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BodyMIND *Solutions*

THE SCIENCE AND STEPS TO EASE ANXIETY AND
DEPRESSION ACROSS YOUR SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Teacher Ebook





About

Bronte Spicer is a teacher, author and mother of three, teaching teachers and parents the science and steps to ease anxiety and depression in children.

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Overview

To help students engage in learning and in life, they need to develop their capacity to be physically aware, connected with and feel their emotions in their bodies. Traditional approaches to teaching about emotions is cognitive-based, focused on emotional literacy, yet the mind and body are inextricably linked. True emotional connection is a sensory and somatic experience. While emotional literacy is an important mental process to make sense of our daily experiences and connect with others, interoception is a vital body-based skill that is essential for personal safety, self-connection, deeper and more authentic relationships, increased resilience, improved mental health and better emotional wellbeing across the lifespan. Interoception strategies in the classroom, practised daily, offers a holistic approach to increase attention span, self regulation and healthy social skills in students from an early age.

Goals

- To give teachers trauma-informed and evidence-based information and practical strategies for explicit instruction to improve interoception in students for better classroom engagement, wellbeing and lifelong mental health.



What is interoception?

Interoception can be simply described as 'feeling your feelings.' It is "the capacity to be aware, to notice, recognise, identify and respond to the internal states of your body. It is known as the eighth sense. Interoception skills are needed for functions such as knowing when to go to the toilet, being aware that you are becoming angry or upset and being able to manage your emotions proactively." (Dep. Ed SA, 2021) The changing states of your body might be subtle, intense or somewhere in between, depending on your individual needs at any given moment.

Why is interoception so vital for our students?

Currently, one in seven young people aged 4 to 17 years experience a mental health condition in any given year. When students are explicitly instructed how to develop interoception, they can learn how to befriend their emotions, disentangle themselves from negative thoughts and feel positive towards their learning and their lives. Scaffolding for children to befriend their feelings can help them feel safe when experiencing intense emotions and can help them reach out for help when they need it. Interoception helps to process overwhelming emotions from challenging experiences, be resilient and resolve issues for the future.

Isn't emotional literacy enough?

New research shows why talking about our feelings and talking through a problem to find a solution isn't always enough for both adults and children. There are strong benefits to learning how to feel our feelings in our bodies, especially after experiencing varying levels of trauma. Our students need to think and feel to develop natural resilience.

How can interoception help with relationships and attention?

Interoception is a pre-requisite skill for self-regulation. "Children and young people will struggle with social interactions if they have not developed interoception skills. Even just being around others may be difficult for them to manage. Children and young people with well-developed interoception are able to use both logic and emotions to respond to their environment. Those without tend to rely on logic and have to carefully think through their possible responses to each situation. Thinking through each situation long term can be tiring and contribute to overload, shutdown, meltdowns, anxiety and depression" (Dep. Ed SA, 2021).





What is trauma and how does it impact interoception?

While we typically think of trauma as a catastrophic event like a car crash, rape or war, everyone experiences varying levels of trauma. For example, a little Prep student might have a big Grade Six student say something hurtful to them. This might leave the Preppie feeling like their whole world has fallen apart and their sense of safety at school shattered.

Trauma and Childhood Development expert, Dr Dan Siegel describes trauma as an experience that overwhelms our capacity to cope. During a traumatic experience, our nervous systems are overloaded with so much information and energy that the brain cannot make sense of what is occurring. When we experience trauma, our hippocampus goes offline and emotional memory, often called 'emotional baggage', remains unprocessed and stored in the body.

During a distressing experience, we feel under threat. Without processing the emotions from the traumatic experience with interoception, the body's nervous system can remain bound in a hypervigilant or shutdown state of survival well after the experience has ended. This can lead to anxiety and depression.



What does modern neuroscience tell us about trauma and interoception?

If a child has an experience where they do not fight or flight, they might feel helpless and will freeze, disconnect, withdraw, people-please or behave submissively. Over time, with developmental trauma, or lots of little traumas, the nervous system can adapt to stay in this state of low-energy, lethargy and disconnection from themselves, others and the world around them. Students who are disconnected in this way tend to need more support to develop interoception.

When the freeze/please response is activated over a prolonged period of time, this can lead to dissociation and depression. Dissociation is a mental process where a person disconnects from their thoughts, feelings, memories or sense of identity. When someone is dissociated, their thoughts can become overwhelming and the thought of connecting with their feelings can be too intense. Interoception strategies can help your students feel safe to reconnect with the physical sensations in their bodies to process both past and present emotions and re-engage with life.



How will my students feel and behave with interoception?

Knowing how to feel their feelings can help your students increase their attention span, confidence, social skills, resourcefulness and resilience. Developing interoceptive awareness helps your students read, express and meet their own needs. A strong connection with the feelings in their bodies can help them manage overwhelming thoughts and be ready to learn. Your students may demonstrate resistance to feeling their emotions and there are strategies available to help with that.

What *is* an emotion?

An emotion is a physical feeling or sensation in the body. Emotions are felt in the body and in a wide variety of ways. We might feel sadness as heaviness in the chest, anxiety as a tightness in the stomach, shame as heat through the face, or excitement as buzzing in the arms. Without the labels for emotions like happy, sad, angry or excited, emotions are simply physical feelings or sensations in the body.



Are emotions the same for everyone?

We all feel different emotions in different ways on different days. There is no right or fixed way to feel an emotion in the body. Many educational resources point towards the heart as the part of the body that holds all of our emotions but when we have developed interoception, we become aware that all types of emotions can be felt in all parts of the body. We can also feel the same type of emotion in different areas of the body with varying levels of intensity on different days. For example, one day intense anger might be felt in the abdomen and the next day subtle anger might be felt in the hands or vice versa.

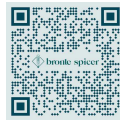
How can I best discuss emotions in the classroom?

- Feelings are things you can feel in your body
- No feelings are bad
- Feelings are like visitors; they come and go
- Feelings that stay have a special message or job to help you
- Everyone has lots of different feelings
- You might feel multiple feelings at once
- It's safe to be friends with *all* of your feelings
- Your body is like a house and your feelings are your friendly visitors
- Sometimes we need extra tools to feel safe with our feelings







How can I model interoception?

Build your own interoceptive awareness with a short daily practice by putting your attention on the subtle, or not so subtle physical sensations in your body. Use this QR code for an audio guide:



And use the techniques included to feel and process your own emotions. In the classroom, show your students how to make friends with your feelings. Model to your students how you feel your feelings with phrases like 'I am feeling frustrated. I can feel heat rising through my cheeks and chest', 'I'm going to breathe in the heat and breathe out with the space around the heat' and 'I can feel the heat disappearing now', or 'I can feel nervous in my stomach', 'I'm just going to pat the nerves in my belly to tell them they are welcome to stay as long as they like'.

What are the four steps to feel our feelings?

-  **Return to calm**
-  **Find the feeling**
-  **Stay with the feeling**
-  **Support the feeling**

Step One: Return to Calm

Nervous system regulation, simple breathing and soothing strategies can help your students return to a state of rest and be ready to feel their feelings. Most importantly, invite your students to notice how they feel before *and* after each exercise. You can ask them firstly, how they feel in general and secondly, how they feel in a particular part of the body, like their chest, arms, feet or neck. This strengthens their interoceptive awareness.

NERVOUS SYSTEM REGULATION STRATEGIES

Stretch, squeeze, release

Breathe in as you open your chest, put your fist hands and arms back, try to touch your shoulder blades together, hold with tension, then breathe out as you release and 'melt'.

Rosenberg's Vagus Nerve Activation Exercise

Cradle the back of your head with your hands, look at a point to the right for 30 seconds, then look at a point to the left for 30 seconds.

Gradually Slowing

Rub your hands vigorously, then gradually slow them down.

Notice and Name

Look around the classroom. Whisper the names of the objects/people you see.

Framing Space

Put your hands up in front of you to frame the space in front of your face. Put your eyes on the space to the left of your frame, in the middle of your frame and to the right of your frame.

Pat Your Body

Pat your body with gentle and soothing pats. Say to yourself, 'I'm here with you. I love you. You're safe.'

Step One: Return to Calm (continued)



SIMPLE BREATHING STRATEGIES

Rainbow Breathing

Breathe in as you raise your hands from by your sides to above your head.
Breathe out as you bring your hands from above your head around to down by your sides.

Straw Breathing

*Breathe in, hold your breath for a moment, position your fingers as if you were holding a straw to your mouth. Then breathe out through the imaginary straw for six counts.

Belly Breathing

*Put your hand on your belly as you breathe. Notice how your belly pushes your hand out and in.

Shoulder Breathing

*Lift your shoulders towards your ears as you breathe in, drop your shoulders as you exhale and sigh.

Butterfly Breathing

*Imagine there is a butterfly sitting on the end of your nose. See what colour yours is! Breathe gently in and out through your nostrils so you don't blow it away.

SOOTHING STRATEGIES

1. Pat or hold a soft toy or pet
2. Play in a safe cave or quiet corner
3. Wrap your arms around you and give yourself a hug.
Notice how it feels in your body
4. Smile, lift your chin up and lengthen your spine
5. Rock or sway from side to side in a rhythmical motion

Step Two: Find the Feeling

WHOLE CLASS STRATEGIES

These can take less than 30 seconds and are great ways to help your students refocus.

Wake Up Your Body

Gently slap your hands all over your body like you are waking up the body. Then stand silently and notice where you can feel the *slaps* in your body.

Hand Rub

Vigorously rub your hands together like you are trying to keep warm. When I say 'freeze', freeze your hands in the air. Notice and describe the feeling in your hands.

Bee Breath

Put your pointer fingers in your ears, take a deep breath and say 'bzzz' like a bee for as long as you can. Then notice where you can feel the buzzing in your body.

Sound Bath

Play a tibetan or crystal singing bowl and notice where you can feel the vibration from the sound in your body.

ONE-ON-ONE STRATEGY

Ask your student how they are feeling (eg. after receiving an award, completing an activity, falling over)

Step Three: Stay with the Feeling

The best place to start for students to learn to feel their emotions is with those emotions that feel safe like feeling happy, proud and excited. As children get older, they can learn how to feel safe feeling more challenging emotions like sadness, frustration and anger.

WHOLE GROUP STRATEGY

When using whole group strategies, take 30 seconds to model how you stay with the feelings or emotion you have in your body. Verbally describe the feeling to your children as you feel. Use this list to guide your description: where the feeling is, the size of it, the shape of it, the colour of it, the expression of it (moving or staying), the texture of it.

MODELLED ONE-ON-ONE STRATEGY

Model to your whole class and guide one student to increase their duration of interoceptive awareness when experiencing an emotion.

- First establish the emotion. Ask your student 'how do you feel?'
- Then guide them to their body using the following questions:

Where is that (proud/frustrated) feeling in your body?

How does that feel in your body?

Does that feeling have a colour?

If you were to reach inside your body and touch it how would it feel in your fingertips?

How big is the feeling?

What shape is it?

Is it moving or staying?

Step Four: Support the Feeling

MODELLED ONE-ON-ONE STRATEGY

Use these questions to guide your student to feel safe with an intense feeling in their body.

BREATHE WITH THE FEELING

- Can you find where the feeling ends?
- Can you feel space around the feeling where there is no feeling?
- Can you breathe in the feeling and breathe out with the space around the feeling? Keep doing that and see what happens to the feeling.

STRIKE UP A CONVERSATION WITH THE FEELING

Ask your student to tell the feeling:

- Thank you for being here
- You're welcome to stay as long as you like
- I love you

If the feeling stays invite your student to ask their feeling:

- If it wants something
- If it needs something

Their feelings tend to represent themselves and their own needs. If the feeling needs a hug, encourage your student to 'hug' their feeling by holding the area of their body where the feeling is.

Explain that our bodies are very clever and that if feelings stay in our bodies, they either have a message or they are helping us in some way.

This helps them listen to their own needs and inner guidance system.

Prompt your student with:

- Does this feeling have something to say to you?
- Does it have a message for you?
- Does it have something to tell you?
- Is this feeling helping you in some way?
- Does it feel like this feeling is protecting you in some way?



Final Note

The most effective way for your students to develop a healthy connection with their emotions is to develop interoception with feelings they feel safe and comfortable with like excitement and happiness. Gradually, as they develop their capacity to befriend more challenging emotions like sadness, anxiety and anger they will be fully equipped to experience the full spectrum of emotions that inevitably come with life.

Often, their thoughts *about* their feelings can leave them resisting feeling their intense feelings. If your students are resistant to feeling their feelings, you can learn the strategies to help them manage this resistance in my professional learning and staff wellbeing.

When our students have the tools to feel safe with their ever-changing emotions in their bodies and know how to befriend their negative thoughts, their anxiety and depression can ease. They have the resources to process their internal world so they move out of protection and into healthy connection with themselves, others and the world around them.

If you have questions about any of these strategies and to learn the full set of science and steps to ease anxiety and depression across your whole school community, email Bronte Spicer at brontespicer@gmail.com or go to www.brontespicer.com

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