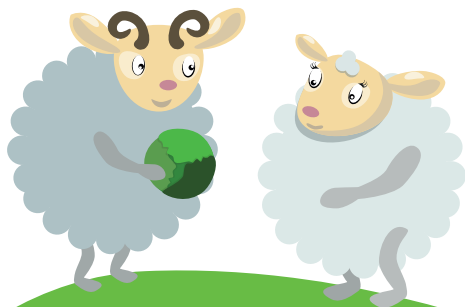


Emotional first aid for parents

**Katarzyna
Działo-Pawłowska**



DKMS 
POKONAJMY NOWOTWORY KRWI



**DZIECIAKI
CHOJRAKI**

GUIDEBOOK

Emotional first aid for parents



Dear Parents and Caregivers,

When a family member becomes seriously (chronically) ill, the family's life changes dramatically - especially when the family member is a child. In such a family, all its members are „sick“. While the child has the diagnosis and experiences the disease physically and mentally, the other family members experience the child's illness primarily psychologically, through emotional pain. This is a moment of tremendous change, especially the change of roles: a healthy child becomes sick, a working parent enters the role of a caregiver of a sick child, while siblings of a healthy brother/sister suddenly lose the closeness of parents and the sick sibling for a while. Other people needed to support the family may even start living in the house.

The extent of changes in family life resulting from a child's chronic illness often causes tension and internal conflict for each family member as well as conflict between family members. In the event of a child's serious illness, a whole range of emotions and thoughts arise, and they are all normal, because they tell us what the child's caregiver is experiencing. Treatment of a chronic disease is associated with a great deal of mood variability in parents and treated children, and this too is natural.

Remember that all feelings have an important function in our lives, so all of them are necessary and beneficial for us, although feelings such as anxiety, sadness, anger, grief, helplessness and guilt cause us discomfort and emotional pain.

In this guidebook, I will show you how we can significantly influence our thoughts, attitudes and emotions, where to seek help and how to take care of our emotional balance.



Katarzyna Działo-Pawłowska
Psychologist, psychotherapist, psycho-oncologist

What are our emotions telling us?

Each person interprets the situation of a diagnosis individually. This interpretation depends on various factors, such as previous experience in life, but also on how individuals have dealt with life's difficulties so far. You may interpret the experience of your child's illness as a challenge, a threat or harm. Each of the above attitudes is linked to different emotions:



A parent who perceives a diagnosis as harm will feel mostly grief, anger, helplessness and will look for someone to blame.



A parent who perceives a chronic illness as a threat experiences severe anxiety.



A parent who sees a disease as a challenge feels stronger and focuses on **cooperating with doctors** and looking for what can help the child.

The latter attitude, as you can easily guess, is the healthiest for parents and a sick child.

How to understand the emotions that are often awakened when a child is ill?



ANGER: informs us of our unsatisfied needs, e.g. the need for security. Sometimes anger simply hides the presence of other emotions that are difficult to express, such as anxiety, panic and worry. It can also be a reaction to the rejection of everything a parent goes through after a child's diagnosis. Although anger is commonly perceived as a bad emotion, this is a gross oversimplification. Through anger we can motivate ourselves to take action, get more information and make positive changes in our own lives.



SADNESS: is the result of experiencing a child's illness and confronting your own helplessness in the face of a child's suffering.



ANXIETY: occurs when a situation is perceived as dangerous, threatening, and a parent does not feel able to deal with the threat. It is the result of accumulating daily concerns about the child, its life, the health of other family members and one's own physical condition in the context of having to provide long-term care for the sick child.



REPULSION AND DISGUST: emotions that are hard to admit. These feelings can be triggered by a sick child's secretions, mutilation, bleeding and odour. These situations may be accompanied by nausea, a vomiting reflex, a desire to step back or even escape.

Remember!

Parents are the best support for a child. But to have the strength to support your sick child for a long time, you also need support. Use the support of your family, friends, volunteers or people of goodwill.

Various forms of support are worth considering:



Support in tasks – when someone can do the shopping and bring it to the hospital or prepare a meal for a parent who holds vigil by a child or take over household duties, etc.



Emotional support – from a person who can listen or talk to a parent, or be silent or cry with the parent, or simply offer a hug.

Remember!

Make use of professionals available at the hospital: doctors, a psychologist, a psycho-oncologist, a chaplain, etc.

Our mood depends on the kind of people we surround ourselves with. Therefore, build relationships consciously.

During this time, you may experience a change among your relatives. Some will take on a supporting role, and others will not - this is a natural process. New acquaintances and friends will appear; these are often parents met at the hospital who understand each other without words. It is advisable to focus on new support and save your strength without despairing that perhaps your old friend does not have the capacity to act as a support person. Limiting contact with people who have a negative influence on the person supporting a sick child is also helpful.

Tension is reduced when we meet our basic needs, such as nutritious food and sleep, which helps maintain mental and physical health.

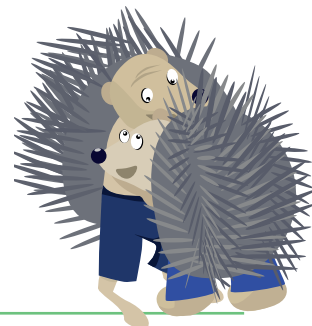
Other effective methods of dealing with emotions:



CRYING – gives relief, reduces tension as tears have a composition similar to that of serotonin, whose levels increase with, for example, antidepressants. In its wisdom, our body wants to help us by secreting tears. People have the ability to defer crying. If you block your crying in front of strangers, you can shed tears when you are in a safe space.



BE FORGIVING AND GENTLE TO YOURSELF – there are no perfect people. Don't expect too much from yourself. One of the most helpful skills is to learn to forgive yourself for mistakes and to learn from them.



How to take care of your emotional balance?

Remember!

You cannot squeeze water from a stone – recharging your batteries is a must!

A person supporting a child can take care of their emotional balance by doing an activity that makes them feel calm and happy. Answer the question: what can make me feel better? It could be a walk, reading a book, watching stand-up comedy, taking a moment of quiet time alone, listening to music, colouring, running, practicing yoga, or getting a massage.

To take care of yourself, you don't always have to leave the hospital and leave your child behind. You can do things for yourself while staying in the room with your child, such as colouring, listening to music, watching stand-up comedy, playing board games, etc. The important thing is that you don't give up on yourself.

Supporters often forget about their passions that give them joy and respite. Sometimes a thought creeps in that it's not appropriate to feel good or laugh when my loved one is sick. **But where do you get the strength to support a child without charging your own batteries?** A support person's mind needs a breather from support duties. Just take a few minutes a day for yourself and you will be a more calm and creative parent.

Remember!

To comfort a child in its suffering, first you need to be comfortable yourself.

The difficult emotions you are experiencing are the result of thoughts and questions in your head:

- Will my child recover from this disease?
- When will he or she be healthy?
- What did I do wrong that made my child sick?
- Why did this happen to us?
- Will I be able to support my sick child? What about the other children?

Dealing with emotions is about discovering and learning from them and realizing where they come from.

What are emotions and what is their purpose?

Emotions become part of our lives the moment we are born. We start communicating our needs such as hunger, desire to rest or cuddle, in our infancy through crying. When those needs are satisfied a child communicates that they are happy with a smile or peaceful sleep. As a person develops, the range of needs increases, but also communication with the environment changes. Very small children express their emotions mainly non-verbally, older children verbally, and everyone through behaviour.

Emotions have a protective and informational function. That's why it's worth learning to read your emotional GPS - the internal navigation system that is part of our nature. It is useful to be attentive (aware) of your emotional states in relation to your thoughts. Noticing one's own feelings is one of the first steps to dealing with them and recognizing them as normal. The most important thing for a parent is to try to take time to understand and work through their own range of emotions.

Where do emotions come from?

Emotions are the result of our thoughts. Depending on what we think about a particular situation, we may feel good or feel discomfort, i.e. emotional pain.

One very effective way of dealing with emotions that cause emotional pain is a method developed by Professor Maxi C. Maultsby, indicating where emotions come from. The **ABCD** of emotions is:

- A** – SITUATION, such as cancer diagnosis in a child
- B** – YOUR THOUGHTS ABOUT THIS SITUATION, e.g., „Cancer is a terminal disease.“
- C** – EMOTIONS that you experience as a result of your thoughts, such as anxiety
- D** – THE ACTION YOU WILL TAKE UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF THE EMOTIONS YOU FEEL

Looking in detail at what happened and what a parent's thoughts were, we can see why they felt FEAR. Now it's important to consider whether the first thought about a diagnosis is based on facts and rework it into a healthy one; that is, one grounded in the reality of treating the disease.

Example: It is worth noting that we are in a hospital, we have been offered treatment. A child has a young and strong body, the cells of the immune system can recognize, destroy and remove cancer cells, and these processes happen without us being aware of it from the moment we are in the womb.

By working with dark thoughts, we can help ourselves to reduce stress and be more calm parents in caring for a sick child and effectively improve the quality of life with a sick child in the family.

Remember!

You can't stop birds of sorrow from flying over our heads, but you can do your best to prevent them from nesting in our heads.

What happens to young children who experience difficult emotions?

Young children left alone with emotional turmoil accumulate tension and anxiety, which often manifests itself in behavioural changes: irritability (so-called „naughty behaviour“), there may be difficulty sleeping (the rhythm of sleep and wakefulness changes), bed-wetting, children may withdraw into themselves, cooperate less well with the team of people treating them.

What about teenagers?

Teenagers will react similarly to young children, only a change in behaviour may manifest itself in the form of severe withdrawal into oneself. Therefore, they may be irritable, „snappy,“ and often have sleep problems. Sometimes they detach themselves from their peers because they are more likely to experience feelings of shame. They often need to be alone with their difficult feelings. But they must not be left completely alone for long. In a crisis, everyone needs support.

Teenagers need much more detailed information. They may ask more questions, especially about the impact of the disease on their appearance, fitness and function in the future. It is worth waiting for children's questions and answering them according to what is known at the moment. It is important to talk to teenagers. They need it very much, although adults may sometimes think they don't want our presence. On the contrary, they need the presence of a loved one, their understanding and patience. There are so many changes happening in the teenage body at this age, and illness and treatment is another developmental crisis.



How to support a young and teenage child in dealing with emotional pain caused by anxiety, sadness and anger?

Remember that children read parents' reactions well, even when parents don't say anything. Children sense that something has changed, something is wrong. **Therefore, at first, it is very important for a parent to take care of themselves, learn to recognize their emotions and work through them.** If you want to be a support for your sick child, you need first and foremost to take care of yourself, which means learning to lower your stress levels so that you can be a support for your child, not another source of anxiety. When a child senses tension or emotional pain in a parent, they may choose to suffer alone, as they want to protect the parent from their difficult emotions, rather than add to the parent's worries. A child will go through a treatment process much better if the parent, to the best of their ability, takes care of themselves in this difficult situation.

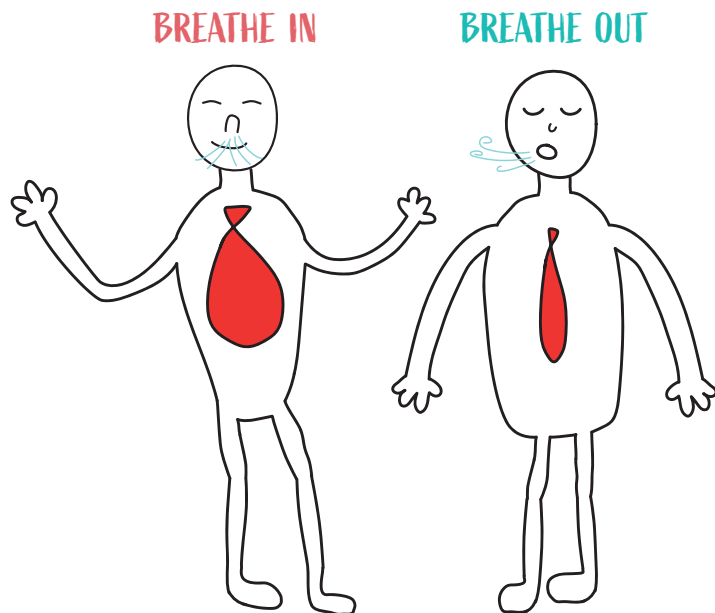
1. Breathing exercises

Conscious breathing effectively reduces tension in the body. Sit comfortably, inhale, hold it for a moment, and then exhale, saying to yourself in your head: relax. Breathing like this several times, regularly, you will see your mind quieting and your body becoming less tense. This way of lowering tension will also help your child a lot.

Instructions for a child

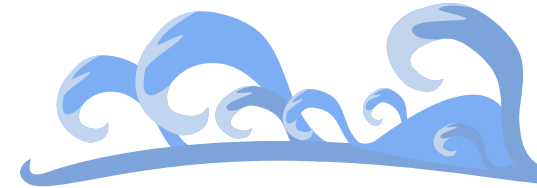
Now let's play with a balloon. We will be balloons. Our belly is a balloon. Slowly take a deep breath and fill the balloon with air, hold the air in the balloon while counting to five, and then let it out. While breathing, say the word „relax“ in your head.

Repeat this game a few times and you will feel tension in your body decrease and you will feel more calm.



2. Nursery rhyme massage

All kinds of nursery rhymes can be very relaxing for children. Examples such as Itsy Bitsy Spider., Miss Polly had a dolly who was sick, sick, sick..., or the game of pizza, which we play while massaging the child's back or a different place on the body.



3. Working with imagination in recovery

Working with imagination helps transform anxiety into peace of mind. Children are masters of imagination. Just tell them that we are going to the seaside in a week and immediately images appear of them jumping over the waves, collecting seashells, eating waffles, etc. They think about what they want to experience, nice things that give them joy. This is what imagination is all about - it is thinking or imagining something that is meaningful to a person.

Basic principle: **Think or imagine the desired outcome.**

Each person is an expert on imagination, because we use it throughout our lives. By being used so often, it becomes automatic and unconscious - like the process of breathing.

An example of a natural way to use your imagination: Recall what you had for breakfast yesterday. Using your imagination, notice the relationship between imagination and feelings. Through imagination, we can put ourselves into a state of relaxation.

Example: Ask your child to imagine a place where they feel calm and safe. It could be a place that the child really visited or an imaginary one. Choose a quiet moment when no one will interrupt.


Instructions for a child

Close your eyes. Breathe calmly. Imagine a place where you feel safe and calm. Concentrate on this peaceful setting and imagine it in as much detail as possible. Let there be colour in this image. Evoke sounds in your imagination, e.g.: birds singing, the sound of water, rustling leaves, someone's laughter, etc. Pay attention to how calm and relaxed you feel when you are in that place. Now imagine that when you open your eyes, you will return to the room you are in with the feeling of joy and peace.

It's worth doing this kind of work as often as possible, so that when you're in a stressful situation, you can quickly go to that safe place in your mind and calm down.

Important: **Worry** is an example of the unhealthy use of our imagination. It is simply imagining what we don't want. We do not want to develop it!

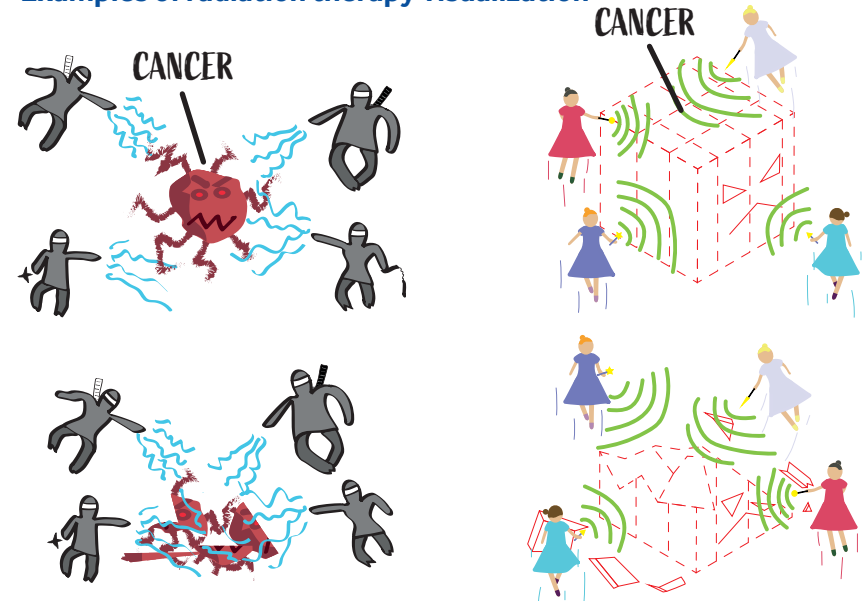
The Simonton Method (a type of psychotherapy) gives helpful recommendations:

 Imagine the **disease as curable**. Cancer cells are weak, confused and deformed, and are naturally recognized and destroyed by the healing abilities of the body.

 Imagine your child's treatment as effective, think of it as an ally.

Working with imagination in recovery is like learning a language or working out at the gym. The more you practice, the easier it gets and the better results you achieve. You might think that working with your imagination is like your mental gym, where you exercise your healthy thoughts. You can connect mind and body, e.g. by drawing a child's body, its illness and everything that heals it. Do it together with your child, no matter what age they are. This is an effective self-healing process for all people regardless of their age. You can first talk about how you imagine treatment (each in your own way), e.g. how chemotherapy or radiation therapy works.

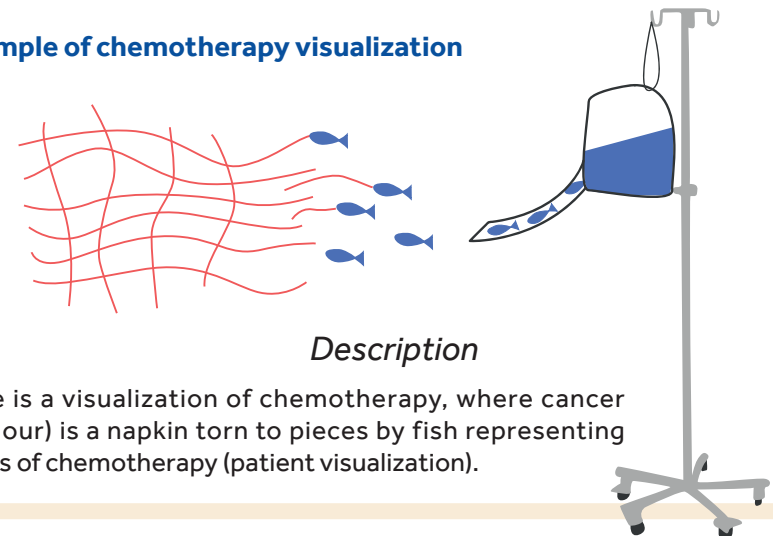
Examples of radiation therapy visualization



Description

In the picture on the left you can see how the ninjas use their power to burn cancer, and it disintegrates. The drawing on the right shows cancer being destroyed by radiation therapy rays, which here appear as princesses with wands, effectively destroying cancer.

Example of chemotherapy visualization



Description

Here is a visualization of chemotherapy, where cancer (tumour) is a napkin torn to pieces by fish representing drops of chemotherapy (patient visualization).

How to talk to a child about illness and treatment?

When a child gets sick, a parent has many new and often very stressful tasks to perform, such as talking about what the illness is, how it will be treated, what the consequences are, etc. Answering the above questions causes the child emotional pain, as they learn that the illness will be treated for longer than a runny nose and that they will be in the hospital away from family and peers. A parent is filled with anxiety about how a child will take such information.

Remember!

How your child handles information about health and treatment depends largely on how you handle the news.

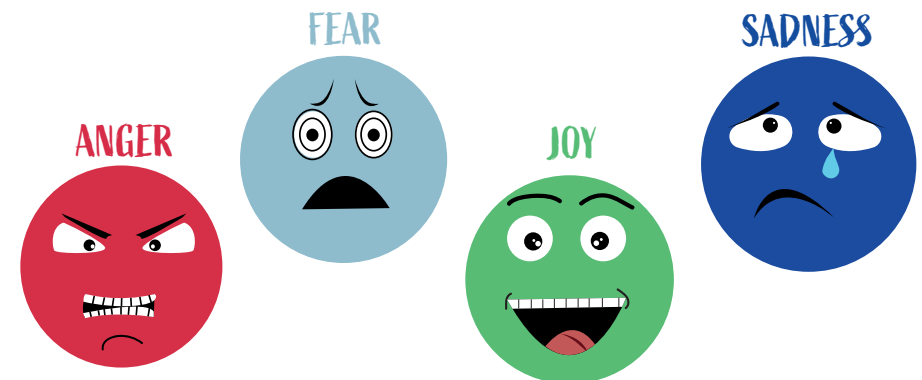
Although most parents, wanting to protect their child, would prefer not to share the above news, there is nothing worse than not having a frank conversation with your child about their illness. **Giving a child reliable information about the disease has a significant impact on increasing their sense of security.** Children need to be taken seriously, they want to have a say in what is happening to them, and to know what awaits them.

It is important to adapt the language and the way of informing the child to their age, curiosity and condition. This makes the situation for the child more stable and can better prepare for predictable events. A child acquires knowledge of the disease gradually. This is a process in which we always follow the child, such as answering their questions and asking if they understand what we are saying. **What to do if we don't know the answer to the child's question?** We say openly that we don't know. We listen carefully and honestly answer the questions posed by the child (using other forms of expression as well, such as a drawing or a game).

Building a sense of security in a chronically ill child, whether a small child or a teenager, starts with good communication, being open and attentive to what they say and what they need. The foundation of conversations about a disease and its consequences should be **HOPE**, which mobilizes the body's forces to cope with the disease. A little bit of hope

becomes extremely supportive - it helps to get us through crises, contributing to faster mental maturation of the child, helps to endure suffering and cope with feelings of helplessness, anger and the inevitability of events.

Young children have good contact with their bodies, so they feel emotions strongly in their bodies; for example, when they are stressed, they say their stomach or head hurts. This is valuable information. You can ask your child: „How are you today?“ And if the answer is: „So so,“ we should inquire as to what this means. We can ask the child to draw or tell us where in the body they feel this unpleasant sensation. A parent can encourage a child to draw or talk about their feelings by sharing emotions, e.g.: „I'm happy to be here with you and I feel warm in my heart right now, and it looks like this...“. It may be easier for a child to draw and say what they are feeling after such an introduction.



If a child does not want to talk about what they feel, you can encourage them by explaining that this information will help you to help them faster, so they will not be alone with the difficult situation, and then their emotional pain may be easier to bear.

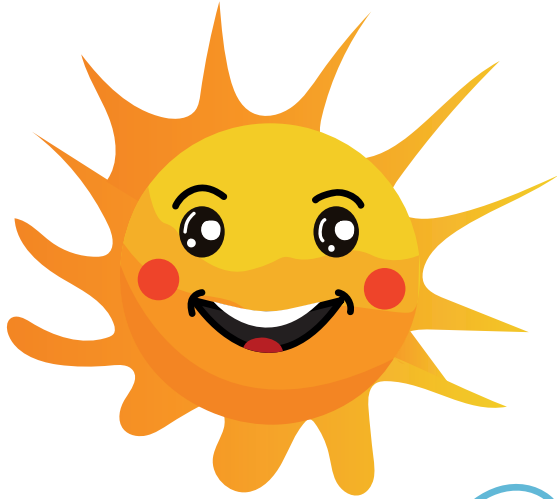
To enhance a child's quality of life during treatment, you can make a list of things to do with your child, as they are a source of joy. Dr. Simonton said that **fun is the greatest enemy of disease.** When we laugh, happy hormones - endorphins - are produced in our bodies, which strengthen the work of the immune system.

Exercise 1.

Instructions for a child: Write down or draw situations that make you feel good and bad.

SITUATIONS THAT MAKE YOU FEEL GOOD

(Write them down in clouds)



SITUATIONS THAT MAKE YOU FEEL BAD

(Write them down in clouds)







Remember!

We feel the way we think.

While looking at your child's emotions together, you can ask them some supportive questions.

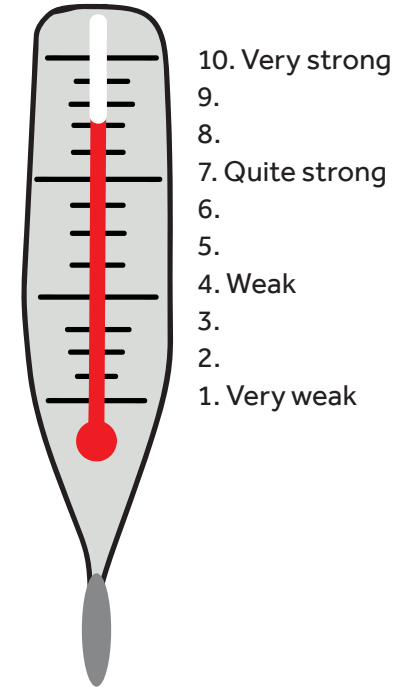
Examples of questions:

-  Think of something that made you feel sad. How could someone recognize that you felt sad?
-  What does your face look like when you are sad?
-  How does your body function when you are sad?
-  How do you behave when you are sad?



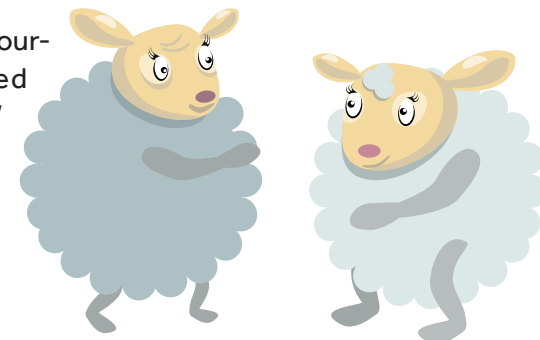
Exercise 2.

Instructions for a child: Imagine you can use a thermometer to show me the level of your emotion, e.g. sadness. On a scale from 1 to 10 where would you put it?



Exercise 3.

Just hug your child and then hug yourself. Studies show that we need **4** „hugs” a day to survive. **8** „hugs” a day help us to strengthen our immune system, and **12** „hugs” make us grow.



Helpful literature



Samantha Snowden M.A., Anger Management Workbook for Kids. 50 Fun Activities to Help Children Stay Calm and Make Better Choices When They Feel Mad, Callisto Kids.



Stążka-Gawrysiak A., Self-Regulation. Opowieści dla dzieci o tym, jak działać, gdy emocje biorą górę, Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak.



Bailey A., Ciarrochi J., Hayes L., Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life for Teens. A Guide to Living an Extraordinary Life, New Harbinger Publications, Inc.



Maultsby, M. C., Jr., Wirga, M., DeBernardi, M., ABC of Your Emotions



Edwards A., How to Crack Your Peanut: Solving the Mystery of Why You Sometimes Lose Your Mind, National Center for Youth Issues.

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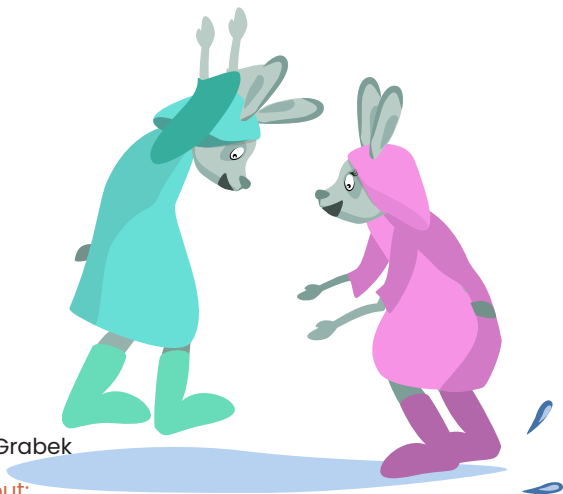
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About the author of the guidebook

Katarzyna Działa-Pawłowska
Psychologist, psychotherapist,
psycho-oncologist. In therapy she
uses the cognitive-behavioural
approach. She uses tools from the
existential approach and has been
working individually, as well as in
groups, with cancer patients and
their relatives for more than
20 years, using the Simonton method.
She supports chronically ill children
and their parents and runs support
groups for people in mourning. In her
therapeutic work she assists patients
in rediscovering themselves, their
needs, and emotions, while learning
to communicate with themselves in
a gentle and accepting way.

