you feel anxious?

Differentiation

■ Support

Focus on recognising anxiety in the body rather than the full cycle.

■ Core

Complete the anxiety cycle for a personal example and identify one management strategy.

■ Extend

Research cognitive behavioural therapy as an evidence-based treatment and write a summary.

■ 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

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Mindfulness & Self-Regulation

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Learning Objective: Students can explain what mindfulness is, describe its evidence base and practise at least one technique.

Year Group	Age Range	Duration	Resources Needed
KS3	Years 7–9 Ages 11–14	35–40 minutes	Optional: mindfulness app (Headspace, Smiling Mind), quiet space

Overview

Mindfulness — paying attention to the present moment on purpose, without judgement — has a substantial evidence base for reducing anxiety, improving focus and supporting emotional regulation in adolescents (Zoogman et al., 2015).

For students navigating uncertainty and threat, mindfulness offers a concrete tool that does not require any resources and can be used anywhere, including in the classroom.

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. Begin: "What does it mean to be in the present moment? How often do you think you actually are?"
2. Define mindfulness: paying attention on purpose to the present moment without judging what you find.
3. Briefly explain the neuroscience: mindfulness gradually reduces amygdala reactivity and strengthens prefrontal control.
4. Lead a 5-minute guided mindfulness practice: breath focus, then sounds, then body sensations.
5. Debrief: what was noticed? What was hard? What was unexpected?
6. Introduce the difference between formal practice (meditation) and informal practice (mindful eating, mindful walking).
7. Discuss building a habit: even 5 minutes daily produces measurable benefits over time.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between mindfulness and just relaxing?
- Why might non-judgement be important — what happens when we judge our thoughts?
- What barriers might stop someone maintaining a mindfulness practice?
- When during your day might mindfulness be most useful?

Differentiation

■ Support

Use a 2-minute guided practice with teacher narration throughout.

■ Core

Complete the 5-minute practice and write three observations.

■ Extend

Compare mindfulness to other self-regulation strategies using research evidence.

■ Recommended Mindfulness & Meditation Resources

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Self-Compassion

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Learning Objective: Students can apply Kristin Neff's three-component self-compassion model to a personal struggle.

Year Group	Age Range	Duration	Resources Needed
KS3	Years 7–9 Ages 11–14	35 minutes	Self-compassion worksheet

Overview

Self-compassion (Neff, 2003) involves three components: self-kindness (treating ourselves as we would treat a good friend), common humanity (recognising that suffering is part of the shared human experience) and mindfulness (acknowledging painful feelings without over-identifying).

Research shows self-compassion is more effective than self-criticism for motivation, resilience and mental health. Common humanity is particularly relevant now: students are not alone in finding this hard.

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. Begin: "How would you speak to a close friend who was going through a really hard time?"
2. Ask: "Do you speak to yourself the same way when you are struggling? Why not?"
3. Introduce the three components of self-compassion: self-kindness, common humanity, mindfulness.
4. Focus on common humanity: "You are not the only person finding this difficult. Millions of young people around the world are navigating exactly this."
5. Students write about a current struggle using the self-compassion framework.
6. Key exercise: students rewrite their inner critic's voice using the voice they would use with their best friend.
7. Debrief: what shifted? What was hardest?

Discussion Prompts

- Is self-compassion the same as making excuses for yourself?
- What is the difference between self-compassion and self-pity?
- Research shows self-compassion leads to more motivation than self-criticism. Why might that be?
- What would you say to a friend struggling with the same thing you are struggling with right now?

Differentiation

■ Support

Provide sentence starters for the self-compassion writing exercise.

■ Core

Complete the exercise independently and identify which component was hardest.

■ Extend

Research Neff's self-compassion model and evaluate the evidence base.

■ Recommended Mindfulness & Meditation Resources

Headspace (Teens)

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Stress Management Toolkit

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Learning Objective: Students can identify their personal stress responses and select strategies from four evidence-based categories.

Year Group	Age Range	Duration	Resources Needed
KS3	Years 7–9 Ages 11–14	40 minutes	Stress management toolkit worksheets

Overview

Stress is not inherently harmful — it depends on how we interpret and respond to it. Kelly McGonigal's research shows that viewing stress as helpful (challenge stress) rather than harmful (threat stress) changes its physiological effects.

Building a personalised stress management toolkit — rather than using one-size-fits-all advice — is more effective because students understand their own patterns and can choose strategies that genuinely work for them.

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. Begin with a stress audit: "Rate your stress level this week 1–10. What has contributed to it?"
2. Introduce the stress response: what happens in the body, why it evolved, what keeps it going when not needed.
3. Distinguish challenge stress (helpful, energising) from threat stress (harmful over time).
4. Present four categories of stress management: physical (breathing, movement), cognitive (reframing thoughts), social (connection, talking), behavioural (routine, sleep, preparation).
5. Students audit their current toolkit — which categories do they use and which are missing?
6. Build a personal stress toolkit: one strategy from each category.
7. Commit to trying one new strategy this week and reflect back next session.

Discussion Prompts

- Can stress ever be useful? When does it become harmful?
- Which of the four categories do you currently use least?
- What makes it hard to use stress management strategies when you are actually stressed?
- What one change to your routine this week could reduce your stress most?

Differentiation

■ Support

Focus on two strategies from the physical category only.

■ Core

Build a full toolkit with one strategy from each category.

■ Extend

Design a stress management programme for secondary students, justifying choices with evidence.

■ Recommended Mindfulness & Meditation Resources

Headspace (Teens)

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Positive Emotions — Deep Dive

Psychology Flows Lesson Plan | KS3 | Years 7–9 | Ages 11–14 | psychologyflows.com
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Learning Objective: *Students can apply Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build theory and design strategies to intentionally increase positive emotions.*

Year Group	Age Range	Duration	Resources Needed
KS3	Years 7–9 Ages 11–14	40 minutes	Psychology Flows Positive Emotions activity sheet

Overview

Barbara Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build theory (2001) proposes that positive emotions broaden our awareness and thinking, which over time builds psychological resources — including resilience, creativity and social connection.

Critically, this theory suggests that positive emotions are not merely byproducts of good circumstances — they can be deliberately cultivated and are especially important during difficult times. This lesson gives students both the theory and practical tools.

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. Begin: "Can you name five positive emotions? Why do you think they matter beyond just feeling good?"
2. Introduce the Broaden-and-Build theory: positive emotions widen our awareness and help us build lasting resources.
3. Key insight: this is particularly important during difficult times — not instead of acknowledging negative emotions, but alongside them.
4. Students audit their week: which positive emotions did they experience and when?
5. Discuss: "Can positive emotions coexist with difficult ones? What would that look like?"
6. Students design an emotional first aid kit: specific, realistic strategies to intentionally grow positive emotions.
7. Share kits — notice the diversity of what works for different people.

Discussion Prompts

- Is it authentic to try to cultivate positive emotions, or is that forcing it?
- What is the relationship between positive emotions and resilience?
- How might you support a friend who cannot seem to access positive emotions?
- What is the difference between toxic positivity and genuine positive emotion?

Differentiation

■ Support

Focus on identifying three positive emotions and when they occurred.

■ Core

Apply Broaden-and-Build theory to a personal example.

■ Extend

Critically evaluate the evidence base for positive psychology interventions in schools.

■ Recommended Mindfulness & Meditation Resources

Headspace (Teens)

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

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

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Managing Pressure and Stress

Psychology Flows Lesson Plan | KS4 | Years 10–11 | Ages 14–16 | psychologyflows.com
Psychology Flows • Dr Kayleigh Sumner, Educational Psychologist (Doctorate in Education and Child Psychology) • psychologyflows.com/resources

Learning Objective: Students can identify their personal stress signals and apply evidence-based strategies to manage pressure.

Year Group	Age Range	Duration	Resources Needed
KS4	Years 10–11 Ages 14–16	45 minutes	Exam anxiety worksheet, strategy toolkit cards

Overview

Feeling under pressure is a normal human experience, especially during uncertain times. Understanding what happens in the brain and body when we feel pressured helps us respond to it rather than be overwhelmed by it. Knowledge itself is a calming tool.

James Pennebaker's research shows that expressive writing about exam worries for 10 minutes before an exam significantly improves performance. This is one of many evidence-based strategies students can use immediately.

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. Begin: "Be honest — how many people feel anxious about exams?" Normalise completely and warmly.
2. Explain the neuroscience: anxiety activates the threat response, reducing access to the prefrontal cortex (needed for exams).
3. Distinction: some exam anxiety is helpful (motivates preparation) — it becomes a problem when it impairs performance.
4. Introduce four evidence-based strategies: expressive writing (Pennebaker), controlled breathing, positive reappraisal, preparation behaviour.
5. Expressive writing exercise: students write about their exam worries freely for 5 minutes — this "offloads" them from working memory.
6. Students create a personal pre-exam regulation plan.
7. Discuss: when does exam anxiety require additional support? Signpost to school counsellor and Psychology Flows.

Discussion Prompts

- What does pressure feel like in your body? What is the earliest sign it is building?
- What is the difference between helpful pressure and unhelpful pressure?
- How do we know when a feeling is telling us something useful versus when it is unhelpful?
- What would you say to a friend who felt completely overwhelmed right now?

Differentiation

■ Support

Focus on two practical strategies with step-by-step guidance.

■ Core

Create a full pre-exam regulation plan independently.

■ Extend

Research the evidence base for expressive writing as an anxiety intervention.

■ Recommended Mindfulness & Meditation Resources

Headspace (Teens)

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

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Cognitive Reframing

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Learning Objective: Students can identify unhelpful thinking patterns and apply cognitive reframing to generate more balanced perspectives.

Year Group	Age Range	Duration	Resources Needed
KS4	Years 10–11 Ages 14–16	40–45 minutes	Cognitive reframing worksheet, thinking error cards

Overview

Cognitive distortions — systematic patterns of inaccurate thinking — are common under stress and anxiety. They include catastrophising, black-and-white thinking, mind-reading and personalisation. These are not signs of weakness but automatic patterns anyone can fall into.

Cognitive reframing, drawn from CBT, involves identifying distorted thoughts and replacing them with more balanced, evidence-based alternatives. It is one of the most extensively researched psychological techniques.

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. Begin: "Have you ever catastrophised — assumed something would be much worse than it was? What happened?"
2. Introduce four cognitive distortions: catastrophising, black-and-white thinking, mind-reading, personalisation.
3. Key message: these are not signs of weakness — everyone's brain does this, especially under stress.
4. Teach the ABC model: A (Activating event), B (Belief or thought), C (Consequence — feeling or behaviour).
5. Students identify a current worry and analyse it using the ABC model.
6. Apply reframing: what is the most balanced, realistic thought they could hold instead?
7. Important: reframing is not denial or toxic positivity — it is finding the most accurate, balanced view.

Discussion Prompts

- Is reframing the same as telling yourself everything is fine? How is it different?
- Which cognitive distortion do you notice most in yourself?
- What is the relationship between our thoughts, feelings and behaviour?
- How might cognitive reframing help with exam anxiety specifically?

Differentiation

■ Support

Provide worked examples before applying independently.

■ Core

Apply the ABC model to two personal examples and generate balanced reframes.

■ Extend

Research CBT as a treatment for anxiety and evaluate its effectiveness for adolescents.

■ 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)

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Building Emotional Resilience

Psychology Flows Lesson Plan | KS4 | Years 10–11 | Ages 14–16 | psychologyflows.com
Psychology Flows • Dr Kayleigh Sumner, Educational Psychologist (Doctorate in Education and Child Psychology) • psychologyflows.com/resources

Learning Objective: Students can define psychological resilience, map their personal resilience resources and create a resilience plan.

Year Group	Age Range	Duration	Resources Needed
KS4	Years 10–11 Ages 14–16	45 minutes	Resilience framework worksheet, VIA character strengths list

Overview

Resilience is not a fixed trait or the absence of vulnerability — it is a dynamic process of adaptation that can be built at any age. Research by Ann Masten describes resilience as "ordinary magic" — it emerges from ordinary human strengths and connections.

The 4S resilience model (Supports, Strategies, Sagacity, Solutions) gives students a practical framework for mapping and developing their personal resilience resources.

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. Begin: "Think of the hardest thing you have ever got through. What — or who — helped you?"
2. Define resilience: not invulnerability, but the capacity to adapt and recover. It is built, not born.
3. Introduce the 4S model: Supports (people who help), Strategies (what you do), Sagacity (wisdom you hold onto), Solutions (actions you take).
4. Students map their personal resilience resources under each S.
5. Identify the weakest area and brainstorm with a partner how to strengthen it.
6. Create a personal resilience plan specifically relevant to the current context.
7. Discuss: "Can resilience be built during a crisis? Or only before one?" (Answer: during and after — post-traumatic growth is real.)

Discussion Prompts

- Is resilience about bouncing back to where you were, or can it mean bouncing forward?
- What is the role of social connection in resilience?
- Can resilience be built during a crisis, or only before one?
- What is one thing you will add to your resilience toolkit this week?

Differentiation

■ Support

Focus on the Supports category only — identify three supportive people.

■ Core

Complete the full 4S model and identify one area to develop.

■ Extend

Write a research-informed essay: "What builds psychological resilience in adolescents?"

■ Recommended Mindfulness & Meditation Resources

Headspace (Teens)

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Looking After Yourself Right Now

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Psychology Flows • Dr Kayleigh Sumner, Educational Psychologist (Doctorate in Education and Child Psychology) • psychologyflows.com/resources

Learning Objective: Students can assess their current wellbeing across key domains and identify one meaningful change to support themselves.

Year Group	Age Range	Duration	Resources Needed
KS4	Years 10–11 Ages 14–16	40 minutes	Wellbeing audit worksheet, weekly planner template

Overview

During difficult periods, looking after ourselves is not a luxury — it is a necessity. Sleep, movement, connection and rest all directly affect how we feel, how we cope and how much capacity we have for everything life asks of us.

This lesson gives students a framework for honestly assessing how they are doing and making small, realistic changes that genuinely help.

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. Conduct a wellbeing audit: students rate eight areas out of 10 — sleep, nutrition, movement, social connection, study time, relaxation, sense of purpose, self-compassion.
2. Discuss: which area has the lowest score? What impact might that be having on the others?
3. Introduce the evidence for each area as an academic performance factor — keep it concrete and specific.
4. Address the guilt of resting: rest is not doing nothing — it is how we recover and rebuild capacity.
5. Students design a weekly plan protecting at least one hour per day for their lowest-scoring area.
6. Create a two-week wellbeing commitment — specific, measurable and realistic.
7. Discuss: how will you know in two weeks whether your plan is working?

Discussion Prompts

- What does looking after yourself actually look like this week?
- What makes it hard to prioritise rest when you feel behind?
- If someone you cared about had your current wellbeing score, what would you advise them to do?
- What is one small change that would make the biggest difference to your wellbeing this week?

Differentiation

■ Support

Use a four-area audit rather than eight.

■ Core

Complete the full audit and create a realistic two-week plan.

■ Extend

Design a personal two-week wellbeing plan and reflect on what they noticed.

■ Recommended Mindfulness & Meditation Resources

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Hope & Future-Focused Thinking

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Learning Objective: Students can apply Snyder's Hope Theory to a personal goal and identify pathways and agency for achieving it.

Year Group	Age Range	Duration	Resources Needed
KS4	Years 10–11 Ages 14–16	40 minutes	Psychology Flows Hope Bubbles sheet, future-mapping worksheet

Overview

Snyder's Hope Theory (1994) defines hope not as a feeling but as a cognitive process: having clear goals, identifying pathways to reach them (pathways thinking) and believing you have the capacity to use those pathways (agency thinking). All three components can be developed.

For Year 10–11 students navigating disruption and uncertainty, maintaining a future-focused perspective is a genuine psychological protective factor. Hope does not deny present difficulty — it holds difficulty and possibility simultaneously.

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. Begin: "Think about where you want to be in five years. How does thinking about that feel right now?"
2. Introduce Snyder's Hope Theory: goals + pathways + agency = hope.
3. Key distinction: hope is not optimism (a disposition) — it is a cognitive skill with three components that can all be practised.
4. Students complete their Hope Bubbles and then apply the full Hope Theory model to one specific goal.
5. Identify pathways: "What are three different routes to this goal?"
6. Identify agency: "What do you already have that will help you get there?"
7. Address hopelessness directly and compassionately: "It is completely understandable if hope feels difficult right now. This is exactly what this lesson is for."
8. Identify one concrete action to take this week towards a stated hope.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between hope and optimism?
- Can hope and grief or sadness coexist? What does that look like?
- What does hope look like when circumstances are genuinely very difficult?
- What is one specific thing you will do this week towards a hope?

Differentiation

■ Support

Complete Hope Bubbles with three prompts and one action step.

■ Core

Apply Snyder's full model to one personal goal.

■ Extend

Critically evaluate hope theory and compare it with other positive psychology approaches.

■ Recommended Mindfulness & Meditation Resources

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