

Warm Up
Stay Neutral Routine

Information for The Classroom Teacher

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Most emotionally reactive students underestimate their ability to succeed and overestimate how difficult an activity or situation will be. Their rising stress in new or difficult situations further complicates the actual situation as they superimpose negative memories and emotions onto what is happening.

Their coping behavior (fight/flight) when they are this uncomfortable, further disengages them from what is really happening (often removing them from the situation), and then they never have a chance to find out that they can manage the situation, or that the situation is not as bad as they think. These students never get the chance to make a better memory, a memory that would be available when they need it, the next time they encounter the same situation.

People who are anxious are motivated to avoid what is making them anxious. We can use this motivation and shape student avoidance (to a more constructive form of avoidance) in a way that will give the student sufficient exposure to the activity, while providing better memories to replace the negative memories they already have. That is the purpose of the neutral routine.

The neutral routine starts with the assurance that the student does not have to engage in the activity until the student is ready. For details about the actual neutral routine see the comprehension guide that provides the student with an understanding of this program (All About Staying Neutral) and the one that describes the actual routine (Warm up, Stay Neutral Routine).

While the student is "neutral" we expect the teacher to be highly reinforcing toward the students who are participating. Specifically, we want reinforcement for effort (not just the right answer) and we want to normalize "mistakes" with students who are trying to learn. We want to validate that it isn't easy all the time for most of the students, or it's normal to need help or to feel like you don't know how to do it.

Provide positive summary statements to the class that will facilitate the formation of positive memories for the student warming up ("This is not as hard as we first thought" "This is hard but we're having a lot of fun figuring it out").

Try to ask questions that you think the "neutral" student can answer and think of a supported way that the student can engage in the activity (e.g., the student can dictate ideas instead of writing them down, or work with a partner in a quiet part of the room, or do some with the teacher before doing it independently, or will have extra time to respond without worry of interruption, or be provided with answer choices instead of open-ended responses etc.).

Also, summarize how well the situation worked out so you can create a new narrative for the student:

"Sometimes you think it will be too hard, but this time you warmed up, joined the activity, and you found out that, while it was hard it was not as bad as you thought it would be. You can do hard things like this because you know how to try hard and get help when you need it."

Do not deliver that script in its entirety. It's too long to be useful for the student. Take what is most relevant and deliver pieces of the script that help you create the narrative the student will need the next time.

You may also maintain a record of what was originally too hard that has now become routine. We want the student to learn that hard things become easier with practice and effort. The emotionally reactive students who manage to avoid never learn how capable they can be, so the goal is to use this routine as a way to slowly engage them in what they would otherwise avoid.

For more details about this program see: <https://kevinplummerphd.com/staying-neutral-a-warm-up-routine/>