



## Lesson Plan: Emotional Regulation

### *How hot or cold does your emotional “engine” run?*

---

**Grade level:** High School

**Approximate time frame:** One class period

#### **Introduction/rationale**

In the following lesson students will consider the influence of emotions on thinking and behavior and come to understand how managing one’s emotions typically leads to better outcomes. After exploring how fictional characters’ decisions and actions are affected by the intensity of their emotions, students are encouraged to think about parallel instances in their own lives.

#### **Instructional objectives**

Students will...

- Demonstrate an understanding of the concept of emotional intensity through discussion and written work
- Identify a character’s level of emotional intensity in a work of fiction using evidence from the text to support their assertions
- Apply understanding of this concept to their personal lives and discuss its relevance

#### **Curriculum standards**

*English/Language Arts:*

- Summarize in a coherent and organized way information and ideas learned from a focused discussion
- Write coherent compositions with a clear focus, objective presentation of alternate views, rich detail, well-developed paragraphs, and logical argumentation

*Health:*

- Identify and describe the experience of different feelings (such as elation, joy, grief, and rage) and how feelings affect daily functioning



## Lesson Plan: Emotional Regulation

### *How hot or cold does your emotional “engine” run?*

---

#### **Materials needed**

- Work of literature (novel, chapter, or short story)
- Whiteboard
- Paper
- Pencils

#### **Student activity/handout**

*Revved Up or Shut Down?*

#### **Student reading assignment**

*Brain Driver’s Education: Operator’s Guide* section: “How hot or cold does your emotional ‘engine’ run?”

#### **Procedures**

Anticipatory set:

Imagine you walked into class today and were given a pop quiz worth 25 percent of your grade. How would you react? Would all of you react the same way or with the same level of intensity? No – because our emotional engines run at different speeds.

As we’ll see in the story/novel, there are ways to recognize when we are feeling strong emotions or have particular intense reactions to events in our lives, and that is the first step in managing these feelings and reactions.

In literature writers give clues to the characters’ level of emotional intensity using word choice, tone, imagery, dialogue, and the reactions of other characters. In actual life, we can use similar clues to figure out our own level of emotional intensity.

#### **Step-by-step instructions/activities**

1. Start by reading a scene in a recent text in which a character has a clearly high or low intensity reaction to an event within the story. Ask students to pay special attention to any clues that describe the character’s emotions. Ask students to take notes to be used in the discussion that will follow.



## Lesson Plan: Emotional Regulation

### *How hot or cold does your emotional “engine” run?*

---

2. Before discussing the text, introduce the concept of an “emotional engine” as described in the Student Reading Assignment “How hot or cold does your emotional ‘engine’ run?” in the *Brain Driver’s Education: Operator’s Guide*:
  - The brain is like an engine that generates the thoughts, memories, and moods that form our emotions.
  - Using the driving metaphor, students conceptualize taking charge of their emotions, instead of being controlled by them.
  - People experience emotion along a spectrum of intensity. At one extreme, they feel shut down, disconnected from emotion. At the other extreme, they are revved up and feel emotions very powerfully.
  - If we are aware of our feelings, we have the ability to adjust their intensity to a level that’s appropriate for the situation.
3. Ask the students if they can determine what the main character is feeling in this scene. How does the reader know this?
4. How are other people reacting to that character in the scene?
5. Ask the class what level of emotional intensity the character is feeling—is he/she revved up or so shut down as to be devoid of feeling at all? Is the intensity appropriate to the situation the character is in? Why or why not? (Again, make sure students can support their assertions with evidence from the text.)
6. Draw a line on the board that visually represents a spectrum of intensity from “shut down” to “revved up” with “balanced” in the middle.
7. Ask the students where the character fits on this spectrum. (Again, ask for evidence.)
8. Ask students why it might be useful for the character to be aware of his/her level of emotional intensity and how such awareness might be helpful to them (the students) in their everyday life.
9. Provide students with a composition assignment, using the Student Activity handout “Revved Up or Shut Down?” (Students will choose a character from a story or novel they have read this school year and analyze the character’s level of emotional intensity.)



**Lesson Plan: Emotional Regulation**  
*How hot or cold does your emotional “engine” run?*

---

10. Optional: Allow students to present information from their composition to the class or discuss their answers to the “reaction” section of the assignment.

**Assessment**

Use class discussion and Student Activity handout composition to assess student understanding.



**Student Activity: Revved Up or Shut Down?**  
*How hot or cold does your emotional “engine” run?*

---

### Assignment

For this assignment, you will analyze the emotional intensity of a fictional character. To do this, you will have to find clues in the way the character responds to things around him/her and the way other characters respond to him as well. You will provide evidence from the text to support your assertions.

**Step 1:** Read the Student Reading Assignment “How hot or cold does your emotional ‘engine’ run?”

**Step 2:** Choose a character from one of the works of fiction we’ve read this year. Use evidence from the text, notes from our class discussion, and the chart on the next page (“Spectrum of Emotional Intensity”) to help you evaluate this character’s emotional intensity.

**Step 3:** Compile evidence from the text to support your point of view.

**Step 4:** Using the writing process, produce a two page formal composition that:

- a) explains the concept of emotional intensity
- b) introduces your character and describes where he/she falls on the spectrum of emotional intensity
- c) provides at least three pieces of evidence to support your assertion
- d) discusses whether the emotional intensity is appropriate to the situation he/she is in. Why or why not?
- e) ends with a conclusion explaining how recognizing his/her emotional intensity might help this character better cope with the challenges he/she faces

**Step 5:** Write a short reaction: What is typically your own level of emotional intensity? How do you know? How might it be helpful in everyday life to have information about your level of intensity?



**Student Activity: Revved Up or Shut Down?**  
*How hot or cold does your emotional “engine” run?*

---

**Spectrum of Emotional Intensity**

<b>Emotion</b>	<b>Emotionally shut down</b>	<b>Emotionally revved up</b>	<b>Balanced</b>
Anxiety	By denying the possibility that something could go wrong, person may lack good judgment.	Unable to distinguish between true danger and personal fears, may be isolated, on the sidelines.	Able to evaluate situations and decide what steps are necessary to reduce risks.
Anger	Passive, may have difficulty having needs met.	May bully and alienate others. May say or do things that will be regretted later.	Can consciously decide when to be assertive and when to “let things go.”
Sadness	Unacknowledged feelings can build up and break through in unexpected ways.	May lead to loss of ability to carry out daily functions, leading to further sadness and withdrawal.	Can feel sadness when appropriate, but also feels other emotions. Knows strategies for taking care of self, including doing enjoyable activities.
Happiness	Difficulty enjoying successes, feels they are temporary and/or not due to own efforts.	May alienate others by denying/avoiding problems or failing to appreciate others’ struggles and perspectives.	Takes pleasure in own successes and successes of others, acknowledges and learns from challenges along the way.



## How hot or cold does your emotional “engine” run? *Emotional regulation*

There’s a normal spectrum of how people experience their own feelings. At one end of the spectrum are those whose emotional “engine” seems frequently revved up; if you are one of these people, you may feel your emotions (such as mad, sad, or worried) more powerfully than other people do. At times your emotions may get so intense that they cause you to react to things in ways you may later regret.

At the other end of the spectrum are those whose emotional “engine” frequently seems to be barely turned on; these are people who work really hard to not feel anything at all. If you are one of these people, you may appear tough and uncaring to others. If you’re someone who usually tries to shut down your feelings, life may feel boring or empty without access to your emotions.

Some people are right in the middle of the feelings spectrum. They feel their emotions strongly when something warrants a strong reaction, but most of the time, their feelings are more moderate, in the middle. For most people, finding the right balance takes some effort. It’s a good idea to check in with your feelings on a regular basis to make sure you know what you’re feeling and why. (Sometimes it’s easier to do this by talking about it with another person.)

- **When your emotional engine won’t start**

Some people shut down their emotions in an effort to stay in control. They may sit through a violent horror film without flinching while their friends are terrified. Or they may act like they don’t care when a teacher is mad at them. Or they may not show any sign of frustration when the coach makes the whole team do 100 push-ups because one kid was late to practice.

How do they do it? In order to get through a difficult situation without losing control or experiencing a lot of negative feelings, they may tell themselves that they don’t care about the situation. This strategy can be useful to temporarily get control in a challenging situation—for example, to overcome anxiety about singing on stage during a performance, you might tell yourself that there’s no need to be nervous because it’s really just a dress rehearsal.

But sometimes – without your realizing it – the brain might take protective action as a way of keeping emotions in check. For example, if you lose an election for the Student Council, your brain might prevent you from feeling disappointment by telling you that you never were a serious candidate and that you entered the race only as a joke. The problem with trying to protect yourself too much from painful feelings is that if you aren’t even aware that the emotions are there, the

feelings might stay hidden and not go away. They could surface unexpectedly in another situation and influence your behavior in ways that are not helpful.

- **When the engine overheats**

People who feel their emotions very intensely may sob at sad movies, for example, when everyone else is just a little sad. They may stay up all night worrying about an exam while others in the class simply study for the exam without missing any sleep. Or they may yell at a classmate for accidentally bumping into them in the hallway and later regret having acted that way.

When emotions are very intense, it is difficult to be reasonable and rational and to make wise decisions. Intense feelings often are triggered by other people's words or actions, or by disagreements with others. We often find ourselves experiencing the same conflicts, or reacting the same way to different situations, over and over again. It may seem as though the conflicts are always someone else's fault (for example: "she started it," or "my teacher's an idiot"). But, in fact, even if we're justified in our reactions, having a strong reaction to a situation (for example, yelling or complaining loudly) can often make the situation worse.

Sometimes—without your realizing it—intense feelings may cause you to say or do you things that you wish you could take back. For example, if you come home past your curfew on a Saturday night, instead of apologizing, you might yell at your mom because your brain is telling you that your mom is ridiculous for setting a curfew in the first place. The problem with letting unchecked, intense emotions drive your reactions is that these feelings might cause you to say or do things that get you into trouble unnecessarily.

- **Notice how others are reacting to you.**

Seeing how others are responding to you can help you gauge the level of your own emotions. (For example, are they looking relaxed? Turning away? Becoming agitated?) If people are reacting negatively to you, maybe your emotional engine is revved up too high, or shut down, and you are causing others to become uncomfortable. Or maybe the signals others are receiving about your state of mind are being misinterpreted. In that case, you can make sure to convey your feelings in another way that might get your message across better.

- **How can you monitor the intensity of your emotions?**

Think about how you react to different situations. Is your emotional engine usually revved up high? Is it usually shut down? When you're experiencing feelings such as anger, fear, or worry, try asking yourself, "How intense are my feelings right now? Are they helping me make the right decisions, or are they interfering?"



Notice your body sensations. (Is your heart racing? Are your muscles tense? Are you sweating?) Notice how you're speaking. (Are you swearing, yelling, ranting, or perhaps unusually quiet?) At a rally for the school football team, it makes sense and feels good to shout out your intense feelings of school pride, but it probably isn't very constructive to yell at a teacher for giving you a bad grade. Following are some examples of the range of intensities for different emotional reactions:

**Spectrum of Emotional Intensity**

<b>Emotion</b>	<b>Emotionally shut down</b>	<b>Emotionally revved up</b>	<b>Balanced</b>
<b>Anxiety</b>	Without some anxiety to motivate, may go into a situation unprepared or get caught off-guard.	Unable to distinguish between true danger and personal fears. May overreact and cause undue tension for self and others.	Able to evaluate situations and decide what steps are necessary to reduce risks.
<b>Anger</b>	Passive, may have difficulty getting needs met.	May bully and alienate others. May say or do things that will be regretted later.	Can consciously decide when to be assertive and when to "let things go."
<b>Sadness</b>	Unacknowledged feelings can build up and break through in unexpected ways.	May lead to loss of ability to carry out daily functions, leading to further sadness and withdrawal.	Can feel sadness when appropriate. Knows strategies for taking care of self, doing enjoyable things to make room for other emotions.
<b>Happiness</b>	Difficulty enjoying successes, feels they are temporary and/or not due to own efforts.	May alienate others by denying/avoiding problems or failing to appreciate others' struggles and perspectives.	Takes pleasure in own successes and successes of others, acknowledges and learns from challenges along the way.

*This document is available under a royalty-free license at [www.schoolpsychiatry.org](http://www.schoolpsychiatry.org) and is provided courtesy of Massachusetts General Hospital ("MGH"). Any modification of this document is prohibited. This document is intended to provide general educational information concerning feelings, thoughts and behavior. By making available the information contained in the document, MGH is not attempting to practice medicine or providing specific medical advice. This document should not be used as a diagnostic tool or to substitute, replace or overrule a health care professional's judgment or clinical diagnosis. Users should consult with a trained mental health professional for individual situations and for answers to personal questions.*