

Approaching emotions - ours and others' - with curiosity is what we call being an emotion scientist. Being curious about emotions means looking for the emotions behind behaviors or comments. When we act as emotion scientists, rather than emotion judges, we build empathy and improve connections with those around us.

This resource defines five steps we can use to open conversations to support healthy emotion regulation skills among youth.

## 1 Regulate Your Own Emotions

### Start by checking in with our own emotions.

When we are aware of our emotions, they're less likely to take over. Being aware of how we are feeling can help us pay attention to how our emotions influence the words we use, the choices we make, and how we respond to others.

### Know what emotion regulation strategies work for us.

Creating a compassionate space for youth to experience their feelings, move to a calmer emotional state, and participate in problem-solving or decision-making is reliant on our ability to manage our own emotions.

### Consider the best time and place to have the conversation.

We can ask ourselves:

- *Is there enough privacy?*
- *Is a certain time of day better?*
- *Am I in the best emotional space to support the youth?*
- *What is the best way to have a conversation with this youth?*

## 2 Help Youth with their Emotions

### Be an emotion scientist.

We can approach these conversations with curiosity, ask open-ended questions, and listen deeply without judgment. Emotion scientists think flexibly, realize that emotions are complex, and attempt to learn more - whether or not they would feel the same way in a given situation. This is an expression of caring that helps us forge quality relationships.

### Open the conversation.

We might say, *“I want to understand how you are feeling,”* or *“What I am noticing is ...”*, or *“Can you tell me about what is going on?”* Then, we can give our undivided attention. Youth learn to express their emotions in more constructive and respectful ways when they are confident that their feelings will be heard.

### Respond with empathy.

We all want to be heard, understood, and have our feelings validated. Some phrases we can use to respond with empathy include:

- *“I feel I understand you better, just knowing what you are going through.”*
- *“I am honored that you trust me enough to share that.”*
- *“Wow, that’s a lot.”*

### Behavior is an outcome, not an emotion.

Our internal experience of emotions, what happens in our body, and the thoughts we have are not the same as how we express the emotion through our actions, facial expressions, body language or words. We might assume that we know how someone is feeling by how they are behaving, but emotion expression is complex. Asking just one more question before moving on to offering a regulation strategy or problem solving can be helpful in exploring how the youth truly feels.

### 3 Problem Solve Together

#### Support helpful short-term strategies.

Once we know how the youth is feeling, why, and how they want to feel, we can encourage helpful short-term strategies for regulation like mindful breathing, taking a walk, or using thought strategies like positive self-talk or reframing. It is important for us to give youth permission to experience their feelings if they need to, or move away from those feelings if they want to.

#### Model positive self-talk.

This thought strategy involves telling ourselves something helpful or encouraging - like what we might say to our closest friend or family member, or what they would say to us. Once we hear those supportive words, we can internalize them and repeat them in our heads. Some examples are:

- *“I’ve done difficult things before, and I know I can succeed at this.”*
- *“Everyone makes mistakes; I can learn and grow from this.”*

#### Encourage positive reframing.

Positive reframing is a thought strategy that involves reminding ourselves that there may be other more positive ways of looking at the situation.

By changing the way we think about a situation, we can change what it means to us and how we feel about it.

After acknowledging and validating, we can ask ourselves, *“Is there another way I could think about this?”*, *“Is there another, more positive explanation that may also be true?”* or *“What can I learn or take away from this experience that could be helpful?”*

#### Help youth become more independent in their regulation skills.

In conversations, we can explore what thoughts or actions help to soothe or energize them. Offer help and ideas without forcing them. We can say, “I have an idea about that. Do you mind if I share it?” Consider using a problem-solving framework that helps the youth generate multiple solutions to a problem, evaluate the options, and select what will work best for them.

## **4** Close the Conversation

### **Ask for agreement to close the conversation.**

Once we have helped the youth explore their feelings and brainstorm strategies, we can ask if there is anything else that they would like to share. If the response is no, close the conversation. If the response is yes, ensure the youth that you will find time to continue the conversation.

### **Reiterate next steps.**

It can be helpful to review agreed-upon next steps. State the emotion regulation strategies discussed and make sure the youth feels ready to enact them.

### **Plan to check in later.**

If the youth feels it would be helpful, set up a specific time to talk with them again. This time can be used to continue the conversation or to check in about how well the strategies the youth is trying are working.

### **End on a positive note.**

We can show our optimism that the youth will be able to regulate their emotions using the regulation strategies discussed and express gratitude for having this time together.

We can say something like, *"I was glad I got to have this conversation with you and that you felt you could share this with me."*

### 5 Follow Up

#### **Check-in regularly and offer ongoing support.**

Once the youth is calm, we tend to move on when there may be lingering feelings. This may leave youth feeling misunderstood or dismissed.

We can ask, *“How are you feeling about... ?”* or *“How is it going since ...?”* and then take the time to listen without trying to provide answers or suggestions right away.

#### **Consider what conditions support helpful emotion regulation.**

We can ask ourselves how we can create an environment where youth and adults feel safe to express a full range of emotions, where discussions about emotion regulation are commonplace, and where a variety of strategies are encouraged. Investigating youths' successes and challenges with the strategies they use will help us understand them better.

#### **Respond to setbacks with compassion.**

Sometimes things don't go as well as we would like. When we or the youth with whom we work experience setbacks, we can respond with compassion, support, and an understanding that mistakes happen. If we notice that the youth is being particularly hard on themselves, we might ask:

*“What would you say to your best friend if they were in the same situation?”*

#### **Reach out for more support when needed.**

If the youth has experienced a traumatic experience and continues to struggle, follow your program's protocol for referring them for additional support.