

# Strategies to Promote Child Mental Health: A Hands-On Workshop

Dr. Laura Lynne Armstrong, Clinical Psychologist



# About Me

- Clinical Psychologist (Tomorrow Me Psychological Services)
- Full Professor (Saint Paul University / Université Saint-Paul), School of Counselling, Psychotherapy & Spirituality



# Game: True or False?

- Once someone has a mental illness, they will be sick their whole life
- Therapy and self-help don't work. Why not just take a pill?
- You can look at someone and know that they have a mental illness



# Song: Guess what's going on – What do psychologists & psychotherapists work with?

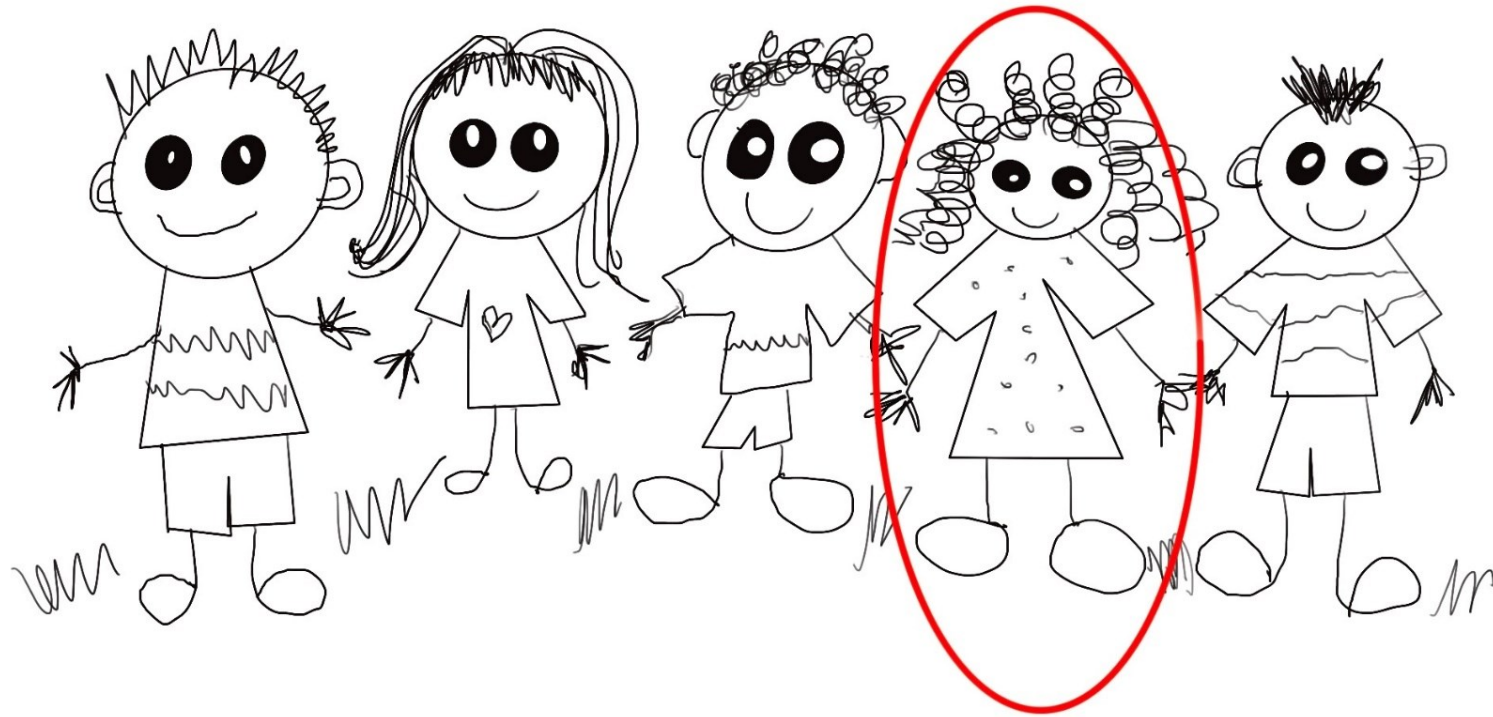
He missed school today  
To hide his tears away  
No one could see the pain inside  
Doesn't sleep at night  
Quit things he used to like  
Feeling all alone in the world

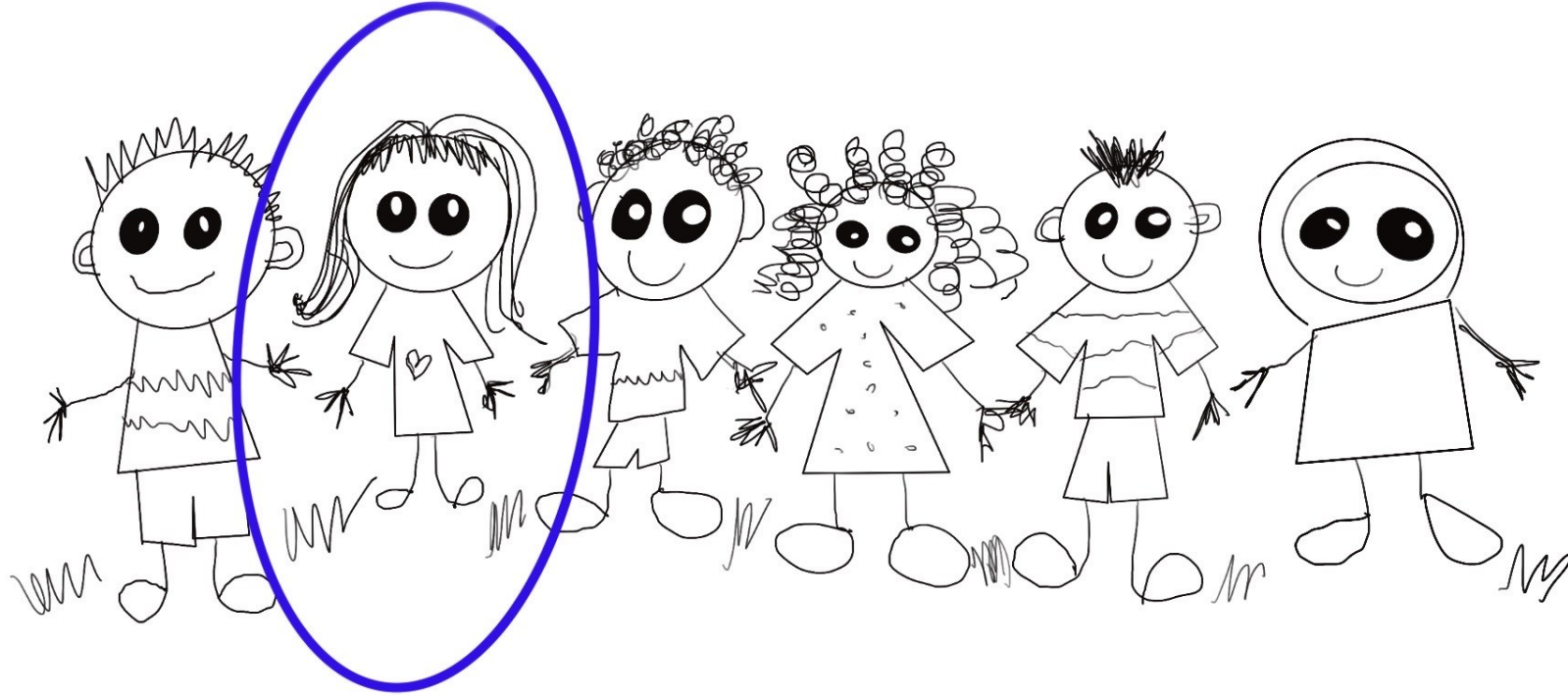
*But inside he's just like me  
Just like me and you  
Inside he's just like me  
Just like me and you*

Nerves won't let her rest  
Heart races in her chest  
The panic fills her day with fear  
At school she skips her test  
A subject she knows best  
Running from her troubled thoughts and  
fears



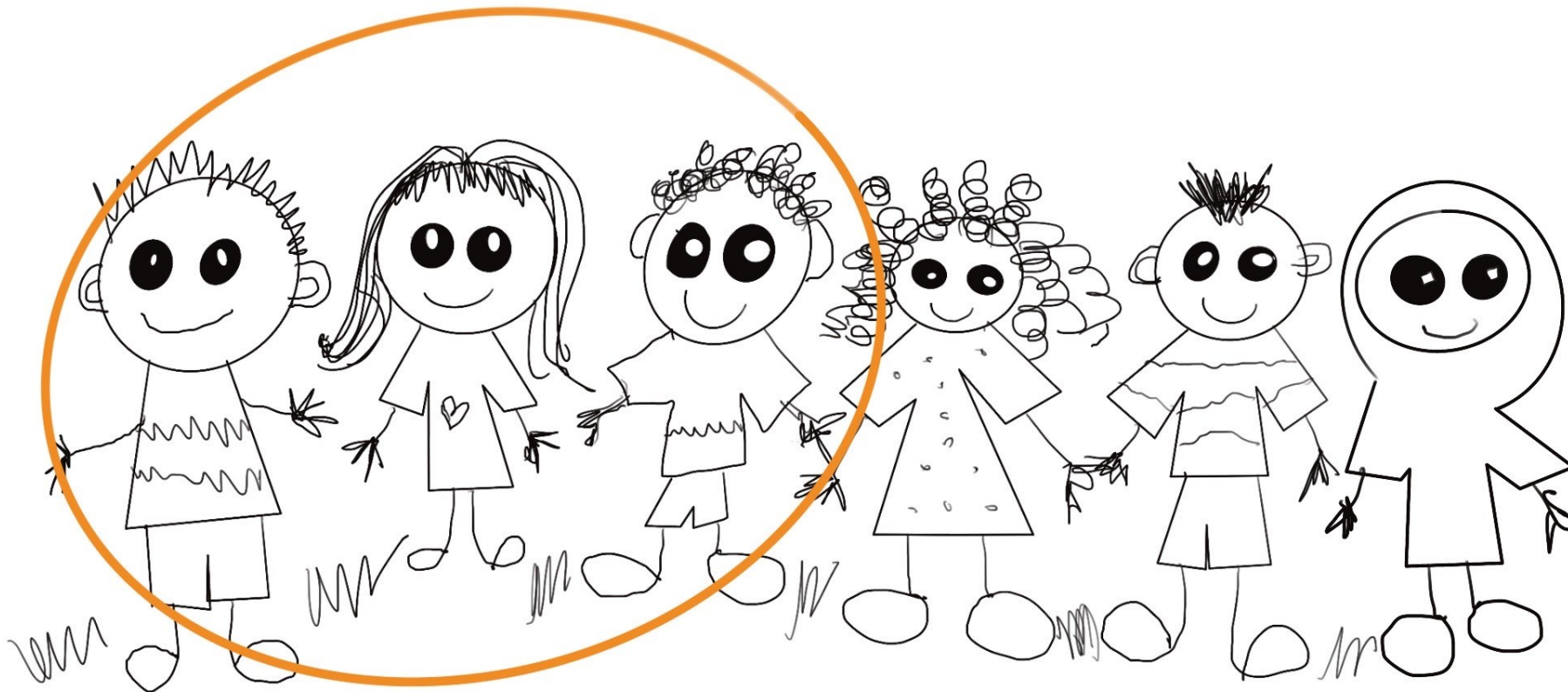
# Children With Mental Illness → Normal Times





$1/6$  who need help get help





Pandemic to post-pandemic: 50% have diagnosable concern (80% have some symptoms)





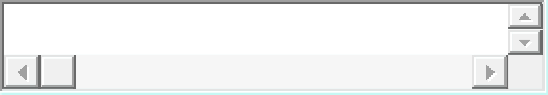
# Balloon Activity



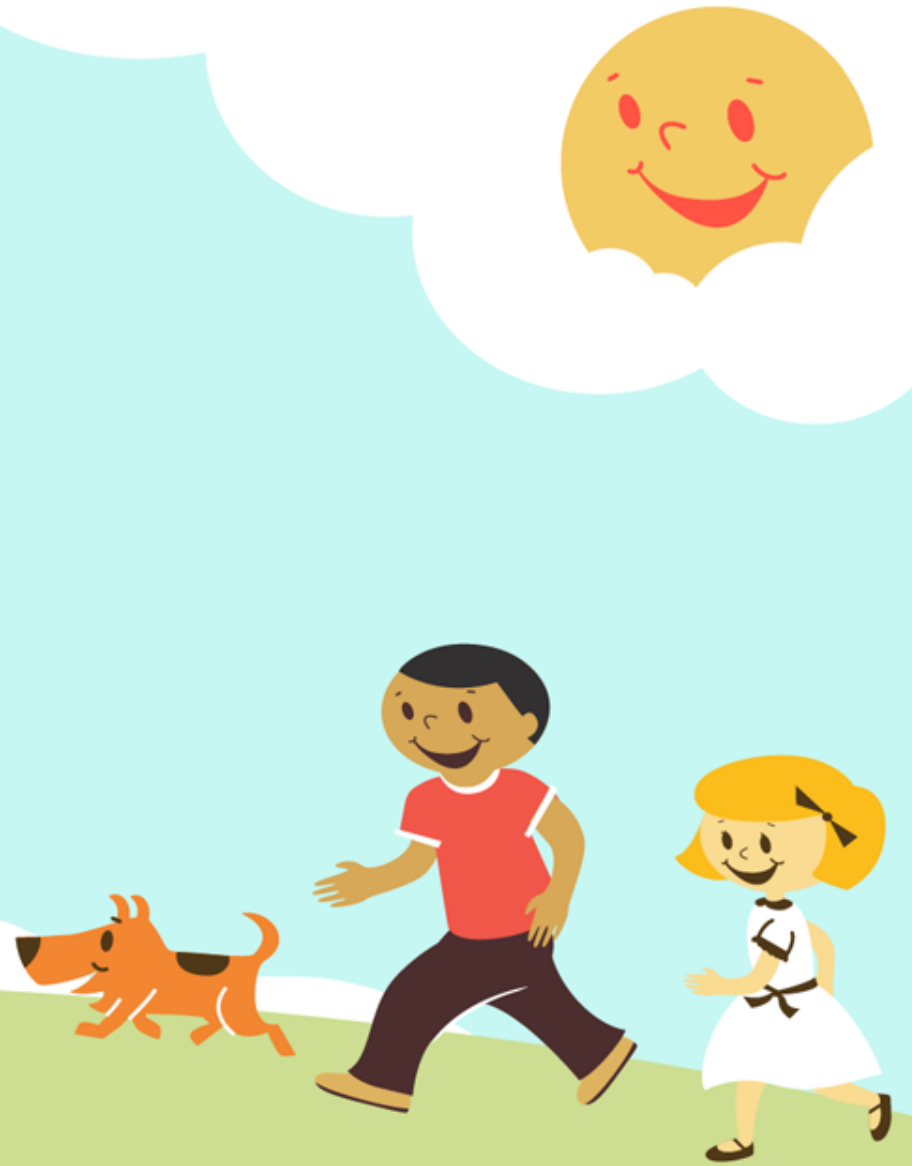
- Value of calm-down activities
- Can even use this as a “time out” during arguments
- Generate list in advance because thinking brain turns off when in flight/fight/freeze mode







# Most Common Mental Illnesses in Children: Signs & Symptoms



# Anxiety

- Younger children:  
Separation anxiety
- Social/Performance anxiety is the most common concern in older children
- Fear vs. phobia



# Factors linked to depression

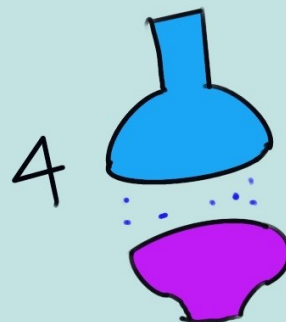
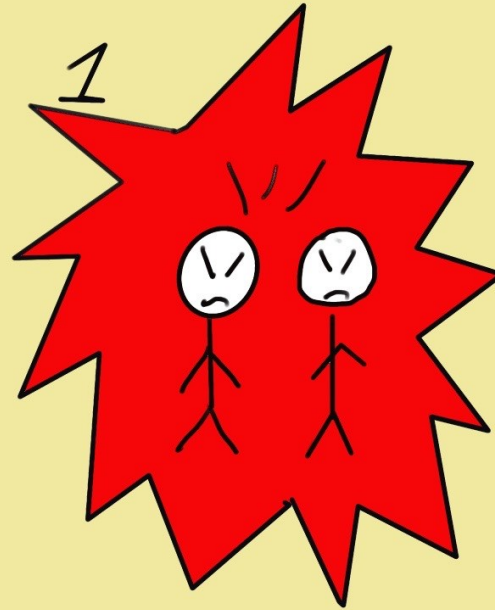
Friend/family  
conflict

Academic needs not met/school  
difficulties

Negative self-thoughts  
(difference between real/ideal  
self)

Biochemical

Lack of hope



# Signs of depression

Sadness, irritability,  
mood swings, social  
withdrawal

Lack of enjoyment  
in previously enjoyed  
activities, risks

Poor concentration

Changes in school  
functioning

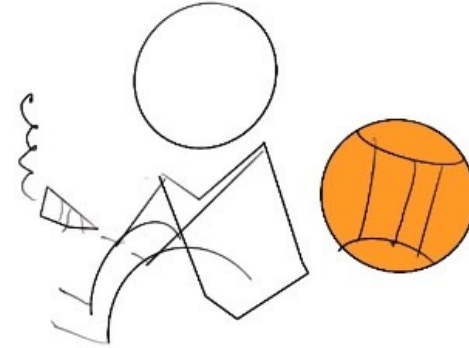
Changes in sleeping,  
eating, dark writing



1



2



3



4

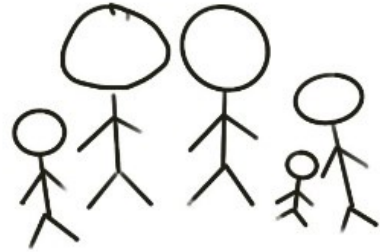


# Protective factors for mental health

1



3



2



4

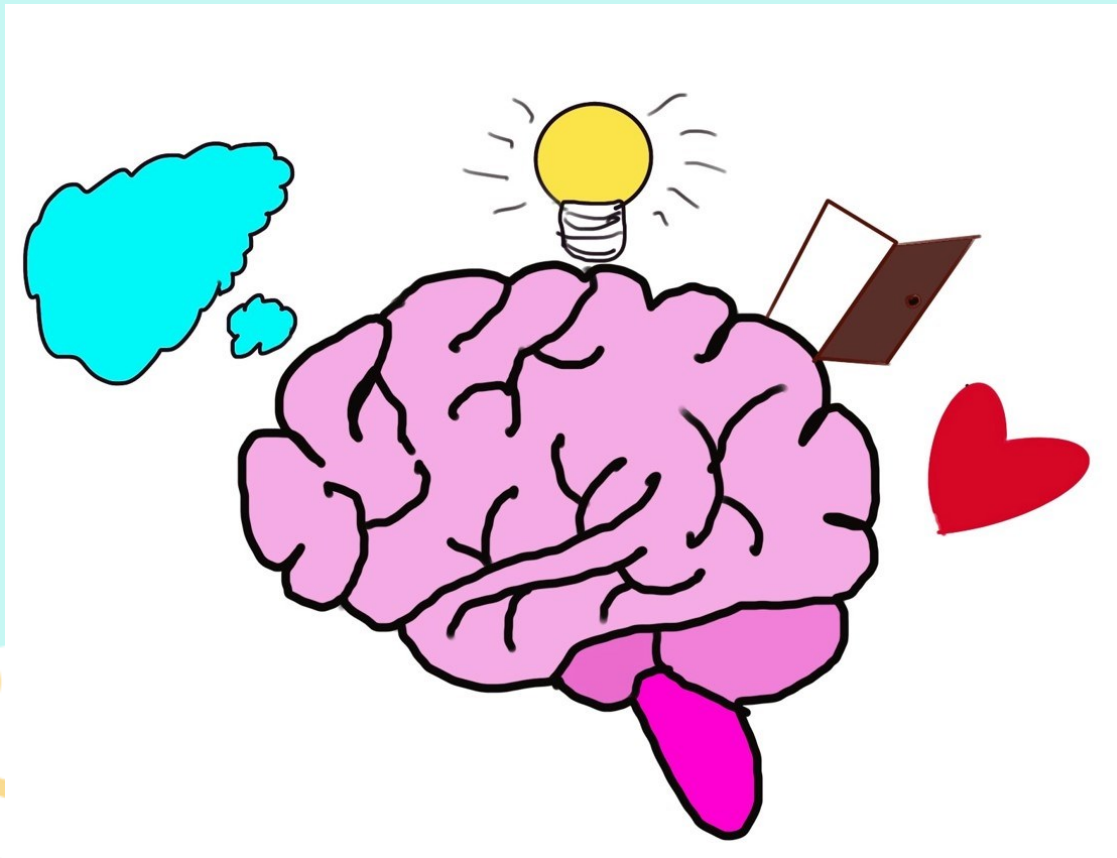


- Positive identity with peer group (even 1 best friend is helpful)
  - Address bullying
  - Peer groups outside of school
- Family support
  - Acknowledge feelings, don't always problem-solve, listen
- Secure attachment to caregivers & others
- Engagement in things to look forward to





# Meaning Mindset



1. Belief that one is capable of choosing their thoughts & actions → control over feelings
2. Hope for a future that is good → a sense of the possible, gratitude
3. Openness to experience → seeing possibilities, ready to learn, try new things, tune into feelings
4. See self as a person of worth → competent, capable of reaching goals





# Steps to Experiencing Meaning Mindset: “CHANGE”



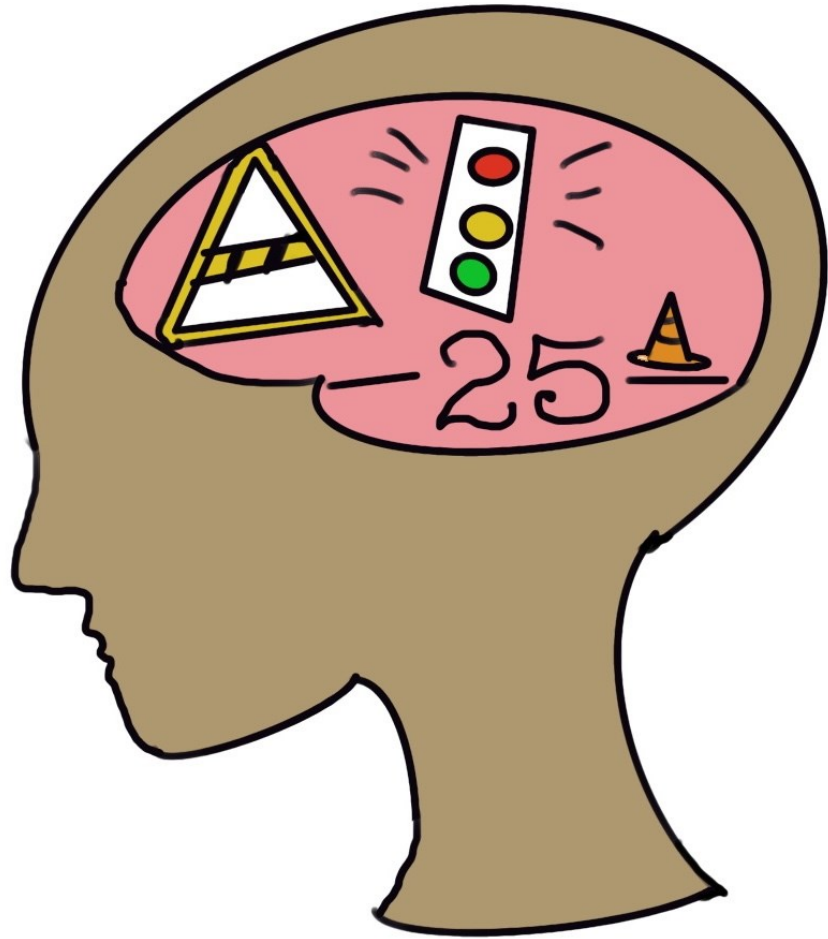
- Challenge unhelpful thoughts
  - ❖ Likelihood (best & worst thing that could happen)
  - ❖ What would I do different next time
- Healthy actions
  - ❖ Schedule feel-good activities
  - ❖ Look for predictable triggers, problem solve when calm
  - ❖ Break it down (small steps)
- Accept circumstances
  - ❖ What's one small thing I can do to make a difference in this situation?
- Need for belonging & self-compassion
  - ❖ Valued relationships (not just online relationships)
  - ❖ What would you say to a friend who is hard on themselves?
  - ❖ Practice self-care
- GratITUDE
  - ❖ Gratitude routine
- Emotional language
  - ❖ Notice feelings
  - ❖ Feelings are helpful alarm bells



# Hands-On Tools

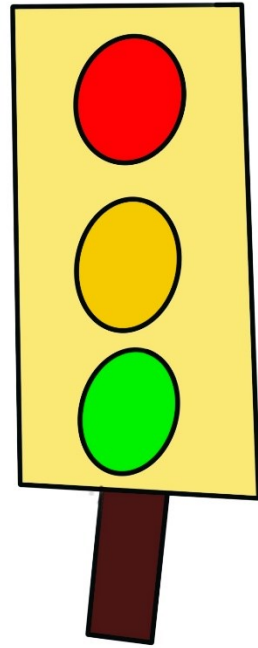


# Brain Development



- Brain development complete at 25
- When emotional brain is active, executive functioning less effective
- Problem solve when calm (patterns are predictable!)
  - First, listen to figure out what the problem is
  - Then work together on a solution

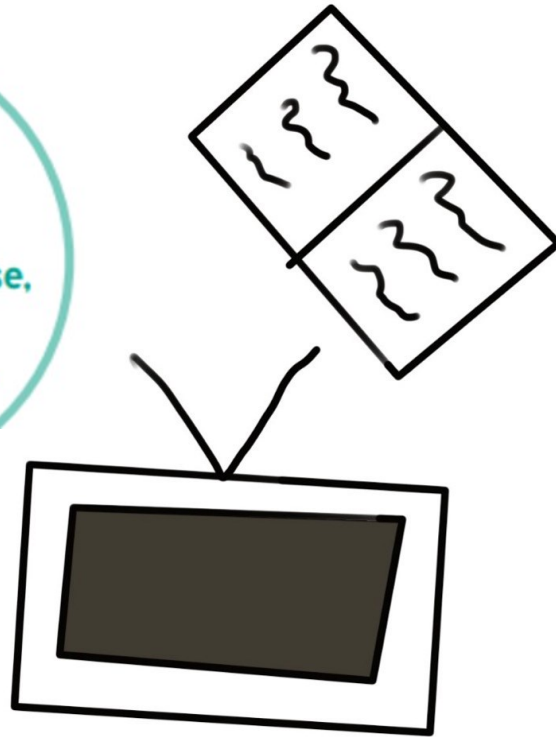
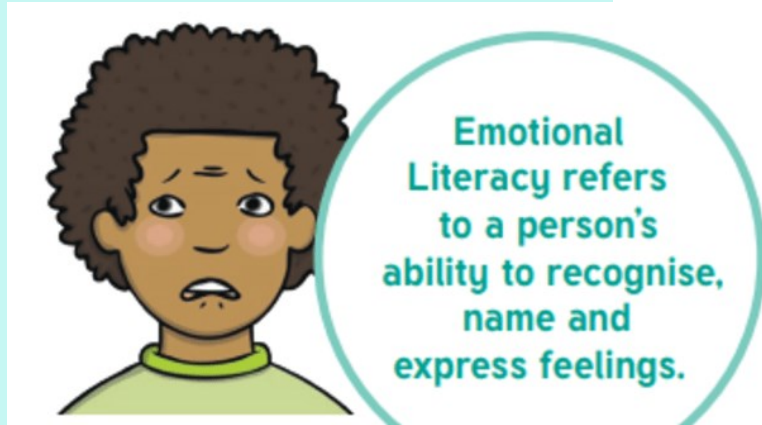
# Communication



- Red light: Strong feelings → acknowledge feelings, safety
- Yellow light: Somewhat strong feelings → acknowledge feelings, safety
- Green light: Calm → Solve problems



# Emotional literacy



- Story: 2 people experiencing the same situation
- Game – feelings improv
- Other ways to enhance feeling literacy:
  - Notice & name feelings
  - “I notice you’re feeling pretty frustrated by that. That is really frustrating”
  - All feelings are okay, but not all actions are okay



# Meaningful Activities



- Act different → feel different
- Academic success:
  - Relaxing pre-sleep routine involving something fun to look forward to (not studying right up until bed)
  - Having something bigger to look forward to at the end of the week (night off), regular activities → creates school work efficiency and makes studying not seem endless.
  - Help young people cultivate life balance.





# Grounding Activities



- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can touch (don't have touch them)
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 deep breath

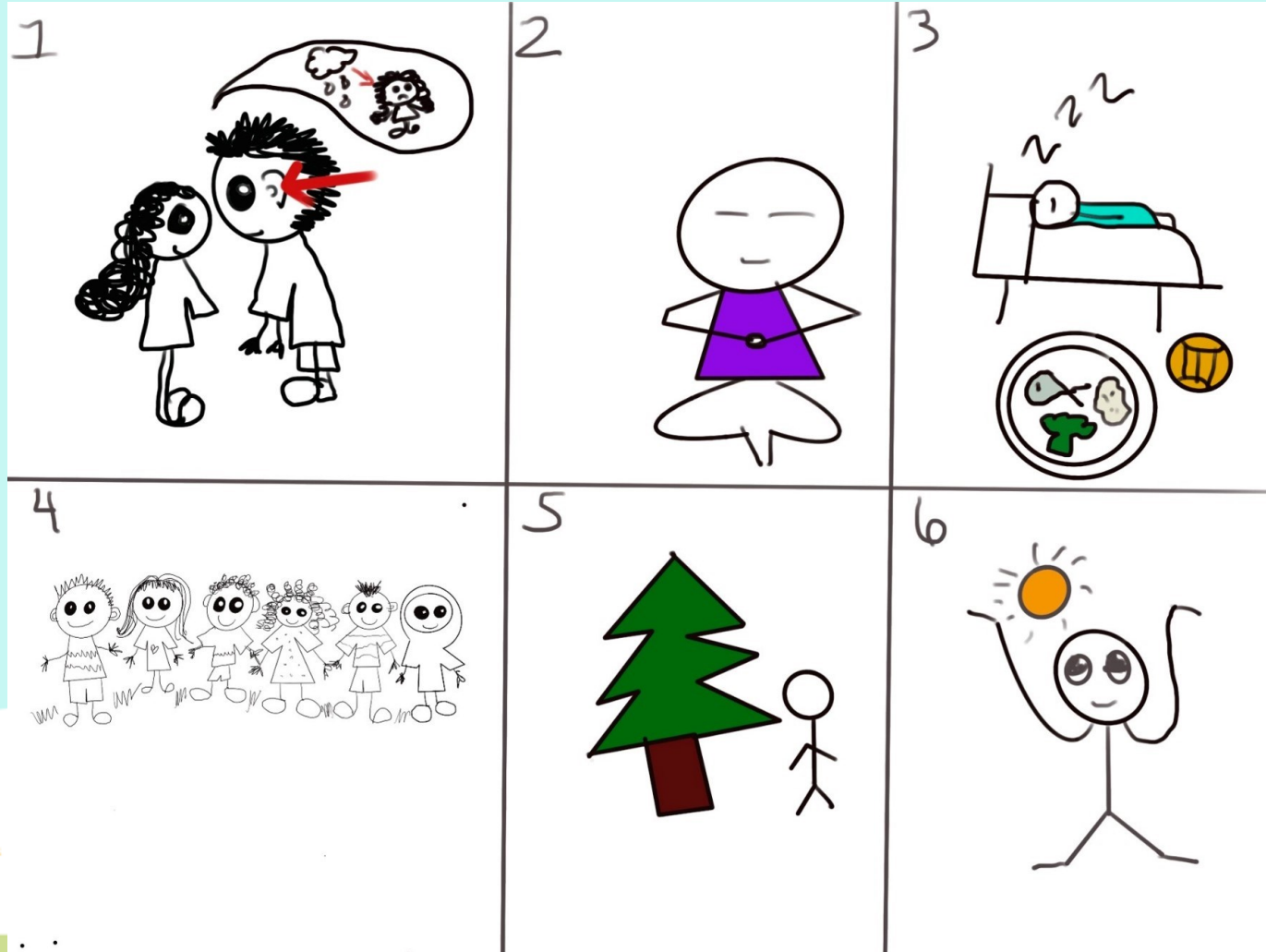


# Emotional literacy

- Feelings Beach Ball



# Managing stress, worries, mood

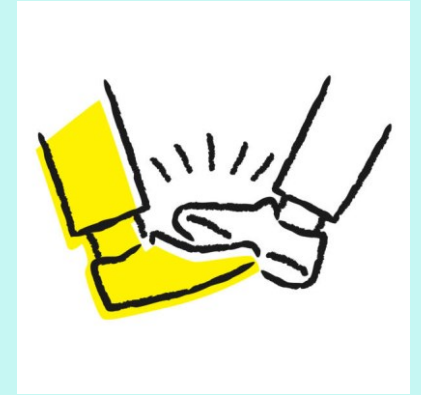


1. Listen with full attention/patience, ask questions, don't be quick to give advice
2. Become a relaxation expert
3. Help them get enough sleep, nourishment, exercise
4. Connect with others
5. Get out in nature
6. Practice gratitude



# Stinking Thinking

- Foot exercise
- How to change thinking -- Question thoughts:
  - What would I say to my best friend if they had this thought?
  - What's the worst thing that could happen? What's the likelihood of that happening (and is there anything you can do to minimize the likelihood of that happening)? What's the best thing that could happen?
  - Sometimes need to break fears down → start with smaller things to gain confidence, then work your way up to bigger things (elevator example)
    - Problem with avoidance



# Importance of Sleep

- Difficulties sleeping?
  - Day time naps can affect night sleep
  - Irregular sleep time is like regular jet lag
  - How to sleep: Use bed only for sleep, relaxing routine before bed (no studying in bed, try not to study or do other mentally busy things right up until bed)
  - If lying in bed for more than 20-30 minutes, get up, do something relaxing, come back to bed when sleepy
  - Challenge thoughts (“I won’t fall asleep”)
  - Sleep affects stress, worries, mood



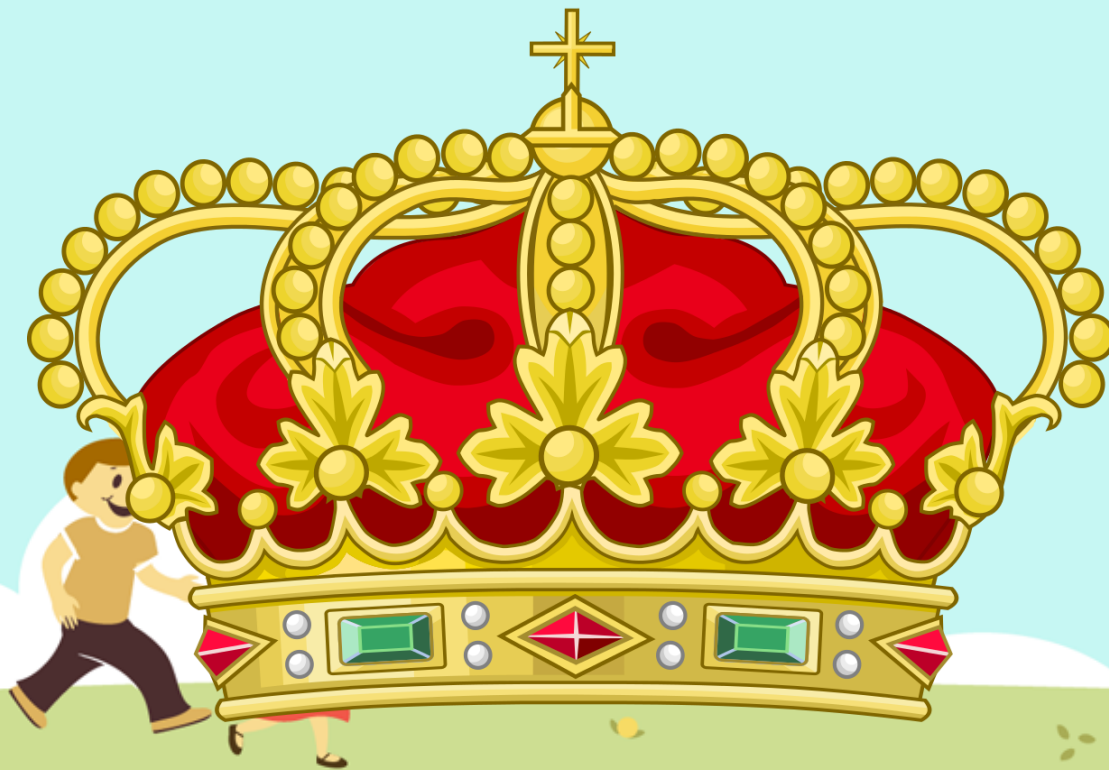
# Music Break!

Song “Thought Detective” from our program called D.R.E.A.M.: Developing Resilience through Emotions, Attitudes & Meaning





# Crown of Thoughts



# Mental Health Resources



# When children need help

- Psychologist → Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT, etc)
- Psychotherapist, Social Worker, School Guidance Counsellor
- Psychiatrist or family doctor (medication) → only if concern is severe → CBT is recommended as frontline treatment
- Crisis → local crisis line; Kids Help Phone



Drlaura@tomorrowme.ca

# Questions?

