

FEEL YOUR BEST SELF™

**Feel Your Best Self:
Diving into How it Works**





Feel Your Best Self: Diving into How it Works

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The purpose of this report is to describe our theory of change for Feel Your Best Self. A theory of change can explain how and why something is supposed to work, along with what benefits are expected and for whom.¹ Understanding the theory of change helps users understand the rationale for a particular intervention. This can inform decisions about the context for effective program delivery and capacity to achieve desired outcomes.

What is Feel Your Best Self (FYBS)?

Feel Your Best Self (FYBS) is a toolkit that teaches 12 simple, emotion-focused coping strategies. Using effective coping strategies is an important life skill, and when used regularly, the FYBS strategies may promote emotional well-being. Although useful across life stages, the primary target in FYBS is elementary-aged children. Using FYBS, kids explore different strategies to identify those that help them feel their best as they navigate different situations.

The 12 strategies are demonstrated in fun videos that show 3 puppet kids as they help each other navigate everyday situations!

The FYBS toolkit includes multiple components: the Feelings Forecast, short strategy videos with puppet friends, strategy step cards, discussion tip sheets, reflection sheets, and puppet-making options. Facilitator guidance is available to help use the various components. Use of the toolkit is flexible—there is no need to implement a fully manualized program that includes every component, or even all the strategies. Users can choose the parts that work best for their target ages, settings, and contexts. For example, a classroom teacher might incorporate all of the components in their lesson plans, an afterschool program might prioritize puppet-making along with the Feelings Forecast chart, or a family caregiver and child might select specific videos and strategy cards to use together.

Why Choose FYBS?

Recognizing, expressing, and regulating emotions are important life skills. So too are being able to take the perspectives of others and engage in prosocial interactions. Social and emotional competencies have been defined as critical to school success and beyond, with social and emotional learning (SEL) described as being important to help children gain the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to learn and thrive.^{2,3} Research has repeatedly shown benefits for students who participate in SEL delivered universally, like class-wide or schoolwide.^{4,5} These benefits include not only better social, emotional, and behavioral skills but also extend to areas like academic performance and school climate and safety. There are many broad and interrelated areas that fall within the umbrella of SEL.⁶ In this report, we focus on emotion skills since they are most directly tied to the goals of using FYBS.

Within the emotion domain, the specific skills mapped by researchers in the [EASEL Lab](#) at Harvard University include (1) emotion knowledge and expression, (2) emotion and behavior regulation, and (3) empathy and perspective-taking.⁷

Emotion knowledge and expression includes the skills of recognizing, understanding, and labeling emotions in oneself and others, and the ability to express one's feelings in contextually-appropriate ways.⁸ Emotion and behavior regulation relates to controlling the intensity and duration of one's emotions and emotional responses, as well as learning to act in accordance with social expectations. Finally, empathy and perspective-taking includes understanding and acting upon the experiences and viewpoints of others. These skills build upon and reinforce one another. For example, emotion knowledge supports the development of emotion regulation and empathy, and opportunities to practice emotion regulation and empathy reinforce emotion knowledge.

Emotion skills include (1) emotion knowledge and expression, (2) emotion and behavior regulation, and (3) empathy and perspective-taking.

Emotion skills help us interpret the sensations in our body that give us information about our emotions. Our mind takes the context of what is happening around us to label those emotions as feelings, like calm, excited, or worried. Emotional experiences can vary widely across people within similar contexts based on personal characteristics, cultural backgrounds, and past experiences. Sometimes the intensity of our emotional experiences can serve us well, and other times it could be useful to adjust the intensity or meaning we have given them. That is why it is important to have emotion skills that guide our interpretations. Recognizing and responding to emotions in ways that facilitate feeling our best self are skills that need to be learned and practiced throughout life. As previously described, acquiring these skills in childhood through proactive and positive opportunities for learning sets the stage for thriving.

FYBS offers a variety of strategies to help interpret emotions, with focus on use of emotion-focused coping to take a situation and determine an appropriate balance of negative and positive emotion. Not every strategy works the same for every person or in every situation, so it is important to have a toolbox of strategies along with the skills to know how and when to use them. Learning the individual strategies, practicing them in different situations, and applying them in real life is what FYBS is all about. FYBS facilitates what has been referred to as flexible emotion regulation.⁹ Emotion regulation is a mechanism to help us better cope with demands, and allows us to influence the what, when, and how of our experiences and expressions of emotion. By doing so, we can alter the intensity of emotional experiences.

Flexible emotion regulation refers to being able to select from a range of strategies to match preferences and context.

Flexible emotion regulation means having available a range of strategies that can be useful in regulating emotions and being able to select and use an appropriate strategy based on features of a situation and personal characteristics. A key aspect to flexible emotion regulation

is understanding when emotions are interfering with desired behaviors or goals. Efforts to employ emotion coping often targets reduction of negative emotion, but as shown in Figure 1, that is not always the case. Sometimes it is desirable to increase or decrease both negative and positive emotions.

Figure 1. *Emotion Goals Can Vary: Some Examples.*

| | Decrease | Increase |
|-------------------------|--|--|
| Negative emotion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trying to calm after being embarrassed in front of peers. • Trying to decrease sadness after accidentally ruining a class project. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressing anger or frustration over unfairness at not being recognized by others. • Increasing sadness to communicate need for support. |
| Positive emotion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refocusing in the classroom after an exciting game at recess. • Downplaying excitement about an accomplishment in front of a disappointed friend. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing excitement to cheer on or celebrate a classmate. • Increasing focus when feeling tired at the end of the day. • Demonstrating care to cheer up a classmate. |

Note. Adapted from Gross (2014).

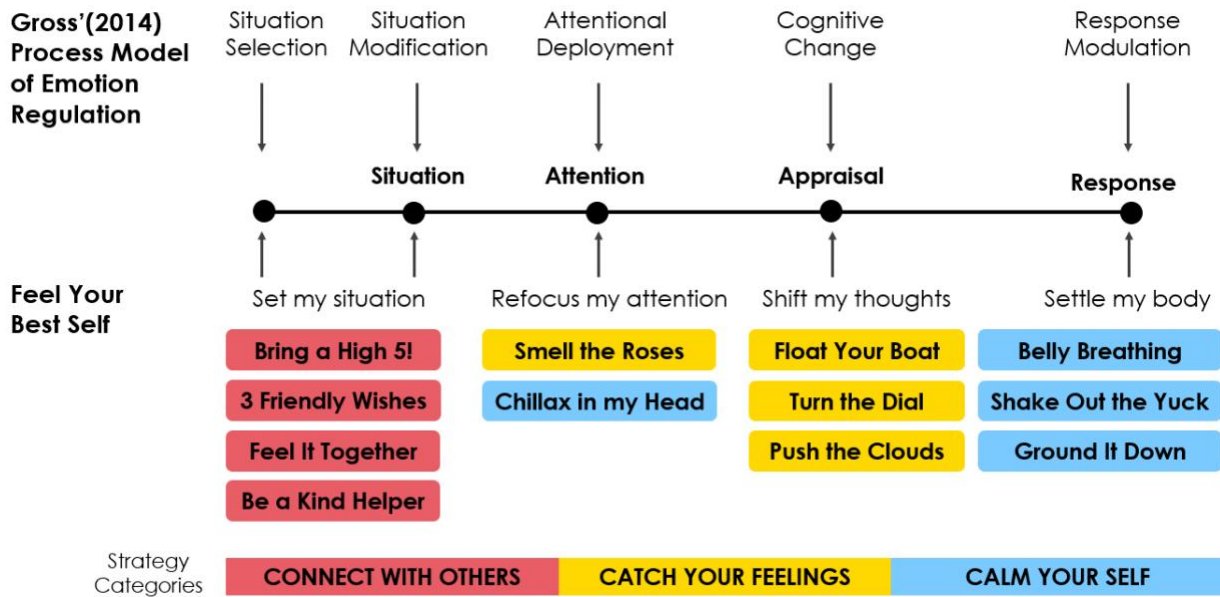
When we recognize the need to modify emotions, we work to determine and apply an effective strategy. FYBS strategies can be used in different places in the emotion cue-to-response continuum. That is, we can use strategies before (e.g., listening to energizing music) or once emotions have been experienced (e.g., distracting or calming ourselves).

From What Evidence does FYBS Draw?

To develop FYBS, our team reviewed evidence in emotion regulation, selecting strategies that could be taught quickly for anyone to use.¹⁰ In our work with caregivers and kids, we have seen that a key to generalized use across settings and over time is high usability.¹¹ Selection of strategies, therefore, was guided by a single-session intervention mindset so that strategies can be used to facilitate change across moments, both small and big. We also aimed for accessible strategies that would be empowering, non-stigmatizing, and affordable to all.¹²

We mapped the strategies, guided by Gross's seminal process model of emotion regulation.¹³ This model proposes that strategies can be used at different points in the emotion cue-to-response continuum.^{14,15} For example, some strategies are used *proactively* (as antecedents before an undesired emotion occurs) through situation selection or modification. Using situation selection or modification, individuals might seek out positive emotions or avoid situations that could elicit negative emotions. Others are used *reactively* (when or after an undesired emotion has occurred) to re-focus attention, shift thoughts, or settle the body.

Figure 2. *Mapping FYBS to Gross' (2014) Process Model of Emotion Regulation.*



As shown in Figure 2, we developed three categories of strategies that function at different points in Gross' Process Model of Emotion Regulation. Those categories include: Connect with Others, Catch Your Feelings, and Calm Your Self. *Connect with Others* strategies are about social relationships, and include offering or seeking connection. *Catch Your Feelings* strategies support self-awareness of one's emotional state through refocusing attention or shifting thoughts. Finally, *Calm Your Self* strategies focus on self-soothing skills that settle the body or refocus attention. The 12 individual FYBS strategies are arranged within these categories, with the acknowledgement that refocusing strategies could fall within both *Catch Your Feelings* and *Calm Your Self*. Additional detail about the FYBS categories and specific strategies is provided later.

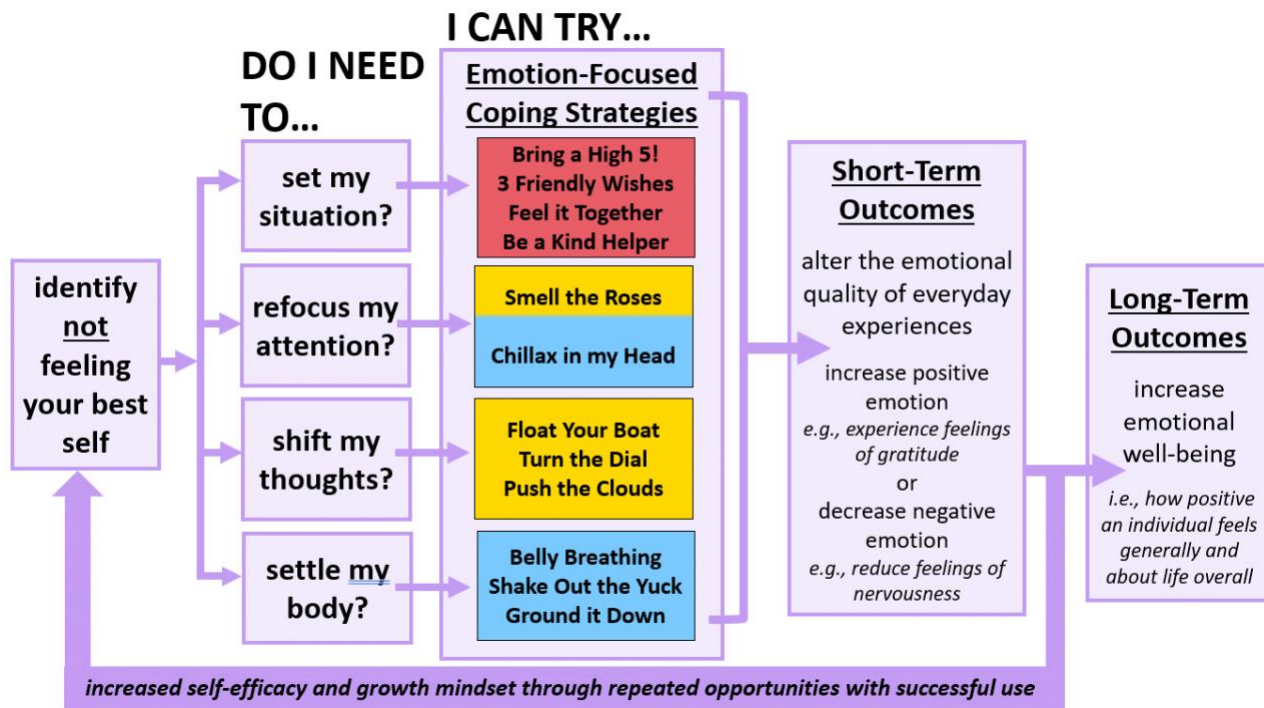
How Does FYBS Work?

Our FYBS theory of change suggests that an individual first recognizes that their emotions are interfering with desired behaviors or goals (i.e., not feeling their best self; Figure 2). This recognition triggers a review of possible strategies that could match their situation and personal characteristics. Implementation of the chosen strategy can alter the emotional quality of that experience, most often directed toward decreasing negative emotion or increasing positive emotion. Repeated cycles of success in which individuals alter the emotional quality of their experiences in everyday moments can lead to an increased personal belief in the ability to accomplish a goal (i.e., self-efficacy).¹⁶ This might look like regulating an emotional expression or staying motivated to influence emotion interpretation. Repeated experiences of success can improve their self-efficacy and ability with which to flexibly regulate emotion.

Over time, repeated use and perceived success can lead to long-term outcomes that include emotional well-being, which refers to how positive an individual feels generally and about life overall.¹⁷ Emotional well-being includes the emotional quality of everyday moments, which

FYBS strategies aim to improve, and judgments about emotional experiences, life satisfaction, and ability to pursue goals. We suggest that as individuals experience a greater frequency of positive emotions and greater self-efficacy in managing their emotional responses using flexible emotion regulation strategies, both their day-to-day experiences and judgements about their emotions will be increasingly positive.

Figure 2. FYBS Theory of Change.



Next, we dive into more detail about the FYBS strategies, and how each strategy functions to help individuals set their situation, refocus their attention, shift their thoughts, or settle their bodies. Although strategies may be used in various ways, we focus on how they are presented in the FYBS videos.

Do the FYBS Strategies Work the Same Way?

No! As we mentioned earlier, strategies target emotion skills that are an important component of lifelong emotion regulation. As shown in Figure 1, the FYBS strategies function at various points in the emotion cue-to-response continuum. The range of strategies in FYBS facilitates flexible emotion regulation by allowing kids to choose the strategy that aligns with both their preferences and the situation at hand. Next, we show how the strategies within each category—as mapped onto Gross’ Process Model of Emotion Regulation—target the critical emotion skills of (1) emotional knowledge and expression, (2) emotional and behavioral regulation, or (3) empathy and perspective-taking.

Set My Situation

| FYBS Category | FYBS Strategy & Brief Description | Emotional Knowledge & Expression | Emotional & Behavioral Regulation | Empathy & Perspective-Taking |
|---------------------|--|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| CONNECT WITH OTHERS | Feel it Together <i>Description:</i> seek social support from trusted individuals | X | X | |
| | Bring a High 5! <i>Description:</i> show gratitude for the strengths of others | | | X |
| | Be a Kind Helper <i>Description:</i> use acts of kindness to help others and themselves feel their best | | | X |
| | 3 Friendly Wishes <i>Description:</i> share friendly wishes with someone to help everyone feel their best self | | | X |

The most proactive approaches to emotion regulation are **situation selection** and **situation modification**.¹³ We collapsed these into one category that individuals can use to **set their situation**. When using these strategies, individuals take actions that increase the likelihood of experiencing specific emotions (i.e., situation selection), or modify an external situation to alter its emotional impact (i.e., situation modification).¹³ Bring a High 5!, 3 Friendly Wishes, Feel It Together, and Be a Kind Helper promote emotion regulation by setting a situation.

Refocus My Attention

| FYBS Category | FYBS Strategy & Brief Description | Emotional Knowledge & Expression | Emotional & Behavioral Regulation | Empathy & Perspective-Taking |
|---------------------|--|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Calm Your Self | Chillax in my Head <i>Description:</i> use visualization to refocus attention | X | X | |
| Catch Your Feelings | Smell the Roses <i>Description:</i> use your senses to focus on the present moment | X | X | |

The next set of strategies engage the mechanism of **attentional deployment**—in other words, they allow us to **refocus our attention**. When using attentional deployment, individuals shift their focus away from undesired emotions towards more desired emotions.¹³ Common examples of attentional deployment include distraction or concentration. Smell the Roses and Chillax in My Head promote emotion regulation through attentional deployment.

Shift My Thoughts

| FYBS Category | FYBS Strategy & Brief Description | Emotional Knowledge & Expression | Emotional & Behavioral Regulation | Empathy & Perspective-Taking |
|---------------------|---|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Catch Your Feelings | Float Your Boat <u>Description:</u> let go of heavy thoughts or feelings so that we can feel lighter | X | X | |
| | Turn the Dial <u>Description:</u> looking at an upsetting or challenging situation in a different way | X | X | |
| | Push the Clouds <u>Description:</u> use a rhyme and simple action to help make room for lighter, sunnier feelings | X | X | |

Cognitive change involves altering how one is appraising a situation or **shifting thoughts**. Individuals can either modify how they are appraising a situation to alter its emotional significance or reappraise their capacity to manage the situation.¹³ Float Your Boat, Push the Clouds, and Turn the Dial all promote emotion regulation through cognitive change.

Settle My Body

| FYBS Category | FYBS Strategy & Brief Description | Emotional Knowledge & Expression | Emotional & Behavioral Regulation | Empathy & Perspective-Taking |
|----------------|--|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Calm Your Self | Belly Breathing <u>Description:</u> how to use relaxation breathing to help settle bodies | X | X | |
| | Shake Out the Yuck <u>Description:</u> shows how to shake off heavy feelings that keep us from feeling our best selves | X | X | |
| | Ground it Down <u>Description:</u> shows kids to tighten and relax their muscles as a self-soothing strategy | X | X | |

The final three FYBS strategies employ the mechanism of **response modulation**. Specifically, they facilitate **settling the body**. Response modulation occurs after an individual has attended

to and appraised a stimulus. Using response modulation, individuals seek to alter the behavioral, experiential, or physiological aspects of an emotional response.¹³ Belly Breathing, Shake Out the Yuck, and Ground it Down are all examples of response modulation.

Conclusion

FYBS aims to equip kids with a range of strategies that they can use to regulate their emotions in various situations. By focusing on simple strategies that can be used across settings and the life course, FYBS facilitates valuable learning of important life skills that are connected to emotional well-being. Grounded in theory of emotion regulation, FYBS strategies help kids proactively regulate their emotions and respond to challenging situations in the moment.

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