



20 CALMING & COPING TOOLS FOR EMOTIONAL REGULATION

20 CALMING AND COPING TOOLS WITH A QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE TO UNDERSTAND THE SCIENCE AND SENSORY BEHIND WHY THESE TOOLS WORK!

Included in this resource:

- One-page tools poster
- Individual tool cards for games/activities
- Tips for use
- Suggested activities to introduce & practice with students





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20 CALMING & COPING TOOLS



WHAT ARE CALMING & COPING TOOLS?

Calming and coping tools are strategies that we use to help our nervous system calm down and cope with stressful situations. We need tools for dealing with stress. Many of the tools on this list have both physiological components that help to calm the sensory and nervous system as well as cognitive components that act to quiet the mind. The goal of using a tool is to help us regulate our emotional responses so we do not automatically go into a stress response or "flight, fight, freeze" reaction when encountering moments of frustration – both real and imagined! Developing calming and coping strategies using practical and easy-to-implement tools is key to the development of emotional regulation.

TIPS:

Practice ahead of time. Using a tool "in the moment" of frustration or anger is too late. We need to practice these tools ahead of time (a little or a lot!) in order to begin to use the tools (more) automatically, so when a crisis hits, we have some choices.

Avoid the "One-size-fits-all" approach. Using calming and coping tools is very individual. Not all tools will work with all of us. Even when one tool was successful once does not mean it will work again, even if the circumstances are similar.

Prepare individual student tools sheets. Make copies of the tools handout and give to each student. Encourage students to circle or highlight tools they think would be useful for them.

Post the 20 Tools in your classroom's calming corner or break area. Students can reference the list to provide a visual cue to aid in calming themselves.

WAYS TO INTRODUCE AND PRACTICE THESE TOOLS WITH YOUR STUDENTS:

- 1) Introduce a "tool of the day." Set aside a specific time each day to explain, model, and then practice each tool. Start with the first tool on the list, or have a designated student choose the tool, or mix it up! Review the science and sensory information to help students understand why the tool is helpful.
- 2) Students take turns to model the tool. Students will model and then lead their classmates in practicing the tool. Encourage discussion as a group on when we might use each tool. Remember, not all tools work for all students and even a tool that worked one day in one situation may not work again the next time during a similar situation.
- 3) Teacher model. You as the teacher describe a situation and what tool you used to help calm your nervous system. Use examples of when using a specific tool might be helpful.
- 4) Play "tools charades." Copy, cut and place the tools cards in a container. Take turns and have students pantomime a tool. See if other students can guess the tool. Continue the discussion with why (or why not) this tool would work and when.
- 5) Describe the tool game. Students take turns describing the tool verbally without using words in the tool's name, rhyming words or gestures.

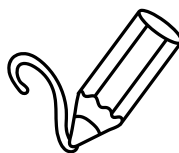
20 CALMING & COPING TOOLS



breathe deep



drink water



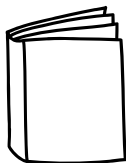
write or journal



draw



use a fidget



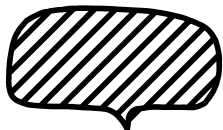
read a book



take a walk



take a break



talk with
an adult



count to 5



use positive self
talk



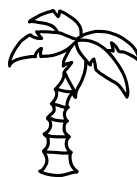
stretch high and
low



listen to music



lift heavy item



think of a
calm place



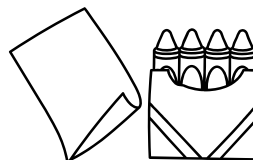
eat a snack



blow out 5
"finger" candles



give yourself hand
squeezes

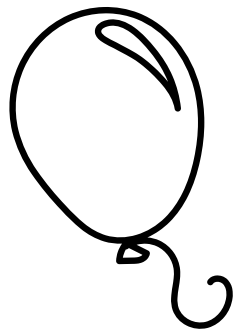


doodle or color



smell vanilla or
lavender

breathe
deep



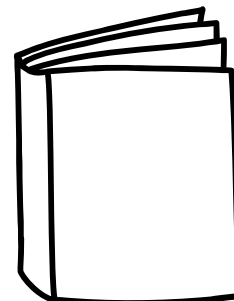
drink
water



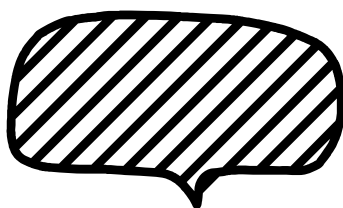
use a
fidget



read a
book



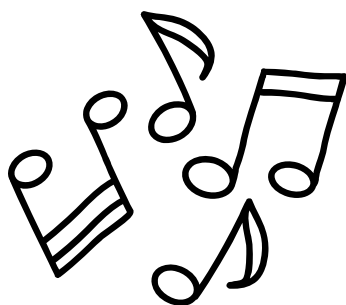
talk
with
an adult



count to
5



listen to
music



lift
heavy
item



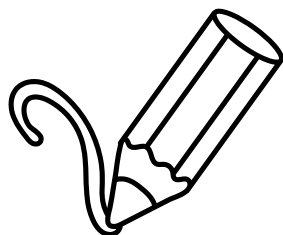
blow
out 5
"finger"
candle



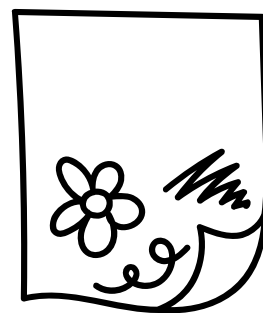
give
yourself
hand hugs



write or
journal



draw



take a
walk



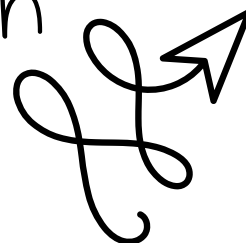
take a
break



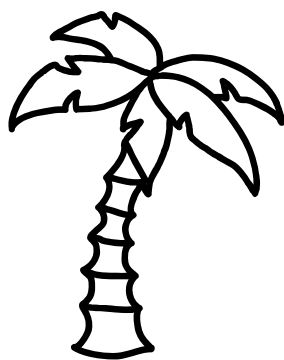
use positive
self talk



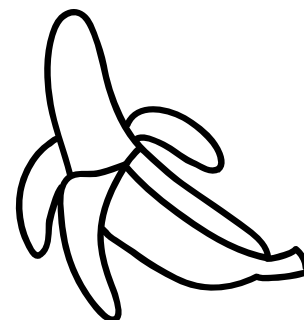
stretch high
and low



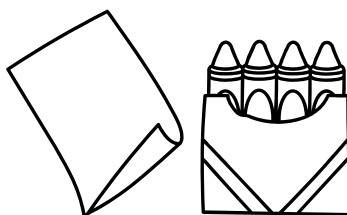
think
of calm
place



eat a
snack



doodle or
color



smell
vanilla
or lavender



20 CALMING & COPING TOOLS



A QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING THE SCIENCE AND SENSORY BEHIND WHY THESE TOOLS WORK

BREATHE DEEP

Focusing on our breath when we are upset, nervous, or stressed is one of the quickest ways to activate our body's natural relaxation response. When we are in a stressful situation, we tend to breathe quickly, in our chest which revs up the nervous system. Slowing down our breathing assists the body by decreasing heart rate and improving focus. Have students think about their belly like it is a balloon. Tell them to breathe in deep to fill the balloon and breathe out to deflate it. Repeat this simple process 5 times and notice the effects.

DRINK WATER

Drinking water boosts energy and delivers important nutrients to our cells, especially muscle cells, postponing muscle fatigue. Not getting enough water or dehydration has been shown to decrease thinking skills. Water also helps us feel full longer and helps with digestion.

WRITE OR JOURNAL

Writing or journaling on paper or digitally is a powerful way for older students to get their feelings down into words. This can have a big impact on mood. For younger students, encourage them to just give their feelings a name. When students become overwhelmed, they often struggle with understanding their feelings. Give students a notebook and allow them to write about how they are feeling.

DRAW

Drawing is a creative outlet that provides a relief from anxiety and stress. Drawing allows the brain to focus on a picture which is a good mindfulness activity.

USE A FIDGET

Fidgeting with our hands is a natural and very normal way to release excess energy. A fidget tool is one sensory strategy used to help students achieve self-regulation. The theory behind using these tools is that it provides sensory experiences to increase attention, participation, and performance. Fidget tool recommendations are always given with the stipulation that the student must understand that it needs to be used appropriately. Review appropriate uses for the tool with the student (i.e. keeping the fidget in the hands, under the desk in the lap, etc.), inappropriate uses for the fidget (i.e. throwing the fidget, rolling the fidget, giving the fidget to a friend), and the consequences for inappropriate use of the fidget (i.e. having the fidget taken away). Laying out clear guidelines for use helps students know the expectations and follow the rules. Good fidgets have the following qualities: silent, small, tactile, safe, cheap, and teacher-approved (most important!)

READ A BOOK

Reading helps with stress reduction by lowering our heart rate and helping us to relax. In addition, reading helps build empathy, a trait that allows us to understand and communicate the feelings of other people. Recognizing others' feelings also allows us to change the way we see ourselves. It can cause us to see our own experiences from a new perspective.

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TAKE A WALK

Taking a short walk helps to reset our brains. Fresh air and movement is soothing. Walking has a natural rhythm which is calming. Walking with students may provide opportunities for them to open up about what is on their mind. Or, have them run an "errand" to the office, etc. which provides a designated route (with a change of scenery) and a movement break.

TAKE A BREAK

Creating a small separate area within the classroom designated as a safe or break or calming area helps students who tend to become over stimulated. These sensory areas are designed to give students some privacy, safety, and an opportunity to self-regulate their brains and bodies. They enable tired, overwhelmed or stressed students to take a few minutes away from busy classmates and environmental challenges. These safe areas should never be used as a punishment or a time-out space and should, preferably, be used before the student has a meltdown. This area can be quite small and adjusted according to your classroom management style, grade level, and room arrangement.

TALK WITH AN ADULT

Talking with adults allows students to verbalize feelings and gives them a "voice" about what is bothering them. As the adult, talking with students allows us to have some insight, while also allowing the student to process for themselves. As the adult, try and resist the tendency to "fix" the problem. Students may just need you to listen and ask appropriate questions, not necessarily offer advice.

COUNT to 5

Counting is automatic and rhythmic. Have your students count to five – cue them to close their eyes if they feel comfortable. Use your fingers as cues and instruct your students to use their own fingers. This type of 5-second meditation allows the brain a chance to reset itself and be able to look at things differently. It also gives students a chance to think before they act, which is often quite helpful!

USE POSITIVE SELF TALK

Creating a short and positively worded phrase or "mantra" helps students when feeling upset or overwhelmed. Encourage students to create one for themselves. Examples might include: "I am calm" or "I am relaxed" or "I've got this" or "I can do hard things" work well but get imaginative and make it something personal.

STRETCH HIGH AND LOW

Stretching stimulates the muscles and joints and is calming and organizing for the nervous system. Students need and benefit from proprioceptive input. Stretching impacts the serotonin (called the "master modulator") levels in our brain and helps to regulate our level of alertness and gives us a feeling that "all is right with the world."

LISTEN TO MUSIC

Listening to music has a significant effect on feelings, stress, and anxiety. Using a variety of musical styles influences our mood and sets the tone in the classroom. Experiment with different music styles at different times of the day. If your students are silly and dysregulated after returning from recess, for example, try music with a steady slow beat. If your students have low energy, try music with a faster tempo.



LIFT HEAVY ITEM

Doing "heavy work" (such as exercise) or activity done against resistance stimulates the proprioceptive system (body awareness) which impacts the serotonin levels in our brain. Serotonin helps to regulate our level of alertness and gives us a feeling that "all is right with the world." Heavy work involves pushing, pulling, lifting, and/or carrying something heavy. Heavy work ideas include squishing/squeezing play dough or stress ball, pulling against resistance bands, pushing/moving chairs or desks, climbing stairs, holding a heavy door open, and carrying books.

THINK OF A CALM PLACE

Visualizing a comforting and calming place can reduce stress levels. Have students practice picturing a calm, serene spot. Gradually direct students to start to build an image of how it looks, smells, and feels to be in this calming place.

EAT A SNACK

Chewing provides calming proprioceptive oral sensory input and is a great tool for soothing our nervous system. Crunchy snacks tend to be more alerting while chewy snacks are more calming. Many students benefit from using chewy pendants, bracelets, or other items to provide this calming input. Other great calming oral sensory activities include sucking against resistance (e.g. sucking a thick smoothie through a straw) and blowing (e.g. blowing a feather, bubbles).

BLOW OUT 5 "FINGER" CANDLES

Exhaling slowly taps into the parasympathetic nervous system causing us to feel more relaxed and calmer. Teach students that each finger of their hand is a candle. Blow out each finger "candle" slowly for each breathe.

GIVE YOURSELF HAND SQUEEZES

Performing firm hand holding, pushing, pulling, hugging, and squeezing provide deep pressure touch and refers to tactile sensory input. Deep pressure touch acts as calming or focusing by activating the parasympathetic nervous system, causing our nervous system to "rest and digest."

DOODLE OR COLOR

Doodling or coloring provides us something to focus on and is a great mindfulness activity that reduces anxiety. Coloring or doodling can be set up in a very simple way with a small notepad and a special pencil or colored pencils to use when needed.

SMELL VANILLA OR LAVENDER

Calming scents such as vanilla or lavender have a soothing effect on our nervous system, whereas peppermint and citrus have an alerting effect.



ABOUT POSITIVELY MOXIE

Molly (a junior high school counselor and former elementary school teacher) and Jill (a school-based occupational therapist) have teamed up to empower teachers, counselors, therapists, and parents who want to teach young people the skills needed to better coach their brains for greater well-being and resilience.

We are influenced by the science of positive psychology, counseling techniques, self-regulation, cognitive behavioral therapy, sensory processing, executive functioning, and brain science! We understand our students and youth need as many “tools” in their toolbox as we can give them.

Molly and Jill are passionate about creating relevant, high quality, and actionable resources to address well-being and resilience skills for students!



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