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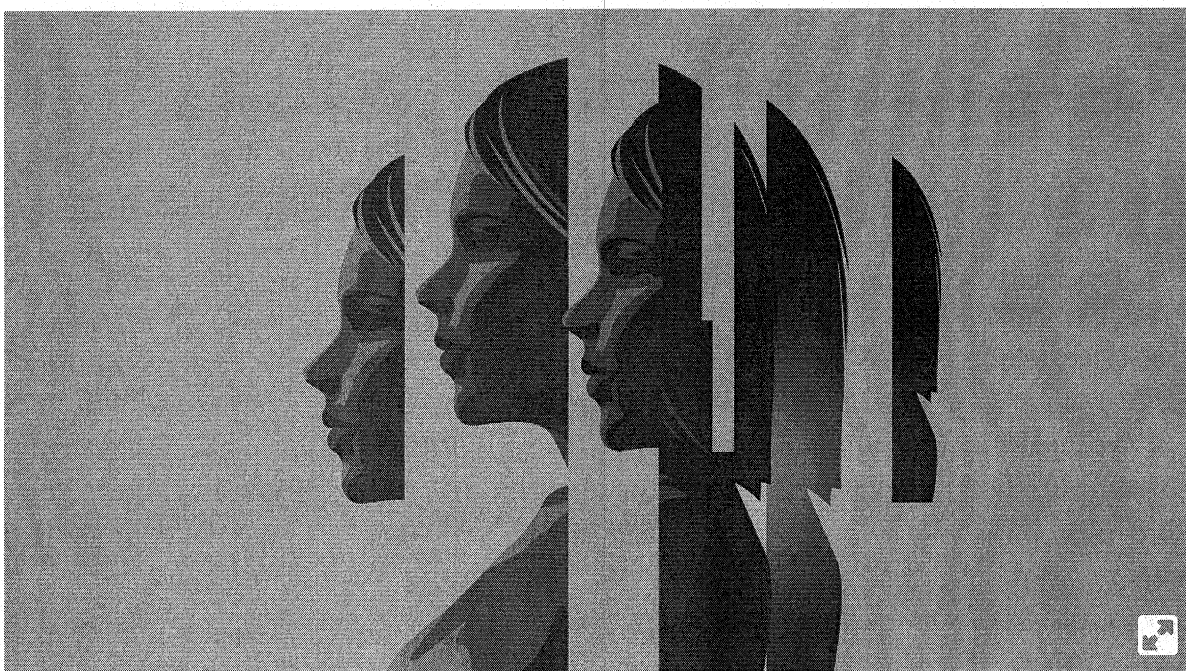
SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

A De-escalation Exercise for Upset Students

A simple technique that takes just a few minutes can help an agitated student regain the state of mind needed for learning.

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So often we find students in a stressed or anxious state of mind. The most telltale signs are inappropriate behaviors or outbursts, negative comments, and anxiety-ridden movements such as fidgeting, leg shaking, and fist clenching. These signals should raise immediate concern and indicate to educators that a response may be needed. The goal is to guide the student to a *self-regulated mindset* ([/article/how-teach-self-regulation](#)), but how does a teacher do that?

First let's review what is going on with a student in the middle of an outburst. Cortisol, which is responsible for keeping people alive in the face of danger, is being released. Often referred to as the stress hormone, cortisol plays a crucial role in our ability to protect ourselves. When we experience stressful situations, the release of cortisol helps us respond rapidly, but it comes with a cost, as it negatively affects the brain's ability to function at an optimal level.

Think of it like this: You're in the ocean on a surfboard waiting for the perfect wave. A short distance away, you see a shark fin pop out of the water, heading your way. Immediately two chemicals—*cortisol* and *adrenaline* (<https://healthfully.com/adrenaline-cortisol-4594433.html>)—are released and you enter the *fight, flight, or freeze response* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJhcn7Q0-LU>): You can fight the shark, flee by paddling as fast as you can, or freeze and hope the shark loses interest in you. Whatever your response, you find yourself in a moment of stress, anxiety, uncertainty, and fear due to heightened cortisol levels.

Now let's consider how this might look in a learning environment. At the end of a class, two students learn that they have received a poor grade on a science test. This is not a life-or-death situation like the approaching shark, but the physiological response is the same. The students' *cortisol levels* (https://www.cogneurosociety.org/cortisol_memory/) are high and they are anxious, a state of mind that doesn't support clear, conscious thinking. Upon entering their English class, the two students are visibly upset. One heads straight for their seat and begins to cry, while the other throws their book bag on the floor and punches the desk. For the teacher, recognizing these signs before beginning class is important.

THE STRESS RESPONSE AND THE BRAIN

The young brain can be confusing, complex, and often misunderstood, not only from the perspective of adults but more importantly from that of the students themselves. In order for students to understand how their brain functions, it's important to teach them about *a few parts of the brain and their functions* (<https://momentousinstitute.org/blog/brain-basics>). To keep it simple, teach them about the amygdala, prefrontal cortex, and hippocampus.

The amygdala directs rapid responses when necessary—the fight, flight, or freeze response. When the amygdala detects a threat, it responds faster than the prefrontal cortex, which directs the ability to make decisions and problem-solve, and the hippocampus, which is responsible for remembering details and storing memories. The two areas of the brain most needed for academic work are thus bypassed. As a result, an anxious, stressed, or fearful state of mind can lead to poor decision-making, inability to think with clarity, and impulsive behaviors.

Learning how to calm ourselves is imperative for our well-being, and the following technique, which is designed to decrease negative impulses and emotions, can be shared with students. The goal is to lead them to more regulated thinking and learning.

A DE-ESCALATION TECHNIQUE

Let's go back to the two upset students in their English class. They aren't ready to work, but the teacher can help by taking a few minutes to guide them back to a state of calm.

This process should take anywhere from four to six minutes and be centered on the student. I've provided a sample of what a teacher might say at each stage, but you should modify those statements so they feel

natural to you.

If you have a paraprofessional or in-class support teacher, you can ask a student who seems upset to step out into the hallway or into *an area of the classroom set aside for de-escalation*

(/video/creating-dedicated-space-reflection). Or you can do this as a whole-class starter activity for anyone who might have something worrisome on their minds. Students can either choose this de-escalation technique—thinking over their answers instead of sharing them out loud—or engage in a warm-up activity connected to the class such as completing a journal entry or worksheet.

Give the student time to regain their calm: Say, “I notice you’re really upset. Let’s work together on breathing slowly for one minute in order to manage your impulses.”

Direct the student to be aware of their thoughts and feelings: Say, “What’s going on in your brain and body right now? Tell me how you feel and what you’re thinking, and if you’re ready to focus on moving forward with getting calm.”

Have the student redirect their thoughts: Say, “Take a minute, close your eyes, breathe slowly, and think about something that makes you happy. I know you told me how much you love your grandma’s fresh-baked cookies. Think about walking into grandma’s house in a calm state of mind as you smell the cookies, taste the cookies, and feel the warmth of them right out of the oven.”

Give the student positive feedback on becoming calm: Say, “Now open your eyes. How are you feeling? If you need more time to settle down, let me know. You should feel happy and excited about your work in getting to this point.”

Give the student a little more time to refocus: Say, “Take a minute and do something for you. Go for a walk and get some air, or tell me about your baseball game the other night.”

Have the student reflect for the future: Say, “The next time you’re feeling this way and I’m not with you, what can you tell yourself in order to take charge of your thinking and behavior, and get yourself to a regulated place?”

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