

The River of Wellbeing:

Ideas for young people to look after their own mental health and wellbeing when settling back at school

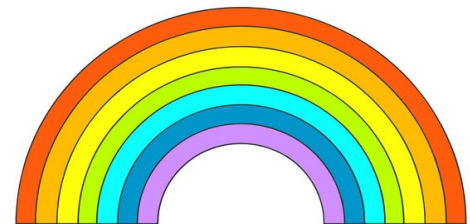
Jersey Psychology and Wellbeing Service

May 2020

The River of Wellbeing is a way to explain the times during the day when we seem to easily listen, learn and get along with our friends. Can you imagine yourself canoeing down the River of Wellbeing?

Like all rivers, sometimes the river is calm and still, and we might experience feelings of safety and happiness. At other times the river may feel a little rough, we may come across rocks and have to think about moving out of the way or we get stuck. In the River of Wellbeing, the rocks are the things that affect our emotions strongly that we come across during our day. When we hit a rock, we may feel sad, worried, or frustrated before the river becomes calm once more and we feel happier again. This might be how you feel sometimes when you think about being at school and doing things outside your home now that it is safe for us to do more.

If you are deciding what you can do now to feel more confident, so that you can be excited about seeing your friends and school staff, and to experience more about what the 'new normal' is going to look like at school then here are some ideas and tips to help you.



In this document:

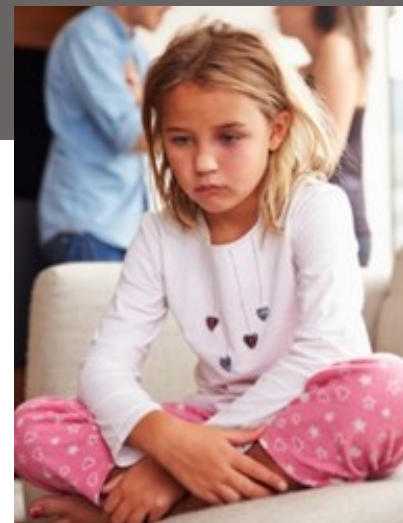
- River Banks.
- What helps us to stay in the river of wellbeing?
- The healthy mind platter.
- Ideas for making progress.
- What have you learned?

The Riverbanks

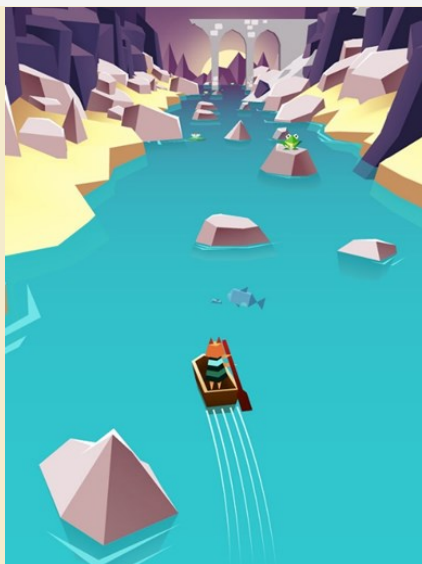
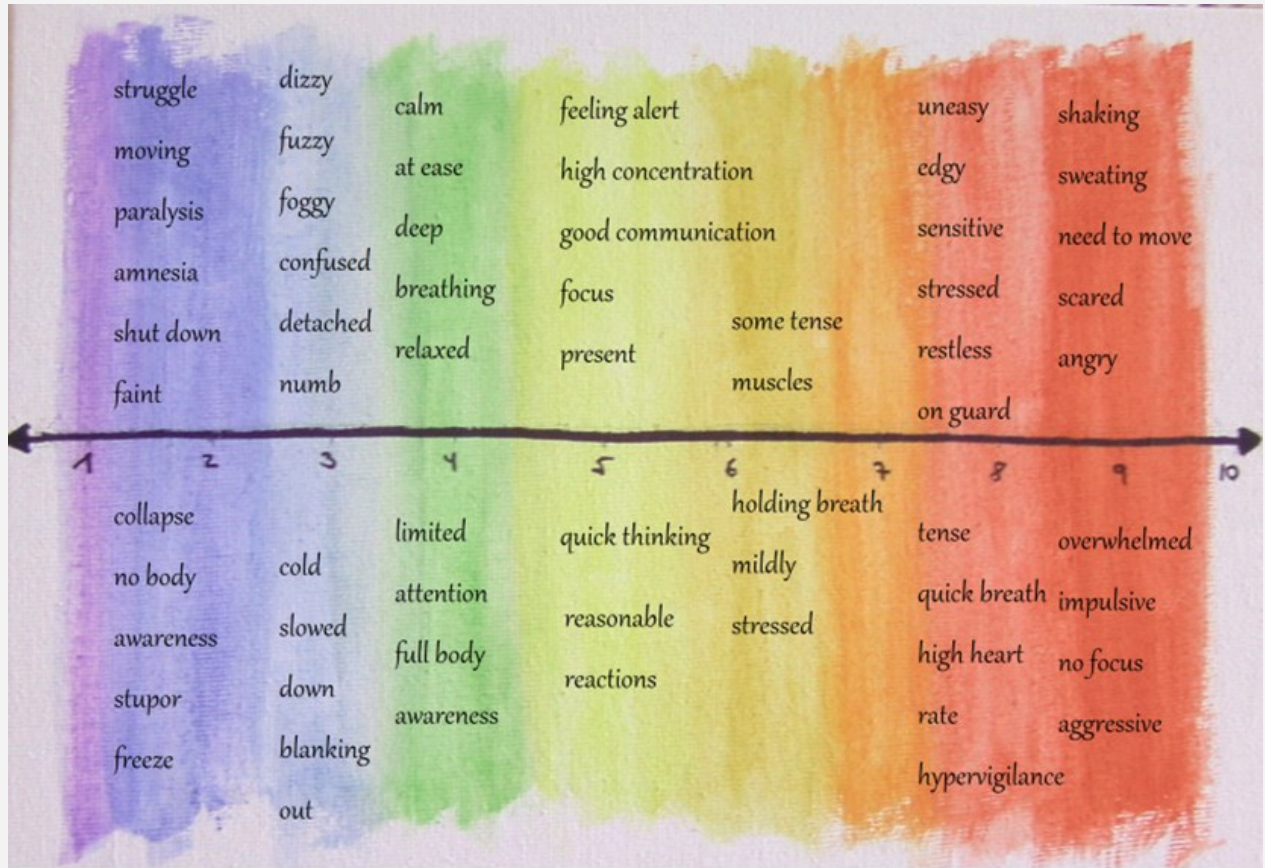
On either side of the river there is a riverbank. One side is called the **Riverbank of Chaos**. People hit this bank when they get very angry, very worried or very upset. Before they hit the bank, they may feel that they cannot concentrate and that they have lots of energy in their body. They may notice their body becomes tense or their breathing gets fast. Sometimes they might get into trouble because of their behaviour; feel like giving up on their work; or lose their temper.



On the other side of the river is the **Riverbank of Rigidity**. People hit this bank when they feel sad, tired and slowed down. It can feel like they are closed off from other people. Some people can 'bounce' from one bank to the other, experiencing difficulty finding the middle part of the river where its calmer and easy to manage.



The following picture shows some of the feelings that people may have. On both edges of the picture are the feelings you may experience at the river banks. The bank of rigidity is shown by the colour purple and the bank of chaos is shown by the colour red. The middle colours green, yellow and orange represents the river of wellbeing, which is the best place for you to be. How do you feel right now?



We can learn to be more aware of how we are feeling. This helps us to use skills to stay in the River of Wellbeing, especially when we get close to the edge. We can also learn skills to return to the River of Wellbeing at times when we find ourselves stuck on either side. At times we might need an adult or a trusted friend to help us with this because our thinking brain does not work well on the riverbanks.

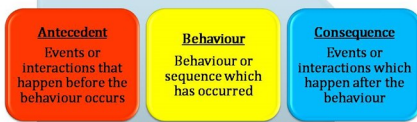
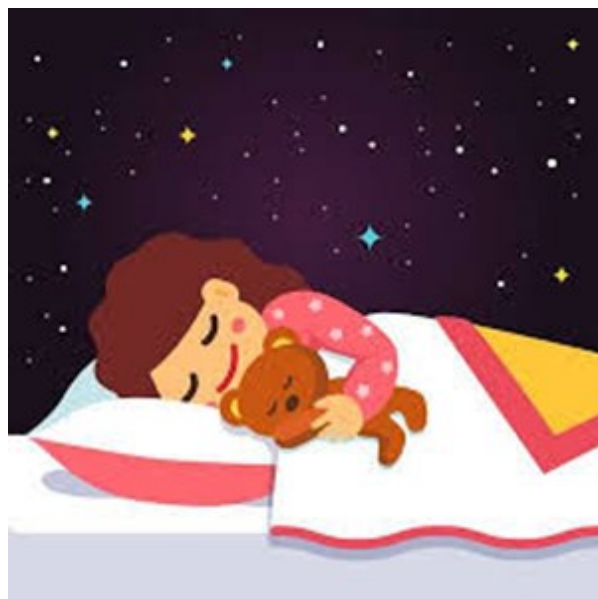
Who are the adults/friends that can help support you back to the river of wellbeing at home or at school?



What helps us stay in the River of Wellbeing?

Our river is wider when we sleep well, exercise regularly, eat healthily and talk about our emotions. Have you noticed how you may feel more grumpy if you haven't slept well or if you are feeling very hungry?

It can be very helpful to talk to someone if you are feeling worried or stressed. There is a saying 'a problem shared is a problem halved' because most of us feel better when we have talked about the things that are worrying us with someone we trust.



The Healthy Mind Platter



The Healthy Mind Platter for Optimal Brain Matter™

Copyright © 2011 David Rock and Daniel J. Siegel, M.D. All rights reserved.

You may have seen the healthy eating plate before, which shows you the different types of foods we should eat in order to have a healthy body. Dr Rock and Dr Siegel decided to design a similar plate for a healthy mind. This is based on science and psychology and they called it the Healthy Mind Platter.

The idea is that we need to spend time each day in the 7 areas. If we get the balance right with all 7 then we help ourselves to be in the river of wellbeing for longer.

Sleep

Remember, having enough sleep is very important for our wellbeing. Sleep helps us to concentrate, to have more balanced emotions, to learn easier and to make good choices e.g. with how we act.

Physical time

When we move our bodies, aerobically (where we feel out of breath) if possible, we strengthen our brains. Exercise improves our mood, lowers stress and anxiety and helps us focus.

Focus time

When we closely focus on tasks we make deep connections in the brain. This may be when you are solving problems, such as Maths, or reading a book.

Play time

When we have fun playing games on our own or with friends we can try new ideas and be creative. Play time helps make new connections in the brain.

Connecting time

When we connect with other people or pets, ideally in person, or take time to really think about our connection to the natural world around us this helps develop the social part of our brain.

Down time

When we are non-focused and don't really have a goal, and let our minds wander or simply relax, we help our brains recharge. Chilling out can be really important. This also helps our brain to remember what we learned in focus time (without even thinking about it!).

Time in

When we quietly stop and think, focusing on any feelings we have, images and thoughts, we help ourselves to use our brains better. Mindfulness and self-awareness activities can be helpful. Some people like to write a diary or talk about their feelings with someone.

It can be useful to think about how much time you spend each day in the 7 areas. It might also be useful to think about how you're going to connect and do some of these things when you return to school.

Ideas for moving from the Riverbank of Chaos to the River of Wellbeing

As mentioned earlier, when you have experiences that make you hit into the riverbank you may need someone you trust to help support you back to the river of wellbeing. With practice you can also learn how to do it for yourself. Sometimes it happens naturally with time. Our emotions tend to move on, like clouds in the sky or leaves on a stream.

There are many different ways to help return to the river of wellbeing and some of these are discussed below. You can remember them by thinking about the word **BRAMBLE**. This stands for **B**reathing, **R**hythm **A**nd **M**oving **B**ody **L**ightens **E**motions. You may need to get a trusted family member to help you with some of these as you start, or work through them with friends.

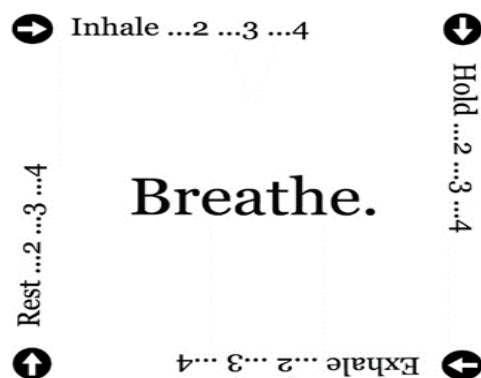
The breath can be a really useful way to return to the river, especially when used with movement. However, some people don't like paying attention to breathing. If this feels more unhelpful than helpful then you could just focus on movement. Other ways to notice the breath, which may help are to put one or two hands on the belly and feel the breath from the outside or to imagine breathing in a calming colour.

As well as using breathing, rhythm and movement, we can also use the senses of seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting.

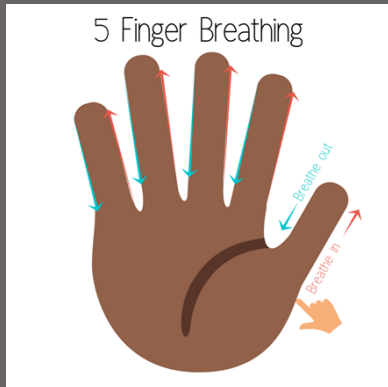
1. **Belly breathing** – place a hand on your belly and feel the movement. Allow your belly to rise as you breathe in and fall as you breathe out. You can also practice lying down with a soft toy or light book on your belly. Imagine giving the toy or book a ride as your belly moves it up as you breathe in and down as you breathe out.

2. **3/5 breathing** - breathe in as you count to 3 and breathe out as you count to 5. Breathing in this way helps calm your mind and body. You can practice this also by blowing bubbles. Gently blow the bubble as you breathe out. Notice how the bubble is bigger if you blow gently and for longer.

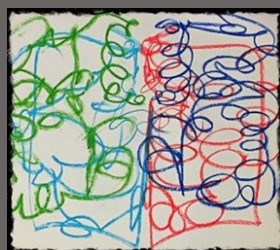
3. **Muscle relaxation** – tensing/squeezing the muscles in different parts of your body on the in-breath and relaxing on the outbreath. For example, making the hands into fists as you breathe in and then allow your hands and fingers to become loose and floppy as you breathe out. You can do different parts of the body or the whole body. One way of doing this is tensing the body as though you were a robot and then letting the body become floppy like a ragdoll.



4. **Finger breathing** - Sometimes called star breathing (using a star instead of a hand). With fingers on one hand outstretched use a finger from your other hand to trace around the thumb and fingers whilst breathing. From base of thumb to tip breathe in; from tip of thumb to base on the other side breathe out and so on. This can then be repeated on the other hand.

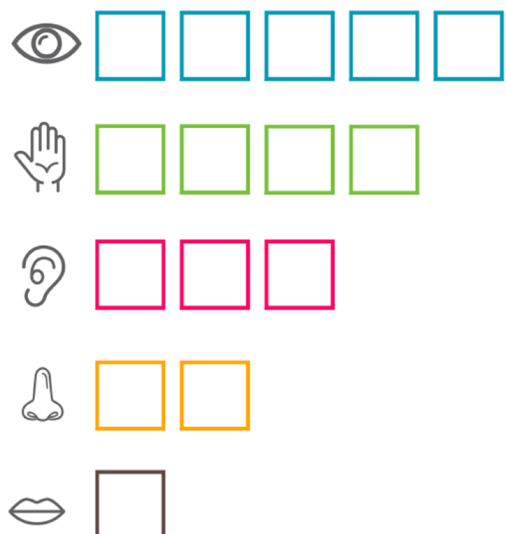


5. **Tracing and breathing** - Draw a shape on a piece of paper. As you breathe slowly in and out continue to trace the shape without lifting the pencil from the paper.
6. **Movement and rhythm** – such as jumping on a trampoline; throwing a ball against a wall; kicking or bouncing a ball; shaking or stomping out your energy; fast walking or marching on the spot; star jumps; playing the drums; squeezing stress balls, etc.
7. **Two-handed scribbling** – using two different coloured crayons or pencils, one in each hand, begin by scribbling with both hands at the same time. This can be done to the beat of music if available.



8. **Opposite sides** – try clicking the finger of one hand whilst blinking the eye on the other side of the body and then swapping over. It's not as easy as it sounds!
9. **Music (soothing and calming music and sounds)** – what types of music help you to feel more calm if you are feeling angry or worried; or happier if you are feeling upset? Think about how you can use this information to help yourself prepare for something when you'd like to feel happy or how to support yourself when you're feeling a little sad.
10. **54321** - using your 5 main senses – 5 things you can see (looking around the room); 4 things you can feel (such as your feet on the floor, you bottom on the chair, your clothing on your skin and your hands on your lap); 3 things you can hear (maybe the sound of the clock, people moving or talking, traffic or birds); 2 things you can smell (or imagine, such as soap on hands, hot chocolate, baked bread or cakes) and 1 thing you can taste (or imagine, such as toothpaste, pizza, chocolate).

54321 Grounding Exercise



Ideas for moving from the Bank of Rigidity to the River of Wellbeing

If you find yourself feeling sad, tired, not really wanting to talk to anyone or enjoying anything then try helping yourself by...

1. Thinking about what you can do to smell something/touch something/hear something/see something or taste something you like that makes you feel safe and warm.
2. Chewy, crunchy food.
3. Use a sensory shaker. This can be something you make that creates a noise or a bottle with glitter inside that you can watch as it goes up and down when you move the bottle, concentrating on your breathing as it moves.



4. Play with some sensory toys e.g. things you can squeeze or rub gently against your skin.
5. Roll a pencil between the palms of your hands and focus.
6. Gently wash your hands using warm water and nice smelling soap or give yourself a hand massage. It's even better if you have someone you trust who knows how to give a massage!

7. Think about using a stress / squeeze ball or play with some slime.
8. Use a heavy or weighted blanket and wrap it around your shoulders like a hug. The pressure often makes us feel calmer.
9. Think about going to sleep in a sleeping bag on top of your bed and wrap yourself up safe. You might even want to try using a small pop up tent on top of your bed and make yourself a safe, calm space.
10. Feel the bottom of your feet on the floor or your body sat on a chair, notice how your body is supported.
11. Get dancing and put on some music!
12. Gently sit or bounce on a trampoline or yoga / therapy ball.
13. Finger tracing – see labyrinth picture.
14. 54321 – see above.



What have you learned?

We hope you find this handout helpful. Here are some reminders of the key learning points

- We are at our best for learning, playing and being with friends when our brain has a balance of calmness and alertness. We call this the 'river of wellbeing'.
- The wider our river of wellbeing, the more we can manage problems that arise during the day, like getting stuck on a Math problem, falling out with a friend or wondering what something new will look like.
- We can widen our river by getting enough sleep, exercise, healthy food and by talking to someone we trust about our feelings. We can also use the Healthy Mind Platter to think about balancing our time for sleep, physical time, focus time, down time, time in, play time and connecting time.
- Like all other children and adults we cannot stay in the river of wellbeing all the time. Sometimes we will hit the riverbanks, especially if our river is narrow and there are obstacles in the water. One side is the bank of chaos, where we go when we feel very angry, anxious or worried. The other side is the bank of rigidity, where we go when we feel sad, tired or shut down.
- When we hit a riverbank our thinking brain doesn't work very well. After a little time, even if we do nothing, we will get unstuck, return to the river and feel better but we can help ourselves too, either on our own or with the help of an adult, using some of the ideas above and learning what works well for each of us.
- We can think about our skills by remembering our 5 main senses – seeing, touching, hearing, smelling and tasting; and by remembering the acronym BRAMBLE. BRAMBLE stands for breathing, rhythm and moving body lightens emotions.

Finally, the best time to practice these skills is when you feel reasonably calm. The more you practice, the easier they will be. Then, when you need to use them they will be more familiar to you so get moving and start thinking about what works for you and how you are going to help yourself to stay in the middle.

**Thank you for reading and keep rowing
down the river!**

