

# Exploring the Ethical Dimensions to Emotions

## PURPOSE

In this learning experience, students will identify when emotions become risky. Emotions can cause harm to ourselves and others when they grow very strong. Students will learn that they can cultivate the skills of recognizing emotions. Through this recognition they can decide whether or not to give those emotions more “fuel,” and to manage their emotions in ways that align with our values.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students will:

- Identify the connection between emotional wellbeing and ethics
- Describe the ethical dimensions of emotions
- Examine how ethical responses can promote wellbeing and support compassionate responses

## PRIMARY CORE COMPONENTS



Self-Regulation



Compassion  
for Others

## LENGTH

45 minutes

## MATERIALS REQUIRED

- “Cultivating the Stance of Opposition” reading
- Four A’s Protocol
- Writing utensils and paper

## CHECK-IN | 5 minutes

[PAUSE]s can be up to 10 seconds each

### Settling Activity

- **“Let’s take a moment to get comfortable and in an alert position. What does your body need right now? [PAUSE]**
- **For you it may be settling into your chair, or if you feel like it, leaning against a wall, sitting or lying on the floor. Please take a moment to make yourself comfortable in an alert position. Feel free to move if you need to. [PAUSE]**
- **Now I invite you to think of a resource, something that makes you feel better, safer, happier, or stronger.**
- **It could be a person, place, thing, something about yourself, or a memory of a kindness you experienced. It can be real or imaginary. Notice the details of this resource and any sensations associated with it. [PAUSE]**
- **Now, when you think about this resource, what do you notice happening inside your body? Notice the sensations. [PAUSE]**
- **Next, I invite you to bring your attention to your body and what it is in contact with. Perhaps you feel the chair against your back, your hand on your leg. Possibly the coolness of the table, the softness of your shirt, maybe the air going in and out of your nostrils. What sensations do you notice on the inside? [PAUSE]**

- **Scan your body for a pleasant or neutral sensation and just pay attention to that and observe it. See if it changes or stays the same. [PAUSE]**
- **You can always shift your body and your focus to another place that feels better. You can always focus on your resource. [PAUSE]**
- **If you get distracted, remember that you are human and it’s okay to get distracted. Just acknowledge you’re distracted and try to bring your attention back to your resource or a pleasant or neutral sensation in your body. [LONGER PAUSE]**
- **As we do this, we’re learning more about our bodies and how to calm them and make them feel better.**
- **Now we’ll conclude the practice. If you closed your eyes, I now invite you to open them. Thank you.”**

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## PRESENTATION/DISCUSSION | 10 minutes

### Revisiting Thinking Traps

- **Open up your journal to our “personal core affect maps” Take a look at how you mapped the emotional terms according to how they could be felt or experienced. Refresh your thinking on your process.**
- **Turn to a nearby partner and share your thoughts about a couple of emotion terms**

that you graphed. Think now about which ones you'd like to share.

- What are some of the factors that contribute to how different people might graph the same emotion term?"

### New Information

- "We can experience more than one emotion at a time.
- These two emotions are focused on different aspects of the event of moving away.
- We can also experience more than one emotion at a time when we feel a "mixed resource." A person might think of their best friend and how happy they are when they're together, but then in the next moment, think of how their friend has moved away, and feel sadness that they can't be together as often. Happiness and sadness are opposing emotions, but here they come from focusing on two different aspects of the resource.
- Only one of the two emotions can be deeply felt at the same time. For example, a person can't feel sad at missing their best friend and happy at missing them at the same time. Another example is rage and tenderness. If I'm filled with rage towards someone, it's unlikely that I will be feeling tenderness toward the same person. For me to feel tenderness towards them, my rage has to pass."

### INSIGHT ACTIVITY | 20 minutes

#### Instructions and Guiding Language

- "We're going to read a short article about cultivating a stance of opposition that helps us gain more agency and empowerment over the emotions we are feeling.
- As you read the article, use the note catcher to capture your thoughts, in preparation for small group discussions.
- With a partner or in small groups, discuss one section that you found interesting and one section you found challenging. Take turns discussing your findings."

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### REFLECTIVE PRACTICE | 10 minutes

#### Reaching for Opposing Emotions

#### Activity Overview

Students will make self-to-text connections, contextualizing their ideas about developing the Stance of Opposition to their own circumstances. They will record their thinking in their SEE Learning Journal.

#### Writing/Reflection Prompt

- "What is an emotion and when do I feel emotion?
- When I get into a particular emotional state of mind, how could identifying this emotional state or experience be helpful to me for understanding my current reality and for creating a change that I desire?

*(For example, "I'm feeling sadness and am highly activated and it's very unpleasant.")*

- *How might reaching for an 'opposing emotion' help me with that? What's a specific action I could take?"*

### **Guiding Language**

- *"We can identify certain emotions as "risky." Emotions are risky when, if left unattended or allowed to grow very strong, they prompt us to engage in behaviors that would harm ourselves and others. We can cultivate (intentionally develop) the skills of recognizing emotions, deciding whether or not to give those emotions more 'fuel', and manage our emotions in ways that align with our values.*
- *Understanding emotions and mindsets in this way will also help us develop within ourselves a "stance of opposition" towards those emotions and mindsets that we believe are harmful to ourselves and others.*
- *Identify a 'risky' emotion that if we don't pay attention, can lead us toward harmful ways of acting toward ourselves or one another and identify a paired emotion that we can cultivate so that when we feel the risky emotion gaining strength, we can concentrate on that opposing emotion. Write them down (on our shared chart/in your journal)."*

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## Oppositional Emotions and “The Stance of Opposition”: Exploring the Ethical Dimension to Emotions

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In SEE Learning we identify certain emotions as “risky.” Emotions are risky when, if left unattended or allowed to grow very strong, they prompt us to engage in behaviors that would harm ourselves and/or others. Since SEE Learning is about our own personal experience, what is most important is discerning for ourselves what counts as a “risky emotion” for us.

In chapter 1 we explored the idea that generally no one wants to be hurt or harmed. Instead, we prefer being treated with kindness and compassion. This appears to be universal even among non-human animals. It is no surprise then that many philosophers, scientists, and religious thinkers have come to the conclusion that not harming others is an important foundation of ethical behavior. We can call this “the ethic of non-violence.” This is a foundational concept that is also often called “the Golden Rule”: to treat others as you yourself would want to be treated. This means treating others with kindness, compassion, honesty, integrity, generosity, and forgiveness, since this is how we would like others to treat us.

If ethics is about how we treat others and want them to treat us, then we can see that emotions can play a role in ethics. This is because our emotions and feelings have a large impact on how we behave. For example, we have explored that if we are stuck in the high zone or low zone, we are less likely to engage in productive ways, and more likely to engage in unproductive ways.

We can learn to identify emotions in different ways. We can study them objectively from a third-person perspective (*what we observe in the world as an objective outsider, like a scientist studying it*). We can also study them in our own subjective experience from a first-person perspective (*what we experience and observe about ourselves*). And thirdly, we can study emotions in others from a second-person perspective (*what we observe about another and what we think about that*). Why would we study emotions in so many different ways? Because the better we can identify risky emotions, the better we can manage them. We are dealing with harmful behavior at a fundamental level: in our own minds and hearts.

In addition to just recognizing risky emotions, we can also cultivate emotions and mindsets that are opposed to them. For example, what is the opposite of jealousy? What is the opposite of compassion? What is the opposite of anger?

## Oppositional Emotions and “The Stance of Opposition”:

### Exploring the Ethical Dimension to Emotions (continued)

We can even develop a “stance of opposition” towards those emotions and mindsets (including thinking traps) that we believe are harmful to ourselves and others. For example, if we decide that prejudice towards others on the basis of their gender, religion or ethnicity is wrong, then we identify prejudice as a risky mindset that we do not want. We then commit ourselves to opposing that risky mindset whenever we see it in ourselves or others. Similarly, we commit to cultivating its opposite (or antidote). We may decide that the opposite to such prejudice is a feeling of common humanity and the fundamental equality of all persons, and a commitment to fairness, justice, and impartiality. If so, we commit ourselves to cultivating that in ourselves and others. We cultivate a “stance of appreciation” for these good qualities.

When we develop these stances of opposition and appreciation, we have taken up a commitment to lead an ethical life. We are not merely stating outwardly that we are opposed to prejudice, we are inwardly watching for prejudice within ourselves and opposing it when it arises. Like any skill that we regularly practice, we should get better at this over time. Our internal tendency towards prejudicial thinking should weaken, and our commitment to, and conviction in, the fundamental equality of all persons should grow and become ever firmer. Over time, our understanding of prejudice can become clearer, as will our understanding of common humanity and equality.

The basis of this ethical life is a stance of nonviolence or non-harming. That means refraining from harming others or, if that is impossible, minimizing the harm that we do to others. If others do harm us, we will rarely see those actions as ethical. By the same token, others will not see our actions as ethical if we are harming them. Since we live in communities where we are interdependent, trying to refrain from harm can serve as a foundational ethical principle for our individual and collective well-being. The stance of opposition helps us to do this, because we are on the lookout for those mental states and emotions that might lead us to harming ourselves and others, advertently or inadvertently.

The stance of opposition also helps us maintain “emotional hygiene.” Physical hygiene means the ability to identify what is healthy from what is not. Learning about physical hygiene tells us about things like germs and pathogens so that we can be on our guard against them. It also tells us how to engage in productive behaviors that maintain and bolster our physical health. Emotional hygiene does the same, except on the level of emotions and mindsets. Without understanding the pitfalls of risky emotions left unchecked, and without having a stance of opposition, our practice of emotional hygiene could be limited. If we do develop a rich understanding of our own and others’ emotions, we can practice emotional hygiene in a way that promotes our own and others’ well-being.

Graphic Organizer

## Four "A"s Protocol Template

Assumptions	Aspirations
What assumptions does the author of the Stress Contagion article hold?	What parts of the Stress Contagion article did you find personally meaningful and that you would want to engage in?
Agree	Argue
What do you agree with in the Stress Contagion article?	What do you want to argue with in the Stress Contagion article?

