

the invisible riptide

Building Mental Wellness - Together

Discussion Guide and Activities - Suicide

Discussion Points and Activities using *The Invisible Riptide* for suicide prevention and to educate youth on suicidal thoughts

1. We all have our own emotional riptides, meaning our feelings can overwhelm us.
 - What do you think your own riptide looks like? Draw it! What feelings are in it?
 - How do you feel them in your body, and why do you think we have feelings?
 - Do you think some people feel more sad or worried than others?
2. Stella talks about how all feelings are OK and are part of being human. She also makes a new declaration, "It is ok to not be ok, and doesn't mean something bad will happen, but that something needs to change."
 - How can feelings be both helpful and unhelpful? Give examples.
 - Can you have more than one feeling at a time?
 - What should you do when your feelings are so big that you don't feel safe or feel overwhelmed?
3. Stella learned about **emotional safety**, that means being able to identify, express, and work through emotions as well as having people respect your boundaries.
 - How does it feel when you express your emotions and feel heard?
 - Ask your family what helps them feel emotionally safe. We can learn a lot from others.
 - How have the people in your life helped you when your emotions felt big?
4. Sometimes it's hard to identify or even talk about your feelings. We're not born knowing how to handle feelings. It's something we learn along the way. If we reach out and connect we can work through some really hard thoughts and feelings.



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- Feeling sad a lot or worrying more than other kids is sometimes just the way we come into the world. If you feel this way a lot, chances are people in your family feel this way too! That is because these strong feelings can be genetic, just like the color of your eyes or if you have horrible allergies.
 - Sometimes kids think they are bad or something is wrong with them for having these thoughts or feelings. Have you ever felt that way?
5. Stella feels so overwhelmed by her feelings at one point and describes it as “feeling like she is drowning and all alone.” Have you ever had thoughts that you wish you weren’t here, that you could just disappear, or go to sleep and not wake up to your big feelings? OR have you ever worried about a friend not wanting to be here anymore?
- It’s important to know you are not alone, and together you can handle anything. It’s a sign of bravery and strength to tell an adult how you feel or if you are worried about a friend.
 - If it’s too hard to say it out loud you can email your teacher or school social worker, write in a journal to your parents, or text it, instead of saying it aloud.
 - These big thoughts and feelings are your body’s way of saying things are too hard and too much right now for you on your own. It’s time to lean on a trusted adult. They know just what to do to keep you safe. You never get in trouble for being brave and caring about a friend that you are worried about.
6. Stella becomes more aware of the Invisible Riptide when the Coronavirus pandemic started because there was so much change, uncertainty and loss. Having lonely thoughts and feeling like no one cares if you are around can feel this way too.
- Do you notice an invisible riptide in your body when you start to feel really sad or lonely?
 - Brainstorm some ideas with a trusted adult for what to do IF you start to feel this way so you can ride the riptide until it passes.
 - Draw the emotions of the riptide. Then draw yourself on the riptide, holding on tight, to what helps keep you grounded and safe.
7. Stella feels brave and excited to get help from a “feelings doctor” or therapist (Ms. Tina). She teaches Stella it’s OK to share her feelings. If we don’t show trusted adults our inside, they don’t know how to help us best. Even one safe relationship can help our brain calm and change for the better. How cool is that?



- How do you feel when asking for help? Comfortable? Embarrassed? Relieved?
 - Brainstorm ideas with your family that will help you feel comfortable expressing yourself.
 - How do you want your brain to change so that it works best for you?
8. The book talks about feeling the emotional riptide around us and how it affects us.
- Give examples of how emotions can be contagious - in other words how we can feel the emotions of others.
 - Draw the people in your life and the emotions that surround them.
 - What situations can make your riptide smaller? What situations can make it bigger?
 - Who helps make your riptide smaller? Who might make your riptide bigger?
9. "Balance and connection are the core of health. We feel and function best when our body's systems are in balance with friends, family, community and nature" (Perry and Winfrey, *What Happened to You*, pg. 48). This is why Stella chanted, "**People need people.**"
- What parts feel out of balance?
 - How does your riptide react, what feelings do you have, when you feel out of balance?
 - What are there warning signs that you are starting to feel really sad or anxious?
 - What makes you feel like you belong?
10. Stella wants people to lean on one another. When we know we are not alone in our feelings, we feel more capable of having them. Stella has good friends, but even she feels alone and isolated sometimes.
- When do you feel this way? What can you do if you feel this way?
 - Talk to a trusted adult. Make a plan for school and home that helps keep you physically and emotionally safe. You can include your favorite teacher, the school social worker, art teacher or anyone that makes you feel safe.
11. Let's talk about **co-regulation** - a big fancy word that means we can catch calm from others. We might catch some calm by getting a hug, sitting in silence with someone you love, telling someone you just want to talk and don't want any advice or suggestions, sitting beside each other and coloring, or throwing a ball to each other.
- Identify an adult figure who makes you feel emotionally safe at home and school.
 - What is it about that person or what does that person do to help you feel safe?



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12. Stella liked dancing, especially to help her calm her body and release her feelings. If you are having thoughts about wanting to go to sleep and not wake up, what is something you can do after talking to a trusted adult? For example,
- What are some rhythmic activities you enjoy?
 - What are some soothing activities you enjoy?
 - What helps remind you that you are loved?
13. Our brain is sort of like a muscle. We have to strengthen the calm parts when we are calm so that they work better when needed. Basically, our brain has to get used to feeling calm to use it when it's needed.
- Explore ways to strengthen the calm part of your brain: use apps (Calm, BrainTap app, Insight Timer), short guided meditations, yoga poses, or blowing bubbles.
 - Make a list with your family of things that help people calm down. Notice that calming activities can be different for different people (some want space vs. distance or stillness vs. movement). Your own needs may even change depending on the situation! Knowing what you need and what your friends and family need allows you to be more supportive.

For more helpful resources on discussing thoughts of self-harm with children please visit www.theinvisibleriptide.com under Resources. You are not alone and feeling this way is normal for more people than you think! Check out these evidence-based questions proven to reduce suicide <http://cssrs.columbia.edu>.



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