

the invisible riptide

Building Mental Wellness - Together

Discussion Guide & Activities - Trauma

Discussion Points and Activities using *The Invisible Riptide* designed to reduce the negative impact of trauma and increase positive buffering factors

We all have emotional riptides, meaning our feelings can overwhelm us.

- What does your riptide look like? Draw it! What feelings are in it?
- Feelings are there to give us information. What information are your feelings telling you?
- Some people feel more sad or worried than others. Do you feel that way sometimes?

Stella talks about how all feelings are OK and are part of being human. Feelings are helpful and unhelpful, especially if you had something scary happen or have seen something happen to someone that you love.

- How are your feelings helpful? How are your feelings unhelpful?
- Are there times when your feelings get in the way?
- Can you have more than one feeling at a time?

We are not born knowing how to handle feelings. It's something we learn along the way. Sometimes, scary things can get stuck in our body and give us swirly, whirly feelings in our bellies and heads.

- How does your body feel when you think about something scary that happened?
- Do you have whirling and swirling in your body when you have big feelings?
- Draw what you feel in your body when you think about the scary thing that happened in your riptide.

When we go through difficult or scary situations that make us feel unsafe or like something bad might happen, our anxiety turns on to protect us. However, when the scary event is over, sometimes anxiety forgets to turn off and we still feel the swirly, whirly in our body and feel emotional riptides even when we are safe. When this happens, it's because your brain loves you so much that it may think you are in danger when it sees something, even something really small, that might remind you of the bad thing that happened. Although this can be confusing, it's normal and can happen to anyone.



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- Draw the things that your brain might get confused by and turn on your anxiety, even though you're safe.
- One way you can teach your brain that it is being overly protective is to boss it back when there is a false alarm. When your brain sounds the anxiety alarm when you are NOT in danger, it helps to let your brain know you are safe - sometimes even in a funny way. For example, you can boss it back and say things like:
 - False alarm.*
 - Thanks, but I'm OK. I got this.*
 - I hear you, but I have better things to do than listen to you right now.*
 - Thanks, but no thanks. I'm safe now.*
 - That was then, this is now, and I'm safe.*
- Draw your riptide and your favorite ways to boss it back or let it know you're safe.

In *The Invisible Riptide*, Stella feels so overwhelmed by her feelings at one point that she 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 and scary memories? Maybe you’ve felt like it’s too hard to do anything because everything seems to remind you of what happened, could happen again, or of an unsafe person?

- When your brain gets confused, remind yourself that it’s normal. Notice things that remind you that you are ok and safe now. What smells, people, places, tastes, or sounds or textures make your body feel calm?
- What helps remind you that you are loved and safe even though your body and feelings might make you feel like you are not or that the bad situation will happen again?
- Put together a feel-good kit you can carry in your backpack. What would you put in it to remind you that you are safe and can let yourself see good things and good memories?

Sometimes kids think they are bad or weak for feeling so scared or that they somehow caused something bad to happen. Most kids have thoughts like these that aren’t helpful or true. One of the coolest things about our brains is that we can ALWAYS change it to work in a way that is best for us. Yes, that is right, you can actually change your brain. You can help your brain chew up the parts of the bad memories and unhelpful thoughts that make you feel stuck and hopeless and make room for growing good thoughts and feelings that help you feel like a kid again!

- Draw thought bubbles of unhelpful thoughts that you or other kids might have when you think about the bad or scary thing that happened.
- Imagine saying to those thoughts, “Not helpful.” and “It’s never a kid’s fault.” or “Whatever. Don’t need you anymore.”



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- Draw clouds and put the unhelpful thoughts in them and watch them float away.
- Write the unhelpful thoughts on stones, or just think about the unhelpful thoughts while rubbing the stone and throw them in a pond or a river. Notice that you are releasing the weight of holding onto those thoughts and you now have more room to be a kid and don't have to worry about adult things anymore.

It's normal to feel like it's your fault when something bad happens because it makes you feel like you can control it, even when you can't. It's also a way your brain tries to make sense of something that doesn't make sense.

- Remind yourself that sometimes bad things simply happen. There is no real explanation for it. Since humans like to feel in control, our brains might try to convince us that there is something we did that caused the bad thing, even though it may have been random.
- Draw your emotional riptide with your riding on the riptide, knowing that it was not your fault.
- What's on the other side of the riptide that helps you feel safe and protected again?

Stella learned about **emotional safety - being able to identify, express, and work through emotions and have people listen to you and understand you.**

- When scary things happen, it can be hard to feel physically or emotionally safe. Draw or talk about things that comfort you and remind you that you are safe now?
- How can safe adults in your life help you when your feelings get too overwhelming?

Big thoughts and feelings are your body's way of saying things are too hard and too much for you on your own right now. Your body is trying to tell you it's time to lean on a trusted adult. They know just what to do to keep you safe. Talking to a trusted adult helps us feel less stuck and scared of what our body is feeling on the inside. Sometimes, though, it can be hard to name or even talk about your feelings.

- Who is a trusted adult who can help you sort out all of your confusing feelings?
- If it's too hard to say thoughts and feelings 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.

Stella started noticing her invisible riptide of emotions and feelings in her body when the Coronavirus pandemic started. There had been so much change, uncertainty, loss, and often not feeling physically safe. When we see or experience something scary, our riptides can grow bigger too. When our emotional riptides get bigger, sometimes it's hard to think, and we might do things that are unhelpful or make us feel bad about ourselves. Remember you are not bad, your body is trying to let you know that you need help sorting out all of the big feelings and memories.

- Do you notice an invisible riptide in your body when you start to feel really scared, confused, sad or lonely?



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- Do you ever lash out or get angry and don't know why?
- Think of some ideas with a trusted adult for what you can 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 you feel safe. Remind yourself you are ok now and have a plan to keep you from feeling like you need to get away, fight or try to go somewhere else in your mind.

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. A trusted adult can help us learn how to calm our emotional riptides. Even one safe relationship can help our brain calm and change for the better! How cool is that?

- How does it feel when you ask for help? Comfortable? Embarrassed? Relieved?
- Is it hard for you to find your brave on your own?
- Talk to a trusted adult about different ways to grow the calm parts of your brain. Some ideas include: going outdoors more, dancing, swinging, drawing, practicing mindfulness, or talking about how you feel.
- Write out or draw your trusted adults around your riptide, helping you learn how to make your riptide get smaller.

***The Invisible Riptide* talks about feeling the emotional riptide around us and how it affects us.**

- Use your curious brain to notice how your body feels around certain people, places, and things. What emotions do you feel? Draw them out around the people, places, and things.
- Our brain is so good at this that you might feel someone else’s people’s riptide, and it might remind you of what happened. That is ok. Listen to these signals and take a break from being around that person until you feel safe again. Talk to a trusted adult when you feel this way to help you make sense of it.
- What situations make your riptide smaller? What situations can make it bigger?
- Who helps make your riptide smaller? Who might make your riptide bigger?

“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.”



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- When something bad happens, we often feel out of balance or out of control. For example, is it easier to get angry? Do you have trouble sleeping or nightmares? Do you have more trouble paying attention? Does your body feel more achy now? These are your brain and body telling you that you might be out of balance and that something needs to change. That's why Stella says, "It's OK to not be OK." It doesn't mean something bad will happen again or that you still aren't safe, but that something needs to change.
- What parts feel out of balance or out of control? What things do you want to change?
- How does your riptide change when you think about feeling unsafe and don't have a safe adult around?
- How can you tell that you are starting to feel really sad or anxious?
- Does your riptide ever appear without warning or out of the blue?
- What makes you feel like you belong?

Stella wants people to lean on one another. When you know you are not alone in your feelings, you feel more able to have them and deal with them. That's because of **co-regulation - a big fancy word that means we can catch calm from others. Some ways you can catch some calm include 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 together and coloring, or throwing a ball to each other.**

- Do you sometimes feel alone? What feelings show up when you feel alone?
- Talk to your trusted adult about what can help you feel physically and emotionally safe, at school and where you live. You can include your favorite teacher, the school social worker, art teacher or anyone that makes you feel safe.
- Identify an adult 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?

Lots of kids feel like they are the only ones who have bad things happen to them and that they should keep it a secret. They also may have been told that something bad will happen if they tell. They are also afraid that if they talk about it the feelings may get bigger or they will never go away! The truth is that talking with a trusted person can feel very hard at first, but once you start talking, you can start to feel better.

- Talk with a trusted adult about the difference between a safe and unsafe secret?
- Who is someone who's a really good listener and can share anything with?
- Can you remember a time where you talked about something hard? How did feel? What happened after you talked about it?



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When something bad happens that feels unsafe, we have to re-train our brain how to calm down. We do this by practicing what makes us feel calm and more in control so it's easier for our brains to remember how to help us calm down. When we grow the part of the brain that helps us calm, it becomes stronger and better able to help us when we feel overwhelmed, stressed or scared.

- Stella liked dancing, especially to release her feelings and help her body feel calmer. Draw your brain and all the ways that help you feel calmer so you can see them anytime you have a hard time remembering.
- Experiment with ways to help your brain learn to calm down, like tracing a square and counting as you breathe in and out, doing yoga or stretching your body, blowing bubbles, or imagining yourself in your favorite place.
- Draw your favorite place to be or draw yourself finding your calm.
- Make a list with a trusted adult (teacher, coach, family member) with things that help people calm down. Calming activities can be different for different people (some want space vs. distance or stillness vs. movement). What helps you might even change. Knowing what helps you makes it easier to calm down. Letting friends and family know what works for you to calm down helps them help you.

For more helpful resources on discussing trauma, conversation starters, and building mental wellness, visit www.theinvisibleriptide.com.

You are not alone.

Feeling this way is normal for more people than you think!



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