

## **Title**

Bouncing back to school after lockdown: Promoting children's resilience.

Rebecca McMaster and Katie Bell

## **Introduction**

This research project intends to promote learner resilience and provide learners with coping skills and practical strategies. They can then use these to manage changes at home and at school following school closure from the global pandemic and any future issues they may face. The intention is to allow pupils to create their own solution-focused emotion stems to encourage self-help and overall improve their wellbeing. The reason this project is being carried out is because of the change we have noticed as a partnership in our learners over the last few years in relation to some family circumstances, agency involvement, some pupils having multiple ACE's and overall resilience of our pupils. One of our school values across the partnership is resilience and while we promote this daily and children can explain what this means, some struggle to use resilient strategies for themselves when most needed. Therefore, we hope this project will allow us to introduce coping strategies to the pupils which work for them, with their families and with the staff within our partnership and therefore allows them to use their strategies at home and at school to overall improve their wellbeing. We recognise that running this project with a small number of children within our partnership may not show the most reliable results but if effective we can then begin to use this approach for more groups of children and classes across our partnership in the future.

## **Background**

The Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEM) policy from the Scottish government focuses on children's rights and allows us to use it as a document to support children and their needs. The approach focuses on children's wellbeing needs and allows us to take into consideration the wider influences on a child's life. The policy also identifies the SHANARRI wellbeing indicators as being a focus for every child and allows us to see how they are doing and if we need to provide support. Therefore, as we are focusing on wellbeing for our research project we have used the GIRFEM policy and SHANARRI wellbeing indicators for a basis to assess the children's wellbeing at a current point in time. We have used this to focus on every factor of the wellbeing indicators in relation to experiences during lockdown and experiences after lockdown by asking relevant questions in relation to the wellbeing indicators. The GIRFEM policy does not provide any constraints for us as practitioners so we have based our research findings on the wellbeing indicators which we use daily from this policy. (Scottish Government, 2006).

There is a lot of research surrounding children's resilience and how to boost this in the classroom. When we talk about resilience, we often think of someone 'bouncing back' after a challenging experience but The British Psychological Society use the definition; 'Resilience is the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten the viability, the function, or the development of that system'. (The British Psychological Society, 2020). They have provided a framework for supporting children returning to school after the pandemic which looks at focusing on building strong relationships with their peers and staff within the school, having agency support and promoting the fact that children should have a sense of belonging in their learning environment. The article gives a framework for promoting resilience which is adapted from Masten (2011) and focuses on framing positive goals, tracking positive actions and engaging in a collaborative team with families to support children's resilience. Throughout our research project we aim to work with groups of children to support them in building positive

relationships with their peers and staff and tracking the positive actions they take daily from the coping strategies that they use.

Additionally, the research provided by Zarobe and Bungay (2017) stated that after researching databases which provided information on building resilience within children and young people between the ages of 11 and 18 that expressive arts activities such as music, dance, singing, drama and visual arts can have a positive impact on self-confidence, self-esteem, relationship building and a sense of belonging. These qualities relate to building resilience and mental wellbeing and therefore throughout our research project having the children participating in expressive arts activities to learn different coping strategies may be beneficial.

Furthermore, Eschenbeck et al. (2018) conducted research looking at how coping strategies change from childhood to adolescence. They looked at six different coping strategies (social support seeking, problem solving, avoidant coping, palliative emotion regulation, anger-related emotion regulation, and media use) and assessed these using a stress and coping questionnaire. Their results confirmed that older pupils (approximately aged fifteen) scored higher in problem solving and media use and younger pupils (approximately age 8) scored lower in social support seeking although this increased over time. Increases over time were also recorded for problem solving and media use and decreases were found for avoidant coping and anger-related emotion regulation. Overall, this study found that between ages 9-11 there was a developmental improvement and that children changed towards a more active coping approach which was a positive change. Therefore, while we are conducting our project with 8–11-year-olds we hope that by exposing them to different coping strategies while they are developing, they will choose these more active coping strategies to help with their wellbeing.

Although the previous research and educational articles discussed provide support for building resilience within children in their learning environment there is not much research that shows the benefit of self-help strategies and pupils choosing strategies which they feel are best suited for themselves which is what we want to promote within our children.

After reading the document provided by Anxiety Canada (2021) it allowed me to understand that the more we keep giving children in terms of reassurance then the more we will need to keep giving. The advice from this article states that we should work with them to make a clear plan, follow through with the plan and then give them lots of praise when they start to use the plan for themselves. Although this is in relation to anxiety, I plan to use this approach with our project to boost resilience and having the children create their own plan with their own strategies and then they will be encouraged to use these until they become comfortable in using these independently without adult support. If we can do this across our partnership it would have a huge impact on our children becoming responsible citizens as they are taking responsibility for their own learning and making informed choices and decisions about their own wellbeing.

The guidance from The British Psychological Society (BPS) about supporting re-engagement and recovery (The British Psychological Society, 2020) states that transitions are huge for children and that they provide personal growth and challenges. Returning to school after the global pandemic is a huge transition for children and to plan for this we need to identify those children who may need that extra support going forward and this is what we plan to do through our pre-questionnaire for the children to start our research. The BPS shares that children are going to experience a range of emotions on the return to school, some which may be positive and some which may be negative, and they will also have had a range of emotions and experiences during home learning. Therefore, we have chosen to use

emotions to allow children a starting point in developing their emotional literacy and their coping strategies. After reading the BPS guidance it quotes 'Coping is important to protect ourselves from stress and it is important to connect with the ways in which we are coping'. Therefore, we realise it is important for our children to be able to use coping skills and be able to identify these positive methods as a way in which they are able to cope with difficulties in life and therefore our aim of the project is to ensure children have coping skills that they are able to use successfully.

Lastly, after gaining information from CAMHS about strategies that individual children in our school use for various situations, we were introduced to 'The Decider skills' programme (The Decider skills, 2020). The decider skills use cognitive behaviour therapy which teaches the children on how to recognise their thoughts, feelings and behaviour and then manage their emotions and their mental health. The report given by Amherst Primary School explained how the staff in the school learned the decider skills who then taught them to the children. The school also ran weekly family sessions so that the skills would become a common language within and out with the school. Overall, they reported that the decider skills programme allowed for their focus group of children to manage and control their feelings and understand and know how to take positive actions. (Ayres and Vivyan, 2017). We have decided after reading this report that we are going to use 'The Decider skills' as coping strategies that the children can learn to use to deal with difficult situations.

### **Research Design**

To start the research, I provided a questionnaire (See Appendix 1) to all pupils aged 8-11 from two classes in one school. The bones of the questionnaire were taken from the Playback Learning Academy resource provided to our school to support children with the return to school after lockdown. The questionnaire was based on the SHANARRI indicators and related to their experiences during lockdown. Questions included 'I was able to express my emotions, 'I was supported to overcome any difficulties I was experiencing' and 'I used coping strategies when I was feeling anxious or stressed'. Children were then asked to tick 'Yes' 'No' or 'Not sure' for each question. After questionnaires were completed, I looked through them all and analysed the results. I particularly focused on the questions around sharing emotions and having coping strategies and this allowed me to select pupils who I thought would benefit most from our research project. Although the questionnaire was the main piece of information we used to select our focus group, observations of pupils' behaviour, observing their choices for their emotional check in every morning in class and discussions with the class teacher on their professional opinion about the pupils allowed me to choose pupils for the project.

Once pupils were chosen to take part in the research project, I contacted their parents and explained the process of my research. I explained that their child would be involved in a nurture group where we would work together to learn strategies to help us manage our emotions and then select coping strategies from the decider skills which would help us make positive choices when we feel certain emotions and help build our resilience. From this, parents had the opportunity to ask questions about the project and could opt their child out if they wanted.

The focus groups for the project contained fourteen pupils from two classes and therefore were aged between 8 and 11. The fourteen pupils were split into four groups and were chosen to work with their peers who they had built good relationships with as I thought this would help the process and learning of the strategies.

The research was conducted over seven weekly sessions of nurture groups which took place in a newly created nurture room for this project. Each week we learned a new

decider skill through the format of 'discussion, demonstration and discussion' lessons and this allowed pupils to learn their strategies through arts and crafts, role play, games and outdoor activities. Each week we had a lot of discussion which allowed pupils to express their thoughts and discuss the strategy with their peers. The sessions were run like our tea and toast sessions that we currently have in school, and this allowed for a more relaxed environment while learning these skills. At the start of every session, pupils would place their photograph on a track which we described as an emotional rollercoaster. This gave the opportunity for pupils to say how they were currently feeling and allowed us to discuss how everyone experiences a range of emotions. The first discussion that took place at the start of every lesson was whether we had used any of the strategies throughout the week. This was very beneficial because it allowed the pupils to reflect on their previous week and the situations/emotions that had occurred which required the strategies to be used. The session always ended with the pupils evaluating the strategy they had learned by identifying their choice from an option of: 'I really like it and will definitely use it'. 'I think it is ok and will give it a go' and 'I don't like this strategy and would prefer to use another' and then explaining why that was their choice.

During the seven weeks the children began building a folder of information. It contained information on each decider skill (STOPP, It Will Pass, 54321 Right Now, Name the emotion, Fact or opinion, Opposite action, Self-Care, Values, Listen, Respect, Crystal Clear and Reflect) and any work that they had completed. This then allows for the children to look back over the work they have done and use it for future reference. Throughout the seven weeks of the nurture groups, we reflected on all the strategies we had learned and discussed the different emotions that we all regularly feel. All pupils then selected a range of emotions from our emotion cards (See Appendix 2) that they feel regularly and that they would like to manage. From the emotions, pupils then selected from the decider skills which one they thought was best for them to use when they were feeling that emotion. They created a card with their emotion and their description of the decider skill on the back. This was then put onto a keyring with their photograph and our 'Resilient Riley' school mascot for personalisation. The keyring was created so that pupils can keep this on them during the day and then refer to it when they feel they need to.

When our nurture groups were coming to an end, I provided the pupils with a post-questionnaire (Appendix 3) which was like the first one we used to decide which pupils would participate in the project. At the bottom of the questionnaire, they also had the chance to comment with their opinion on the project. They commented on what they liked about the nurture group project, what they didn't like about the nurture group project if any and what impact the nurture group project would have on them in managing difficult situations.

### **Findings and Analysis**

The results from the project were gathered through the post-questionnaire where pupils answered questions relating to each of the SHANNARRI indicators with their experience after lockdown and returning to school. Like at the beginning, pupils selected their answers from the options of 'Yes', 'No' and 'Not Sure'. After looking closely at the questions which focused on sharing emotions, using coping strategies and asking the children's opinions of what they liked, disliked and what they would take from the nurture group the following results were obtained. Some pupils did not complete the questionnaires due to being absent from school, missing nurture group sessions or feeling that they did not want to express their opinions for the questionnaire.

**'I am able to express my emotions/ I am able to express my emotions using my keyring'.**

	<b>Pre questionnaire</b>	<b>Post questionnaire</b>
	<b>'I was able to express my emotions'.</b>	<b>'I am able to express my emotions using my keyring'.</b>
<b>Child A</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Child B</b>	No	Yes
<b>Child C</b>	Not completed	Yes
<b>Child D</b>	Yes	Not sure
<b>Child E</b>	Yes	Not sure
<b>Child F</b>	No	Not sure
<b>Child G</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Child H</b>	Yes	Not sure
<b>Child I</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Child J</b>	Not completed	Not completed
<b>Child K</b>	Yes	Not completed
<b>Child L</b>	Not completed	Yes
<b>Child M</b>	Not sure	Not completed
<b>Child N</b>	Yes	Yes

57% of pupils said that they were able to express their emotions before our nurture input and 50% of pupils said that they would be able to express their emotions using their personal keyring after our nurture groups. As the percentage of pupils who were able to express their emotions lowered after the nurture groups, I investigated why this was the case. Some pupils shared with me that they were not sure if they were going to use their keyring to express their emotions and would possibly just use it for their strategies. This explained the result for this question.

**'I was able to express myself when I felt happy or sad/ I am able to express myself when I am feeling all emotions'.**

	<b>Pre questionnaire</b>	<b>Post questionnaire</b>
	<b>'I was able to express myself when I felt happy or sad'.</b>	<b>'I am able to express myself when I am feeling all emotions'.</b>
<b>Child A</b>	Not sure	Yes
<b>Child B</b>	No	No
<b>Child C</b>	Not completed	Yes
<b>Child D</b>	Yes	Not sure
<b>Child E</b>	Not sure	Yes
<b>Child F</b>	Yes	No
<b>Child G</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Child H</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Child I</b>	Yes	Yes

<b>Child J</b>	Not completed	Not completed
<b>Child K</b>	Yes	Not completed
<b>Child L</b>	Not completed	Yes
<b>Child M</b>	Yes	Not completed
<b>Child N</b>	Yes	Yes

The table above shows that 57% of pupils felt that they were able to express when they were happy or sad during lockdown before our nurture group input and 57% of pupils felt that they could express all emotions after our nurture group input. After pupils created their own personal keyring with emotions and strategies, it is hopeful that they will start to recognise when they are feeling a range of emotions and be able to share these with others around them.

**'I used coping strategies when I was feeling anxious or sad / I use coping strategies from my keyring when I feel different emotions'.**

	<b>Pre questionnaire</b>	<b>Post questionnaire</b>
	<b>'I used coping strategies when I was feeling anxious or sad'.</b>	<b>'I use coping strategies from my keyring when I feel different emotions'.</b>
<b>Child A</b>	Not sure	Yes
<b>Child B</b>	Not sure	Not sure
<b>Child C</b>	Not completed	Yes
<b>Child D</b>	No	Not sure
<b>Child E</b>	Not sure	Yes
<b>Child F</b>	No	Yes
<b>Child G</b>	Yes	Not sure
<b>Child H</b>	No	Not sure
<b>Child I</b>	Not sure	Yes
<b>Child J</b>	Not completed	Not completed
<b>Child K</b>	No	Not completed
<b>Child L</b>	Not completed	Yes
<b>Child M</b>	No	Not completed
<b>Child N</b>	Not sure	Yes

When the children were asked about coping strategies before the nurture group input began, 7% of the children (1 child) said that they used coping strategies to help them during lockdown when they were feeling anxious or sad. Then when children were asked about the coping strategies they used after the nurture group input, 50% of pupils identified that they used coping strategies from their keyring to help them when they were feeling different emotions. After observing keyrings and discussions with the children, a lot of these strategies were those which we had learned together through 'The Decider skills'.

**'I was supported to overcome and difficulties I was experiencing/ I am supported to overcome any difficulties I was experiencing'.**

	<b>Pre questionnaire</b>	<b>Post questionnaire</b>
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	<b>'I was supported to overcome any difficulties I was experiencing'.</b>	<b>'I am supported to overcome any difficulties I was experiencing'.</b>
<b>Child A</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Child B</b>	No	Not sure
<b>Child C</b>	Not competed	Yes
<b>Child D</b>	Not sure	Not sure
<b>Child E</b>	Yes	Not sure
<b>Child F</b>	Yes	Not sure
<b>Child G</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Child H</b>	No	Yes
<b>Child I</b>	Not sure	Yes
<b>Child J</b>	Not completed	Not completed
<b>Child K</b>	No	Not completed
<b>Child L</b>	Not completed	Yes
<b>Child M</b>	Yes	Not completed
<b>Child N</b>	Yes	Yes

From the table above it tells us that 42% of pupils felt like they were supported to overcome any difficulties they were experiencing during lockdown. When the pupils were completing the questionnaire, they discussed things like schoolwork, feeling certain emotions and missing friends during lockdown. After the nurture group input, 50% of pupils reported that they were supported to overcome any difficulties they had. During the nurture group inputs we discussed the different adults in their lives that were present to support them when they were experiencing any difficulties.

**'I was able to make choices/ I am able to make choices using different strategies'.**

	<b>Pre questionnaire</b>	<b>Post questionnaire</b>
	<b>'I was able to make choices'.</b>	<b>'I am able to make choices using different strategies'.</b>
<b>Child A</b>	No	No
<b>Child B</b>	No	Not sure
<b>Child C</b>	Not completed	Yes
<b>Child D</b>	Not sure	Yes
<b>Child E</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Child F</b>	Not sure	Yes
<b>Child G</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Child H</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Child I</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Child J</b>	Not completed	Not completed
<b>Child K</b>	Yes	Not completed
<b>Child L</b>	Not completed	Yes
<b>Child M</b>	Yes	Not completed

Child N	Yes	Yes
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From the table above we can see that 50% of pupils identified that they were able to make different choices regarding their routines and behaviours. After the nurture group input, 64% of pupils identified that they were able to make choices using the strategies they had learned. Throughout discussion they identified that they now have the option to choose from strategies that will help them that they never had before.

After gathering children's opinions about the project, most pupils expressed that they liked the more relaxing environment of the nurture room instead of the classroom and that they liked learning new strategies alongside their peers. Pupils also identified that the strategies help them control their anger and help them when feeling sad. Some pupils also identified that they may not share the strategies with others until they become confident in using them and that they will keep telling themselves the strategies to support this.

Additional opinions from the pupils included:

I managed to use the start of the 54321 Right Now strategy last night when my brother was annoying me, and I could feel my fizz. - I only got to 4 but it helped me cope with my anger and therefore I did not punch him. <b>(Child F)</b> .
I use the 'It will pass' strategy every morning as I feel nervous coming to school. I tell myself that my nervous feeling will pass and that I will be ok once I am in the school. I am always happy once I get into school. <b>(Child I)</b> .
I used the 'It will pass' strategy when we broke down in the car. I was scared and nervous and felt like crying. I knew that my dad would get it sorted and get us home safe so I told myself that my feelings of being scared and nervous would pass and that stopped me getting upset. <b>(Child D)</b> .

Overall, the results demonstrate that we have 50% of pupils who feel that they have strategies to use and feel that they have someone who can help them through difficult times which is a huge positive for our pupils. Additionally, 64% of pupils explained that they have choices they can make using the different strategies to support them and more than half of the pupils feel that they can express a range of emotions to others.

Although most pupils enjoyed making their keyring and explained that it would benefit them, pupils explained that they would probably only use it to remind them of the strategies they could use for each emotion rather than identify which emotion they were experiencing. Overall, this research project has been beneficial for the children as it has allowed them to express their emotions and realise that this is a healthy thing to do and pupils are now equipped with strategies to support them with their resilience.

Due to this project, I will now share my learning of 'The Decider skills' and running a nurture group with my staff team. This will allow them to use these strategies with pupils in their class to support resilience.

Due to conducting this project, it has allowed me to get an insight to pupil's emotions and things that they may need support with. For example, one pupil shared their nerves about their transition to secondary school. I then shared this with their class teacher who explained that the child shared that they were feeling confident about their transition within their class but when in a smaller nurture group he felt more comfortable in sharing that he was nervous about it. This information was then passed onto the teacher working on transition to support them. For some of the younger children it allowed me to see their interest in the fidgets. They already knew that these were for anxiety and therefore I decided to provide some of



these in the nurture room which they explained helped them cope. I can now provide some of these in the classroom when they are completing their learning.

Previous research from Zarobe and Bungay (2017) stated that expressive arts activities helped them understand the strategies. Therefore, I used an outdoor activity for the 54321 Right Now strategy where children had to complete a scavenger hunt. This is now what they remember when I ask them to explain the strategy. We also completed a hand drawing activity which was made personalised for every pupil and a fortune teller activity which they had to make and design. Active activities made them enjoy it and find it easier to understand.

Once some pupils had learned some coping strategies, they began to tell me that they didn't like it because the strategies were not working. I reinforced the message that we must keep practicing the strategies until they become natural to us. This was a challenge as I had to convince the children that we should try these strategies and that some of them will work for them. Another challenge was only having seven weeks to complete the project and pupils having to learn a lot of strategies and try to use them. Therefore, in the future, I think it would benefit for a lot of children to learn one strategy and maybe have a few weeks to use this strategy, reflect and evaluate before learning another. Some of the older pupils commented on how they did not like expressing their emotions to a lot of people and how they found this difficult. I explained that I understood this and tried to explain some of the benefits of this.

## **Conclusions**

In conclusion, the project worked well as pupils enjoyed it and managed to learn new strategies to support their emotions. The project will contribute to our professional development needs as a staff on mental health strategies and nurture approaches to support our learners. The decider skills knowledge and training will be taken forward and used for our school improvement priorities next session and I believe that the skills would benefit all teachers and allow them to teach strategies to their pupils to help deal with difficult situations. This research may be of interest to other schools who hope to use the decider skills or are looking for a similar programme to help pupils gain a range of strategies to support their wellbeing.

The project has shown me how important it is that the strategies are reinforced regularly and that everyone is using them. This would mean that next session when we use these skills with other pupils and staff that it would be beneficial to share these with parents too. This would mean that we were all reinforcing the same strategies which would be hugely beneficial to the children. The only implication would be that if parents did not find them helpful for themselves then they may not reinforce them with their child. This is something that would need a lot of planning if we decided to do this next session.

In conclusion, the research into promoting children's resilience has demonstrated that using the decider skills and having nurture time with small groups of children has been beneficial for the children's wellbeing.

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Appendix 1

Pupil Survey: GIRFEC Well-Being Indicators Survey

Name:



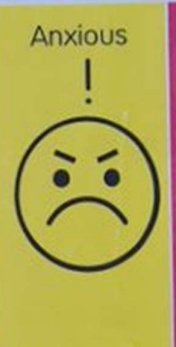


Date:

Well-being Indicator	During lockdown.....	Yes	No	Not sure
<b>Safe</b>	I felt safe to talk about the virus to adults around me.			
	I felt safe from the virus in my home.			
<b>Healthy</b>	I was able to express my emotions.			
	I was able to express myself when I was feeling happy or sad.			
	I used coping strategies when I was feeling anxious or stressed.			
<b>Achieving</b>	I learned to do new things such as baking and cooking.			
	I was encouraged to plan my learning.			
	I was able to use technologies to learn online.			
<b>Nurtured</b>	I was supported to overcome any difficulties I was experiencing.			
	I was encouraged to stay positive.			
<b>Active</b>	I was able to play and have fun.			
	I was able to go outside to exercise.			
	I learned to adapt outdoor games in the house.			
<b>Respected</b>	I was able to express myself about how I was feeling.			
	I was involved in decisions about what we were going to do each day.			
<b>Responsible</b>	I was able to make choices.			
	I was able to take responsibility for my actions and behaviours.			
	I felt listened to and respected.			

<b>Included</b>	I felt included in my family life.			
	I was supported to keep in touch with my friends using social media.			

Appendix 2

### Feeling Cards

Happy 	Afraid 	Surprised 	Nervous 	Confident 
Annoyed 	Tired Zzzz 	Sad 	Anxious ! 	Friendly 
Confused ? 	Worried ! 	Scared 	Lonely 	Cheerful 

Frustrated

Angry

Appendix 3

Pupil Survey: GIRFEC Well-Being Indicators Survey

Name:

Date:

Well-being Indicator	After lockdown.....	Yes	No	Not sure
<b>Safe</b>	I feel safe to talk about the virus to adults around me.			
	I feel safe from the virus in my home and at school.			
<b>Healthy</b>	I am able to express my emotions using my keyring.			
	I am able to express myself when I am feeling all emotions.			
	I use coping strategies from my keyring when I feel different emotions.			
<b>Achieving</b>	I feel that I can learn to do new things such as baking and cooking.			
	I am encouraged to plan my learning.			
	I am able to use technologies to learn online.			
<b>Nurtured</b>	I am supported to overcome any difficulties I am experiencing.			
	I am encouraged to stay positive.			
<b>Active</b>	I am able to play and have fun.			
	I am able to go outside and exercise.			
<b>Respected</b>	I am able to express myself about how I am feeling.			
	I am involved in decisions about what we were going to do each day.			
<b>Responsible</b>	I am able to make choices using different strategies.			
	I am able to take responsibility for my actions and behaviours using different strategies.			

<b>Included</b>	I feel listened to and respected.			
	I feel included in my family life and school life.			
	I am supported to keep in touch with my friends using social media.			

**Please provide answers to the questions below:**

What have you liked about the nurture group project?

Has there been anything that you haven't liked about the nurture group project?

What impact will the nurture group have on helping you manage difficult situations? (Will you use any of the strategies? Will you share the strategies with others? Will you be able to share your emotions more easily?)





