Teaching guidance for the Rollercoaster Series

Using the Rollercoaster resource

We all face difficult events and situations at various times in our lives.

It is important for children to know that facing difficult situations, and the strong emotions which they can elicit, are all part of being human. How we cope with these events often depends on our mental health and the coping strategies we have learned. By talking and learning about mental health, what can affect it, and healthy ways of managing mental health challenges, children will be able to recognise their mental health needs and know what to do to when it needs some attention.

This is summarised by Professor Katherine Weare in What Works in Promoting Social and Emotional Well-being and Responding to Mental Health Problems in Schools? where she notes the importance of developing

a culture in which talking about emotions and feelings, mental health and well-being is the norm, where it is acceptable to acknowledge difficulties and ask for help ...


The Rollercoaster Series takes a challenging or significant life event as the focus for each story, to help children understand and normalise the range of emotions they may experience, and how to recognise and manage ‘big’ and ‘difficult’ emotions. Taking situations that are familiar to all children, but using fictional characters to create some emotional distance, not only normalises the emotional responses but also supports the safe exploration of coping strategies and problem solving. This approach is recommended by the Personal, Social, Health and Economic Association:

Self-reflection is important when learning about mental health and emotional wellbeing. Therefore these topics are best explored in contexts which are relevant to pupils’ lives ... we would recommend using fictional scenarios which pupils may be able to identify with but which are clearly distanced from them as individuals.


Significant life events for children are varied but can include:

• transition to a new school
• family disruption, including parental difficulties and separation
• moving house
• the arrival of a new baby
• loss and bereavement
• friendship difficulties
• long-term illness.
Many children will navigate their way through such life events without any long-term effects. Indeed, some children will learn from the experience and develop skills and resources to deal with future challenging situations too. These children can be called ‘resilient’. This does not mean that they will sail through these events without experiencing any difficult emotions; rather, they will learn to recognise and manage these difficult emotions, and develop problem-solving skills and coping strategies to manage future challenging situations.

However, some children will be particularly vulnerable. They might not have had the opportunities or support to draw on sources of resilience to manage difficult events and situations. These children may have additional challenges, or be facing several difficult life events at the same time.

By encouraging children to notice, name and manage their emotions, we can support them to:
- make links between their thoughts, feelings and behaviour
- identify some of the unhelpful thinking habits that may underpin big and ‘difficult’ emotions
- explore healthy coping strategies to navigate through challenges and adversity.

In this way, we can help prevent mental health problems escalating.

**What is mental health and why is it important?**

Mental health is defined as:

>a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community ...


Mental health is as important as physical health. But just as an absence of serious physical illness does not necessarily mean we are in physical good shape, neither does an absence of mental illness mean we have positive mental health.

Positive mental health in childhood includes:
- being able to empathise and develop relationships with other people
- having a sense of right and wrong
- ‘being comfortable in our own skin’
- realising our potential.
It also includes being able to work through problems and learn from them.

The ability to work through challenges, to adapt, solve problems and adopt healthy coping strategies is an important aspect of our mental health. Sometimes this is called ‘resilience’.

Resilience is one aspect of our mental health and it includes being able to draw on a range of resources to navigate through difficult situations, to learn from them and to thrive. In order to develop resilience, children need to be able to draw on sources of resilience, including the following.

- **External supports** which include people around them, such as family, teachers and friends, who children can trust and turn to in times of need. It also includes access to basic environmental supports such as food, warmth, good housing and schools, where they can feel a sense of belonging and connectedness. When children have access to a range of external supports, they can then develop their internal sources of resilience.

- **Internal supports** which include developing feelings of self-worth and efficacy. For example, the internal belief that they are worthy and loved, and that what they say and do can make a difference. This gives children hope that they can help make change happen – a crucial belief in working through challenges. Internal supports also include the range of problem-solving and coping skills that children can draw on to help them work though difficult and challenging situations.

### Aims of the Rollercoaster Series

This resource aims to promote awareness of external and internal sources of resilience by describing familiar events and situations that many children may find challenging, and sharing strategies to help navigate through such situations.

In this way, a key teaching aim of the Rollercoaster Series is to promote:

> the skills, knowledge, understanding and language that enable pupils to adopt healthy thoughts, behaviours and strategies and to seek appropriate and timely support when they or a friend need it.

Using the Rollercoaster stories as a teaching aid

The four individual stories can be read independently by children for enjoyment, as a library resource. They can also be used with the corresponding workbooks as a teaching aid. It is strongly recommended that the workbooks are introduced and worked through with adult guidance as part of PSHE delivery when teaching about mental health and positive coping strategies.

Read the general guidance below before looking at the rest of these notes for the key teaching points addressed in each story and workbook.

• Putting words to feelings is an important aspect of being able to manage them. Studies show that when we put words to our emotions, the part of the brain responsible for responding instinctively to emotions is calmed. This means that we are less likely to respond instinctively without thinking or to get ‘carried away’ by our emotions.

• Helping children to notice and name their emotions is an important step in being able to manage them. It may help to do some baseline work to check out the children’s vocabulary of emotions and their understanding of what emotions mean.

• Remember to refer to emotions and feelings as ‘good’ and ‘not so good’ or ‘difficult’, rather than simply ‘good’ and ‘bad’. This reinforces understanding that all emotions can be helpful, even those that may be difficult and challenging.

• Remember to highlight the fact that uncomfortable emotions, such as sadness and anger, can all serve a useful purpose. For example, being ‘sad’ can help to slow down our body after a shock or distressing event, giving us time to repair and heal. Being ‘sad’ can also be a signal to other people around us that we need their support and help, as having a network of support around us is an important part of resilience. Similarly, feeling ‘angry’ can help us get ready to face danger and either ‘stand our ground’ or get away fast!

• Remember to stress that feeling the emotion is not the problem. It is OK to feel sad, angry, nervous or upset but we may need to manage the associated behaviours, which may be less acceptable or helpful. Also introduce the idea of noticing and monitoring the strength of emotions by referring to them as ‘big’ and ‘not so big’.

• A key message running throughout all four stories is the link between thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and the fact that unhelpful thinking often underpins ‘difficult’ and ‘big’ emotions. In order to manage our feelings and change behaviour, we often need to address the unhelpful thinking habits that we may have adopted.

The unhelpful thinking habits running throughout the books include:

• Looking through a negative lens – only focusing on the negatives and highlighting the worst possible outcomes – exaggerating the bad!
Turning your back on the positives – ignoring and dismissing anything positive.

Black-and-white thinking – sometimes known as ‘all or nothing’ thinking, this involves seeing things as either bad or good and nothing in between.

Predicting the future and mind reading – thinking that you know exactly what is going on in other people’s minds, this often involves predicting bad things happening in the future.

Workbook 1: ‘Let’s talk about ... worry and change

Summary of ‘But what if ...?’ story

Jake’s story introduces the idea that we all experience difficult emotions, such as worry and anxiety, from time to time, and that these feelings may be linked to life events involving change.

Jake is worried about the impending transition to secondary school and is focusing on a rumour he has heard about the boys’ toilets. Jake keeps this worry to himself, rather than sharing it with other people. Therefore, his worry grows quickly and starts to take over some of his other thoughts too. The metaphor of a weed growing in a garden, and quickly taking up all of the space, is used to demonstrate how unhelpful thoughts that often underpin worry can take up all of the space in our minds.

When worry takes over, it can affect our behaviour and we see how Jake has difficulty sleeping and no longer feels like doing the things he enjoys, such as playing football. Because Jake doesn’t share his worry, he remains unaware that many of his friends have similar worries too. It’s only when he talks about his worry to another child on his visit to the secondary school that he understands that he’s not the only one who feels this way and that, by sharing his worry, it becomes much less of an issue. It begins to wither like an unwatered weed.

Teacher information: mental health and anxiety

Everyone experiences worry and anxiety from time to time, and it is part of typical childhood development to experience such periods. Therefore, it is helpful for all children to learn about anxiety and how to notice it and to develop healthy coping strategies.

However, a few children may have difficulty managing their anxiety to such an extent that it affects their everyday life. For example, they may fear separating from a parent, have phobias or fears about specific places or things, or worry about events or situations such as social gatherings or attending school. These children may be unable to concentrate on schoolwork, have difficulty making and keeping friendships, and might begin to avoid situations and experiences or start relying on unhealthy ways of coping with their worry and anxiety.
When anxiety and worry significantly impact on everyday functioning, some children may be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. In the UK, studies suggest that about 2 to 5 per cent of children under 12 are diagnosed with anxiety disorder (NHS website statistics).

**Key teaching points**

1. **Normalise the emotion**

   **Covers Workbook 1, page 40 and 41**

   Encourage children to understand that everyone experiences a range of emotions, including anxiety, and that sometimes 'big' feelings can be difficult and uncomfortable.

   Explain that we will all experience worry and anxiety in our lives. Sometimes it is unavoidable because of life events and experiences. Transition and change can often be a common trigger for worry and anxiety and this story focuses on transition to secondary school being a trigger for Jake's worry.

   However, there are many other life changes and triggers for children's worry, including falling out with friends, moving home, news events, tests and exams, illness and family problems.

   Explore some of the common triggers and events with children when completing the workbook. Encourage children to write their worries on the worry weeds. Highlight the worries that are underpinned by change, emphasising that worry and strong feelings can be normal and common responses.

2. **'Big' and difficult emotions can be helpful**

   **Covers Workbook 1, page 41**

   Support children to understand some of the ways in which emotions, including 'big' and difficult feelings, can be helpful.

   Explain that worry is a normal response to anxiety. Everyone worries from time to time and it can be a helpful response. Worry can help us to focus on what we need to do in a situation, and to plan and prepare ourselves for something that is going to happen. Worry can also get our body ready for action.

   Give the example of worrying about a test or an exam. Worry can help us to prepare for it by practising and revising. Worry can give us a rush of adrenalin – a special hormone in our body that helps us to feel alert and ready to do our best.

   Big feelings such as worry only become unhelpful when they get out of control. Encourage children to look at Jake's story and find examples of how his worry got out of control.
3 Identifying big emotions, such as worry, in our bodies

Covers Workbook 1, pages 41, 48 and 49

Children will be able to identify some of the signs of ‘big’ emotions, such as worry, in their bodies.

Explain that it helps to notice the signs of ‘big’ emotions, so that they don’t get out of control. Sometimes we can feel ‘big emotions in different parts of our body. Explore with children where in the body we might feel ‘big’ emotions. For example, think about:

- headaches
- stomach aches and flutters
- nausea
- shaking
- feeling tired and heavy limbed
- feeling hot or cold
- prickly or itchy skin.

It can help to watch our bodies carefully, so that we can notice those ‘big’ feelings, and think about what we can do to manage them.

4 Notice unhelpful thoughts

Covers Workbook 1, pages 47, 52–54

Encourage children to recognise some common thinking errors, including looking through a negative lens and thinking the very worst.

Explain that the story shows how Jake’s unhelpful thinking or thinking errors helped his worry to grow, and that it particularly focuses on looking through a negative lens and thinking the very worst. This happens when thoughts focus only on the bad things that might occur, and usually highlights the worst possible outcomes, exaggerating the bad things!

Thinking the very worst is a common thinking error and can contribute to worry and anxiety.

Help children to look back at Jake’s story to find his unhelpful thinking and encourage them to identify their own thinking errors. Make links to children’s worry situations and their thinking errors that might be similar to Jake’s.

Looking through a negative lens and thinking the very worst includes thoughts such as:

- If I go into the toilets, my head will be flushed.
- If I talk about my worry, everyone will think I’m stupid.
5 Helpful coping strategies

(a) *Children will be able to recognise and challenge some unhelpful thoughts.*

*Covers Workbook 1, pages 55–9.*

Help children to test their unhelpful thinking by asking:

- Is this thought a fact?
- Is there any proof that it is true?
- Or is it just a thought?

Children may need further support to explore the difference between facts and opinions or thoughts.

Look at Jake’s unhelpful thoughts and change them into more helpful ones.

Encourage children to challenge some of their unhelpful thoughts by testing them in the same way.

(b) *Children will recognise the importance of social supports and sharing ‘big’ feelings by talking about them.*

*Covers Workbook 1, pages 50 and 51.*

Support children to understand that although worry can be a ‘big’ feeling, it doesn’t stay the same for ever. Look through Jake’s story to see how his worry changed and what helped it to wither.

Draw attention to the benefits of sharing worry with other people and help children to identify their own social supports.

(c) *Children will recognise the importance of noticing worry and monitoring their own worry.*

*Covers Workbook 1, pages 42, 43, 46, 47 and 60.*

Explore with children how noticing ‘big’ feelings before they take over can be helpful. Look back through Jake’s story for instances when it might have been helpful for him to notice his ‘big’ feelings. Practise using rating scales (to rate the strength of emotions) and keeping an emotions diary.

6 Warning signs and triggers that a child may not be coping

Most children can manage their worry and anxiety without any long-term consequences. However, some children may need additional support if their worry is long-lasting and begins to have an impact on their daily life.

Be alert to changes in behaviour that aren’t typical for that child, last a long time and affect how they function. For instance, they may:
• be increasingly irritable, aggressive or withdrawn
• lack confidence to do the things they used to do
• experience changes in sleeping and eating patterns
• have physical symptoms which can’t be medically explained
• start to avoid people and places.

If you are concerned about a significant, long-lasting change in behaviour, and the severity and impact of a child’s anxiety, you may need to request additional support and advice.

**Workbook 2: ‘Let’s talk about ... sadness and loss’**

**Summary of ‘What is “It”?’ ... story**

Sam’s story focuses on sadness and the changing emotions that can be associated with bereavement and loss. The story introduces the idea that we all experience big and difficult feelings from time to time, and that these feelings can often be linked to loss.

Sam feels low and fed-up but doesn’t understand why he feels this way. Everyone else has an opinion on the change in his behaviour. His teacher thinks he is being lazy and can’t be bothered to finish his work; his friends think he’s no fun any more and turning into a bore; and his mum simply wants him to ‘keep smiling’. Comments such as ‘Cheer up, it might never happen!’, and ‘What’s got into you?’ just upset him even more. Sam doesn’t know what the ‘it’ is that is making him feel this way. He didn’t even feel this bad when his cousin Tony died a year ago!

When he talks to his friend, Sam shares how confused and sad he feels. Connections are made between his feelings and the anniversary of his cousin’s death. Sam is helped to understand that thoughts and feelings associated with loss can come and go for a long time, and can cause strong emotions. He is encouraged to talk to his teacher about how he feels, and to think about what he can do when he feels this way.

Sam makes a memory box so that he can explore his emotions as well as remember things about his cousin.

**Teacher information: sadness, low mood and loss**

Many children will experience loss, which can take many different forms. For example:

• bereavement
• loss experienced through rejecting relationships
• family breakdown and divorce
• illness
• loss of friendships
• moving to a new home or school.

Loss of any kind can trigger ‘big’, difficult and often confusing emotions, which can last for some time. A change in behaviour may be a typical response to significant loss. For example, some children may crave routine and sameness because familiarity may give some stability in the early days after a loss. Other changes may stem from the emotional impact of loss, which children cannot fully understand or express. This may have an impact on their ability to engage and perform in school, get along with other people, concentrate and pay attention, or it may affect tolerance levels, irritability or anger.

Most children will work though loss without the need for any significant intervention. However, when reactions to loss are long-lasting, and impact significantly on how a child functions, then this can be a sign that the child needs more support.

Grief is often described as ‘an emotional reaction to the experience of any significant loss’. It helps to be aware of the typical stages of grief but, equally, it is important to remember that children rarely progress through these stages seamlessly, and that reactions to grief are personal and individual.

The stages of grief typically include denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, with a range of reactions and emotions including shock and numbness, overwhelming sadness, extreme tiredness, anger and guilt. Children are more likely to display a ‘rollercoaster’ of emotions and may feel confused by their changing emotional state.

When supporting children who have experienced loss, remember to use clear, unambiguous words which children can understand – and don’t be afraid to refer to death and dying. Try to answer any questions truthfully and clearly.

**Key teaching points**

1  Normalise the range of emotions associated with loss

*Covers Workbook 2, pages 44–7.*

Support children to understand that it is common to experience a range of emotions associated with loss and that, sometimes, these emotions can be difficult and uncomfortable.

Explain that everyone experiences sadness and low mood from time to time and that sometimes these feelings may be linked to experiences of loss, as happened to Sam.
Then talk to the children about different experiences of loss and how we are all likely to experience loss at some stage in our lives.

Encourage children to name and discuss the range of emotions that loss can elicit. Make sure you draw attention to feelings of sadness and low mood, as well as a variety of other emotions such as anger, frustration and guilt. Remind children that emotions come and go and that it's also OK to feel happy, positive emotions after a loss as well.

Look back through Sam's story to help children notice and name the range of emotions that Sam experienced.

2 ‘Big’ and difficult emotions can be helpful

Support children to understand some of the ways in which emotions, including ‘big’ and difficult feelings, can be helpful.

Explain that big and difficult emotions won’t stay the same for ever and difficult emotions, such as sadness, can be helpful. For example, sadness can help to slow down our body so that we can rest and recuperate. It can also signal to other people that we need support. Having supportive people around us, and connecting with others, is often a protective factor for big, difficult emotions. However, when big feelings such as sadness last for a long time, they can become overwhelming and unhelpful.

Help children to name and share other big emotions they have experienced. Can they think how these emotions might have been helpful?

3 Recognising emotions in ourselves and other people

Children will recognise how big and difficult emotions may present in themselves and others.

Explain that it can help to notice big and difficult emotions so that they don’t take over. Sometimes we can tell how someone is feeling by how they look – but is this always reliable? Discuss whether a smiling face always means that the person is happy. Look back at Sam’s story and explore whether he was always happy when he smiled.

Say that sometimes we can feel big emotions in different parts of our bodies. Explore with children where in the body they might feel big emotions such as sadness. For example, think about:

- headaches and stomach aches
- feeling wobbly and nauseous
• shaking muscles
• feeling tired and heavy limbed
• feeling hot or cold
• prickly or itchy skin.

It can be helpful to monitor our body so that we can notice big and difficult feelings and think about what we can do to manage them. Will everyone experience these feelings in the same way?

4 Helpful coping strategies

(a) Children will recognise the importance of noticing big feelings, such as sadness, and monitoring their own big feelings.


Explore with children how it can be helpful to notice 'big' feelings before they take over. Look back through Sam's story for times when it might have helped for him to notice and share his 'big' feelings.

Practise using a rating scale to rate the strength of emotions, and try keeping an emotions diary. This can provide a visual reminder to support awareness and understanding of emotions. It can also help to identify the triggers and situations for big or difficult emotions.

Help children to:
• name the emotion
• notice where it occurs in their body
• rate the strength of the emotion
• note what happened before and after the emotion
• recall what they were thinking
• say what they did.

(b) Children will recognise the importance of social supports and sharing 'big' feelings by talking about them.

> Covers Workbook 2, pages 54 and 55.

Children will understand that talking about emotions and sharing them with other people is a healthy coping strategy.

Support children to understand that, although sadness can be a 'big' feeling, it doesn't stay the same for ever. Look through Sam's story to see how his 'big' feelings changed. Draw attention to the benefits of noticing and sharing 'big' feelings with other people and encourage children to identify their own social supports.
(c) *Children will recognise strategies to help work through the loss, and identify and manage big emotions, including:*


- noticing and identifying big feelings
- identifying who they can talk to about their big feelings
- keeping doing the things they enjoy
- making memory boxes, journals or books about the loss.

5 **Warning signs and triggers that a child may not be coping**

Most children who experience loss will be able to navigate their way through without any significant, long-term consequences or needing specialist interventions.

Be vigilant for signs that a child may need more support to cope with loss. This might include a significant and long-lasting change in behaviour that affects daily functioning. For example, children may:

- lose interest in activities or hobbies
- change their sleeping or eating habits
- have difficulty concentrating and learning
- refuse to do things they previously enjoyed
- have an overwhelming and long-lasting preoccupation with the loss.

If a child’s response to loss is having a significant and long-lasting impact on their daily functioning, you may need to request further support and advice.

**Workbook 3: ‘Let’s talk about … mind-reading thoughts’**

**Summary of ‘Mind reading’ story**

Stacie’s story focuses on mind reading being an unhelpful thinking habit. Stacie’s unhelpful thoughts about her best friend, Kayla, try to predict what Kayla is thinking, focus on the negatives and blow things out of proportion. Consequently, Stacie’s unhelpful thinking leads to a change in her behaviour, which further isolates her from her friends.

Stacie wonders why Kayla ignores her when they are in town on Saturday. All weekend, she thinks about the possible reasons and imagines some of the negative things Kayla might be saying or thinking about her. By Monday morning, Stacie has convinced herself that her thoughts are true.
and that Kayla no longer wants to be her friend. Consequently, she avoids Kayla at school, which causes further problems.

At break time, Stacie sees Kayla with a group of classmates and predicts that they are talking about her. As the day progresses, Kayla catches up with Stacie and asks whether she's feeling OK because she has noticed that Stacie is behaving differently. Stacie says she realises that Kayla no longer wants to be her friend because she ignored her in town on Saturday. Kayla explains that she had lost her contact lenses and didn't even see her!

Stacie is shocked and confesses how she imagined she knew what Kayla was thinking and saying about her. Kayla laughs and they joke about Stacie being a very poor ‘mind reader’. Stacie agrees that if she catches herself mind reading again, she will test out her thoughts by talking about them. The accompanying workbook highlights this common thinking error and suggests further coping strategies.

**Teacher information: linking thoughts, feelings and behaviour**

Our thoughts, feelings and behaviour are all linked. How we think about an event or a situation can impact directly on how we feel and how we behave.

We all have lots of thoughts running through our mind and many of these thoughts are automatic. Some of these automatic thoughts will be negative and unhelpful, and they will have a negative impact on our mood. This, in turn, can affect how we behave. Many big and difficult emotions may be underpinned by negative automatic thoughts.

It’s not always easy to identify automatic thoughts and, sometimes, we may become locked into a pattern of unhelpful thinking. However, recognising our automatic negative thoughts, and when they are likely to occur, can help us to manage them or change the way we respond.

Some common thinking errors are highlighted in the general guidance section of this resource (pages 4–5). It can help to identify your own common thinking errors by reflecting on different situations and your typical responses.

Predicting the future and mind reading is a common, unhelpful thinking error. This involves believing that you know exactly what is going on in other people’s minds and perceiving mind-reading thoughts to be facts. When mind-reading thoughts are perceived as facts and being true, they can have a negative impact on emotions and behaviour. It is an important step to recognise an unhelpful thought such as mind reading as being just a thought and not a fact.

Mind-reading thoughts often focus on the negatives and discount the positives and, typically, predict negative future scenarios. Stacie's story can be used to illustrate this common thinking error to children.
**Key teaching points**

1. **It is usual to have a range of thoughts, some of which can be helpful and others unhelpful**


   Support children to distinguish the difference between a helpful and an unhelpful thought and how unhelpful thoughts can be linked to big and difficult feelings.

   Explain that how we make sense of situations and events can have an impact on our feelings and behaviour. Some thoughts are helpful and enable us to think of ways forward and solve problems. Other thoughts may be less helpful, be linked to big and difficult emotions, and affect behaviour.

   Making and keeping friends can cause a range of emotions. Sometimes these emotions may be underpinned by unhelpful thoughts about friendship issues. Unhelpful thinking such as mind reading can have a negative impact on friendship issues and magnify problems.

   Support children to recognise the difference between a helpful and an unhelpful thought and some of the situations in which they are likely to occur.

2. **Mind reading can be an unhelpful thinking error**


   Support children to recognise mind reading as an unhelpful way of thinking about a situation, and identify some of the ways in which mind reading can get it wrong.

   Explain that mind reading can be an unhelpful way of thinking about a situation because it involves predicting what is going on in someone else’s mind. Although there are times when this can be helpful, we can never be totally sure what someone else is thinking. When we are worried about a situation, mind-reading thoughts can often make it worse.

   Mind-reading thoughts often get it wrong by:
   - focusing on the negatives
   - blowing things out of proportion
   - jumping to the wrong conclusion
   - taking up all of the thinking space
   - behaving as if they are facts.
3 Identifying facts and thoughts

Support children to understand the difference between a fact and a thought.

Help children to test their unhelpful mind-reading thoughts by asking:

- Is this thought a fact?
- Is there any proof that it is true?
- Or is it just a thought?’

Children may need further support to explore the difference between facts and opinions or thoughts.

Explain that when we believe mind-reading thoughts to be facts, we behave as if they are true. This can change our behaviour and even make the situation more difficult. Discuss with children how Stacie’s mind-reading thoughts affected her behaviour and made the situation worse for her.

4 Helpful coping strategies

(a) Children will recognise the importance of noticing unhelpful thoughts and monitoring them.

Explore with children the importance of noticing unhelpful thoughts before they take over. Look back through Stacie’s story for times when it might have been useful to notice her unhelpful thoughts. Practise keeping a thoughts diary or journal.

(b) Children will be able to challenge unhelpful thoughts.

Help children to:

- explore what advice they would give a friend who had an unhelpful mind-reading thought
- test their unhelpful thinking by asking, ‘Is this thought a fact? Is there any proof that it is true? Or is it just a thought?’
- change unhelpful mind-reading thoughts into more helpful ones by exploring a range of possible situations.
(c) Children will recognise the importance of sharing unhelpful thoughts and ‘big’ feelings by checking them out and talking about them.

Support children to understand that it can be helpful to check out ‘big’ and difficult feelings with other people. Encourage children to identify who they can talk to and their own social supports.

5 Warning signs and triggers that a child may not be coping

Most children will work through stressful situations such as friendship difficulties without any long-lasting consequences. However, some children may need additional support if there is a significant, long-lasting change to their behaviour.

Be alert to changes in children’s behaviour that aren’t typical, last a long time and affect how they function. For instance, children may:

- be increasingly irritable, aggressive or withdrawn
- lack confidence to do the things they used to do
- opt out of activities and social situations
- change their sleeping and eating patterns
- display physical symptoms which can’t be medically explained.

If you are concerned about a significant and long-lasting change to a child’s behaviour, you may need to request additional support and advice.

Workbook 4: ‘Let’s talk about ... when thoughts get stuck’

Summary of ‘Stuck on a loop’ story

Gemma’s story focuses on the link between intrusive, repetitive thoughts, and behaviour, and anxiety and stress. In this story, Gemma’s anxiety is linked to school tests and achievement.

Everyone knows that Gemma always gets things ‘right’ and is top of the class. However, she feels under pressure to do well in the spelling tests and is becoming increasingly worried. Her thoughts about the tests become stuck and she begins to link behaviours – such as tapping her pencil three times and counting three white vans – to doing well in the tests. These habits start taking over and begin to affect her behaviour more and more, as they become ‘stuck on a loop’ in her mind.

As the story progresses, Gemma’s friend Ruby helps her to understand how it can be normal for anxiety and stress to affect thoughts. A metaphor is introduced that the thought is like a bossy
friend, encouraging her do things she doesn’t really want to do. What would she say to a bossy friend who was constantly trying to take control?

It is only when Gemma notices and shares her thoughts with other people that she finds ways to manage them, including talking about it and doing things she enjoys. The accompanying workbook highlights how stressful situations and feelings of pressure can be linked to unhelpful, stuck thoughts; also how noticing and sharing unhelpful thoughts can help people to manage them.

**Teacher information: stress and stuck thoughts**

Most people experience stuck thoughts from time to time. For instance, you might have experienced a tune or song lyrics going round and round in your head, as if they are stuck on a loop in your brain. However, sometimes stuck thoughts can be linked to things we are worried about or stressful situations. Thinking or ruminating about a situation – especially one in the past – can increase anxiety and stress by taking over our thoughts and replaying the difficult situation repeatedly. Sometimes we can become stuck in this negative thinking trap.

Stuck thoughts can also become linked to ‘magical’ or ‘superstitious’ thinking, where we link thoughts and events, looking for connections where they don’t exist. Sometimes, magical thinking leads to carrying out ‘lucky’ rituals, to prevent something ‘bad’ happening. When we perform the action, the thought might stop for a while, but then it tends to return bigger and stronger.

Some children may experience stress and anxiety linked to unhelpful, stuck thoughts and magical thinking. Gemma’s story addresses some of these unhelpful thinking errors and raises awareness of the ways in which stuck thoughts can impact on behaviour. It highlights the importance of noticing unhelpful, stuck thoughts early, so that they can be managed before they take over.

Occasionally, obsessive thoughts and compulsions may take over to such an extent that they significantly affect people’s functioning and quality of life. An estimated 1 in 100 children and young people will have obsessive–compulsive disorder or OCD (OCD-UK, 2007, *OCD? A Guide for Young Children*, Nottingham). Workbook 4 does not address OCD so, if you are worried about the impact of obsessive–compulsive behaviour that is long-lasting, and impacting negatively on a child’s functioning, request professional advice and support.

**Key teaching points**

1. **It is normal to have a range of thoughts, some of which are helpful and others unhelpful**

   Covers Workbook 4, pages 42–5.
Support children to distinguish between a helpful and an unhelpful thought and show how unhelpful thoughts can be linked to big and difficult feelings.

Explain that how we make sense of situations and events can have an impact on our feelings and behaviour. Some thoughts are helpful and enable us to think of ways forward and solve problems. Other thoughts may be unhelpful and linked to big and difficult emotions, and they may affect behaviour.

Support children to recognise the difference between a helpful and an unhelpful thought and some of the situations where they are likely to occur.

Certain life events and situations, such as exams, competitions and tests, can cause stress and anxiety. Sometimes, these emotions may be underpinned by unhelpful, stuck thoughts which go round and round in our minds, taking up all of the thinking space. Ruminating or stuck thoughts can be unhelpful because they keep the worry alive without offering any ways forward or problem solving.

Unhelpful, stuck thoughts can often be linked to magical thinking, where we look for connections between thoughts, actions and situations which have no connections. For example, in the story, Gemma links tapping her pencil three times, and seeing three white vans, to doing well in her spelling test. This quickly becomes a habit or ritual that affects her behaviour.

2 Identifying bossy, stuck thoughts as unhelpful thoughts

Support children to recognise bossy, stuck thoughts and to identify events and situations when bossy, stuck thoughts may be more likely.

Covers Workbook 4, pages 46–8.

Explain that everyone has stuck thoughts from time to time. Discuss what gets stuck in our mind, including songs, tunes and jingles. But they don’t last for ever. Ask:

- What helps to stop these stuck tunes and jingles?
- Does trying to stop them always help?

Go on to explain how focusing too much on a stuck tune or song can make it more stuck and stronger. Talk about noticing the stuck tune without focusing on or worrying about it too much. Recognising it as a stuck tune and remembering it will weaken eventually, while continuing to do things we enjoy, can help us unstick it!

Explain that it is common for worry to get stuck in our mind from time to time. Stuck thoughts can go round and round like a stuck tune. Sometimes, thoughts are ‘bossy’ and tell us to do things to help us feel safer or less worried, or for good ‘luck’. Encourage children to share examples of
other magical or superstitious thinking that they have come across. How might these thoughts be unhelpful?

Discuss how Gemma’s rituals were unconnected to her worry about doing well in the test. The longer she kept on performing the rituals, the stronger they became.

3 Noticing and managing unhelpful, stuck and bossy thoughts

(a) *Children will recognise the importance of noticing unhelpful thoughts and monitoring them.*

_Covers Workbook 4, pages 49–53._

Explore with children the importance of noticing unhelpful thoughts before they take over. Look back through Gemma’s story for times when it might have been useful to notice her unhelpful thoughts.

Encourage children to keep their own diary or journal of thoughts.

(b) *Children will be able to challenge unhelpful thoughts.*

_Covers Workbook 4, page 53._

Encourage children to test their unhelpful thinking by asking:

- Is this thought a fact?
- Is there any proof that it is true?
- Or is it just a thought?

Help children to change unhelpful, stuck and bossy thoughts into more helpful ones by exploring a range of possible situations.

For example, what would children say to a bossy classmate who was telling them to do things over and over again?

(c) *Children will recognise the importance of sharing unhelpful thoughts and ‘big’ feelings by checking them out and talking about them.*

_Covers Workbook 4, pages 54–55._

Support children to understand that it can be helpful to check out difficult thoughts and feelings with other people.

Encourage children to identify who they can talk to and their own social supports.
4 Warning signs and triggers that a child may not be coping

Most children will work through stressful situations such as exams and tests without any long-lasting consequences. However, be vigilant for children who may be especially anxious about situations such as exams. Help them to prepare emotionally and practically for the exams.

Some children may need additional support if there is a significant, long-lasting change to their behaviour. Be alert to changes in children’s behaviour that aren’t typical, last a long time, and affect how they function.

Children may appear increasingly reliant on, or restricted by, routines and rituals to the extent that they significantly impact on other aspects of their daily life. For example, they may:

- be increasingly isolated
- opt out of social situations
- experience changes to sleeping and eating patterns
- display physical symptoms that can’t be medically explained.

If you are concerned about a significant and long-lasting change in a child’s behaviour, request additional support.