

The Emotional First Aid Kit © 2024 by Irith Williams and

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My emotional first aid kit

[I am upset at work, what should I do?](#)

[I just want to read some information](#)

How you feel right now is valid. All of this information helps you to settle so that you can feel in control to think about next steps.

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I am upset at work

It is ok and normal to feel upset at work from time to time.

Firstly, we need to check, do you feel safe right now?

[Yes](#)

[No](#)

Getting settled

First, we'll help you to settle, and if you're not sure, we can help you work out why you're upset. Once you understand why you're upset, and you feel settled, you can think about your next steps.

Not in a private space

If you can't find a private space, you can still do these **quick grounding exercises**. If these settle you it's still very important to find a quiet space and use the [3-step settling process](#). Try to do this as soon as you can. Even a 10 minute break can start to settle yourself.

5-4-3-2-1 Grounding

Look around you and notice:

- **5 things you see**, e.g. items in the room or out the window, your hands, the sky, a plant, picture on wall, furniture, people, colours, shapes, object details, you can also count or categorize objects.
- **4 things you feel**, e.g., feet on the ground, a chair on your back, clothes you're wearing, shoes on feet, the texture of your skin, pen in hand, wind blowing, squeeze yourself tight.
- **3 things you hear** e.g., people talking, birds chirping, your breath, machinery clanking,

car horns, traffic noise, music, humming of electronics.

- **2 things you smell** e.g., Laundry detergent on clothes, food from lunch, citrus fruits, freshly cut grass, rain, cookies, fresh air, flowers, soap, lotion, tea, coffee.
- **1 thing you taste**, e.g., mint, gum, sour candy, fruit, chocolate, eat an orange segment by segment, take a drink of something, bite into a lemon.

Other quick grounding techniques

- If you can go to a sink, splash water on your face or run your hands under cold water.

- Keep small objects with you like a rock or pine cone and notice colours, textures, weight, and every detail about it.
- Cross your arms, making an X on your chest, and tap your collarbones with your fingertips. Breathe deeply.
- Press your palms together. Press them harder and hold this pose for 15 seconds. Pay attention to the feeling of tension in your hands and arms.
- Count backwards by 7 starting at 100. Count to 200 by 3s or 7s.

Next, plan for where and when you can find a private space.

Settling ourselves is a 3 step process.

1. [Scanning our body for tension areas](#)
2. [Naming our feelings](#)
3. [Applying a settling exercise](#)

(Note: These can take as little as 5 minutes, but times can vary. Something is better than nothing. If you have less time available, just do what you can and give yourself more time later.)

Finding a private space

These steps need you to be able to concentrate in a private, safe space. Think about where at work might you have some 'alone' time? e.g. A gym room? A meeting room with blinds? A

secluded outdoor area? A public park? A food & drink area? a toilet cubicle?

Step 1 – body scanning

- Find a quiet, safe place to focus on your body. This could be at your desk, or in a private space, or outside.
- Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths.
- Focus on the feeling of the breath moving in and out of your body.
- Begin to scan your body. Start at the top of your head and move down through each part of your body.

- As you scan, pay attention to any sensations, such as discomfort, tension, warmth, or tingling.
- When you notice any areas of tension or discomfort, focus on that area and take a few deep breaths, imagine that you are breathing into that area and relaxing it.
 - It can help to visualize a golden liquid, or white light, flooding into that area and restoring calm.
- Keep scanning your body until you have covered all areas.
- Take a few more deep breaths and open your eyes.

Important

You may still experience some sensations in your body, but this exercise will help interrupt your emotional response and let you start to regulate your feelings.

‘Breathing’. If you have trauma associated with breathing, or breathing deeply, just breathe normally, but still visualise sending relaxing liquid or light into the area you are focussing on.

Now that you have scanned your body it's time to name your mental feelings.

Step 2 - Naming feelings

- Find a space to say out loud, or to write down, each feeling. This could be at your desk, or in a private space, or outside.
- Name each feeling that is making you upset. Use the words “ I feel....”. For example “I feel worried.” “I feel attacked.”. Don’t worry if your feeling qualifies as an ‘emotion’ just use whatever description fits you.
- If it’s helpful, translate your ‘self talk’ in this situation to ‘I feel...’ statements. E.g., “I feel ambushed”, “I feel ignored”, etc.
- Keep naming your feelings until you have covered them all.

Note

It can be helpful to write down your feelings for future reference. If you need to say them out loud, you can use the microphone on your smart phone to make notes.

Important

Naming feelings is proven to help us calm because it interrupts our nervous system stress response. You don't have to do anything with the words, just naming the feelings has its own effect.

It's not helpful to analyse or judge any feelings. Just let the honest names come out.

Step 3 - A settling exercise

We all have different ways of calming. Some people need activity to 'let off steam'. Some people need a warm bath. Some people need comfort food.

When we are at work, it's difficult to find "what can we do?" And, "where can we go?" to soothe ourselves.

We will help you find the things that provide soothing comfort at work. It's important to **make a note of what works for you**. When we get upset, we can forget these comfort tactics.

That's how this Emotional First Aid Kit is personalised for you. You make a note of what

works, and they can be your 'go to' suggestions when you feel stressed.

So let's get started.

Suggested settling exercise ideas

- Go for a walk outside. Even just around the block if you are not close to any green spaces.
- Some sort of physical activity: e.g, some yoga poses, some jogging or dancing. Listening to music for 5 minutes and moving your body.
- Move to another space and have some food or drink. Hot drinks and crunchy food can be

helpful. Healthy options are salted popcorn, fresh nuts, pepitas.

- Do something social. Find someone to have a break with you. You can also speak to a trusted person. Contact a friend or family member, or a trusted person in your professional network or social network and seek support.
- If you haven't done the [body scanning exercise](#), do that now.
- 5 Minute Muscle Relaxation exercise:
 - Find a quiet and comfortable place to sit or lie down.
 - Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths to relax your mind and body.

- Starting with your feet, tense the muscles as tightly as you can for a count of 5, then release and let go of the tension.
- Move up to your calves, and repeat the process of tensing and relaxing the muscles.
- Continue to work your way up through your body, tensing and relaxing each muscle group: thighs, hips, stomach, back, shoulders, arms, hands, neck, and face.
- Take a few deep breaths and notice how your body feels.

These are just a few suggestions. Make a note of what works for you. Think of something safe,

that you can do at work, to help soothe your feelings.

How settled do you feel?

Settling our feelings when we have been upset is not easy. It's normal to not feel 100% calm. What you are aiming for is to feel settled enough to focus on your work tasks.

These exercises take practice. We might need to do them repeatedly to really start to learn how to reduce our emotional state.

Sometimes it's hard to feel settled when it feels like there is 'unfinished business'.

This Emotional First Aid Kit aims to help you regain calm immediately, so you can start to think about your next steps.

This Emotional First Aid Kit does not give workplace stress advice, but it does offer insight into the causes of emotional stress at work.

Using that information can help you decide what your 'next steps' might be.

Go to the '[Why do I get upset at work?](#)' section to start your 'next steps'.

Sources and resources

Grounding

<https://mentalhealthcenterkids.com/blogs/articles/grounding-exercises-for-kids>

Settling

<https://www.makingbusinessmatter.co.uk/window-of-tolerance/>

<https://www.gov.ie/SiteCollectionDocuments/Education/ID%20The%20Window%20of%20Tolerance%2020%2006%2016.pdf>

<https://cavuhb.nhs.wales/files/resilience-project/parent-group-resources/5-regulating-our-bodies-parents-english-pdf>

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Why do I get upset at work?

Getting upset at work is a very common experience. Most people get upset at work sometimes. Being upset at work can stop our ability to think, to do our work well, and to feel safe.

As well as doing [the settling exercises](#), it can help to understand why we may get upset.

Sometimes it is clear why we get upset. It may be from a safety incident or a distressing event.

Other times it is unclear why we feel upset, or why we feel very upset from a 'minor' incident.

If we understand **why** we get upset, we can use that information to:

- Avoid upsetting situations
- Respond to upsetting situations in healthy ways
- Take steps to address the causes of upsetting situations
- Support others who feel upset at work

The Emotional First Aid Kit is built using knowledge from four ideas. They are:

1. [How we react to threats](#)
2. [The window of tolerance model](#)
3. [The SCARF model](#)

4. [Trauma informed care](#)

All four of these ideas are based on an understanding of the human brain. The human brain's job is to keep us alive. So a key skill for the brain is to recognise 'threats' and 'rewards'. The first thing we need to understand is that our brain constantly scans for potential threats.

Reacting to threats

For humans, survival has always depended on the ability to react quickly to threats.



The part of our brain that controls our ability to react quickly is our **sympathetic nervous system** (SNS). Our SNS recognises threats vs rewards in milliseconds.



We aren't aware when our SNS is first activated, but when it is activated, the SNS causes changes in our body and in our concentration. These are the bodily sensations we feel when we are stressed or worried e.g. muscle tension,

changes in our breathing, knots in our stomach etc.

You might have heard of the 'flight or fight' response. This is describing the effect of our SNS on how we think and behave.

In psychiatric terms, this is called 'hyperarousal' (too much arousal). This is our body trying to keep us safe. We can't stop it happening, but we can learn how to calm our body and mind.

Hyperarousal examples

Here are some examples of hyperarousal.

- Tension, shaking
- Short tempered, defensive, anger/rage
- Racing thoughts, intrusive imagery, obsessive, cycling thoughts

- Emotional overwhelm
- Feeling unsafe, hypervigilance
- Impulsivity, increased physical activity

Reacting to prolonged threats

When we can't escape feeling threatened or stressed a different part of the brain is activated. Our **parasympathetic nervous system** (PNS) takes over and 'immobilises' us to keep us safe. (The 'freeze', 'flop' or 'fawn' response).

Like an armadillo curls up in a defensive ball, this is our body changing strategy to stop us taking risks and keep us still and rested.

This is called 'hypoarousal' (too little arousal).

Hypoarousal examples

- No energy, low energy
- No feelings/sensations, 'checked out', numbed emotions
- Reduced physical movement
- Can't defend oneself, can't think, can't say 'no'
- Feeling ashamed, passive, flat
- Appeasing, trying to 'smooth over'

All of these are normal physiological responses. Our Sympathetic and Parasympathetic Nervous Systems are also activated positively, like when we jump up and down excitedly, or do calming yoga. We need both of these systems to survive

and enjoy life, and we can learn to work with them to manage our workplace interactions.

Remember

Your feelings are valid. All of this information is to help you settle so that you can feel in control to think about next steps.

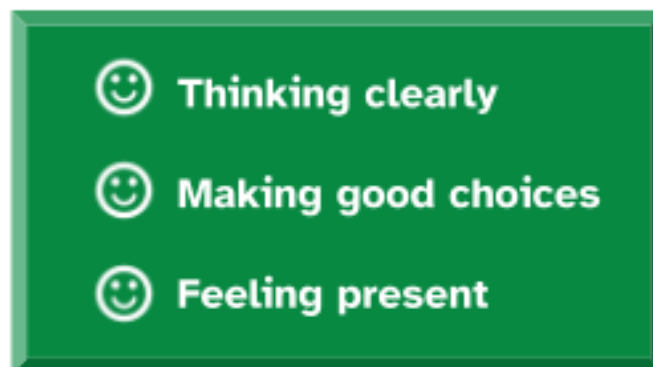
What is a “window of tolerance”?

What upsets us can change. These **different reasons** for getting upset can be explained by a change in our “window of tolerance”.

An optimal window of tolerance

Everyone has a different level of how much they can handle and still feel okay/safe. This is called our "window of tolerance." When we are in our "window of tolerance," we can handle the normal ups and downs of life without too much trouble.

We can think clearly, make good choices and act in a way that is good for us.



In psychiatric language, this window of tolerance is our 'optimal arousal' or 'optimal stimulation' state.

But, sometimes our "window of tolerance" can be different. This can change depending on what's happening around us and what we're doing.

A narrowed window of tolerance

The size of our "window of tolerance" can change because of things like how busy or stressed we are, big changes in our life, and how we get along with other people.

Our health and how much we sleep and exercise can also affect it.



We have ways to describe when this changes.

Neurodiversity

Being highly sensitive to external and internal sensory stimuli can drastically narrow our window of tolerance.

If you are impacted by things like lighting levels, sounds, smells, skin feelings and taste, you may have a neurology that puts you into a 'neurodiverse' spectrum.

Similarly, if it takes a lot of energy to manage your emotions, if the experience of negative and

positive emotions can seem overwhelming, you might also have a neurology that qualifies as ‘neurodiverse’.

If either of these phenomena are happening while you try to deal with a workplace incident, you will need to find professional and peer support outside of this Emotional First Aid Kit. You can find some in the **Resources** at the end of this section.

Think of phrases like “*I feel fragile*”, or, “*I feel stressed*”, “*You’re winding me up*”, or, “*I’m on a short fuse*”.

These are all ways of expressing that our tolerance has narrowed.

When things are really hard and we can't handle them, we might be pushed out of our "window of tolerance." This happens when our SNS or PNS is activated and we can either go into the 'hyperarousal' window or a 'hypoarousal' window.

It's good to learn how to notice when our bodies are feeling this way, and then do things that make us feel calm and safe again. You can use the [Settling exercises](#) to practise this.

There is plenty of information about the 'window of tolerance' on the internet with lots of practical advice. When you feel able, take some time to find the information helpful to you.

You might learn how to widen your window of tolerance if you feel it's too narrow at the moment.

You might also learn how to accept your narrow window of tolerance for now, and work out how to manage the triggers that can tip you into the hyperarousal or hypoarousal windows.

Sources and resources

Kerr, Laura K, PhD [Live Within Your Window of Tolerance: A Quick Guide to Regulating Emotions, Calming Your Body & Reducing Anxiety – Pandora's Project](#)

Living within your window of tolerance [Free \[gratuita\] Window Of Tolerance Guide | laura k kerr. phd](#)

Hampshire CAMHS  [Window of Tolerance](#)

Managing the impact of trauma whilst at work
[Window of Tolerance: Managing the Impact of Trauma Whilst at Work](#)

Understanding the Window of Tolerance and How it Affects You

<https://www.mindmypeelings.com/blog/window-of-tolerance>

[Window of Tolerance Awareness Worksheet](#)

Neurodiversity information

[Neurodiversity: Definition and Impact](#)

[Autism in Adults: Diagnosis, Treatment, and Resources](#)

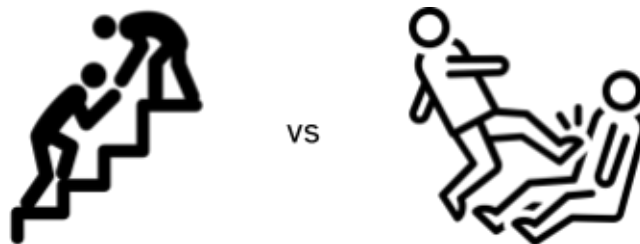
[Pre-diagnosis support - a guide for adults who think they might be autistic](#)

[I Think I Have ADHD: What to Do and Where to Go](#)

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The SCARF model

Now that we understand how our body reacts to threats, we'll learn about our 5 core social needs. Our SNS recognises social threats vs rewards in milliseconds too.



Our emotions help to alert us to our social rewards and threats.

Social emotional feelings

Rewards

relaxed

confident

belonging

proud

recognised

Threats

ambushed

angry

rejected

ashamed

betrayed

The SCARF model describes our 5 social needs.

These are normal needs. Most people have one or two dominant needs.

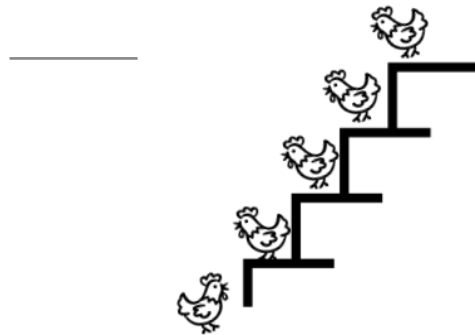
When these needs are **not** met, our brain treats that as a threat and activates the SNS.

The SCARF social needs

1. **S**tatus
2. **C**ertainty
3. **A**utonomy
4. **R**elatedness
5. **F**airness

Status

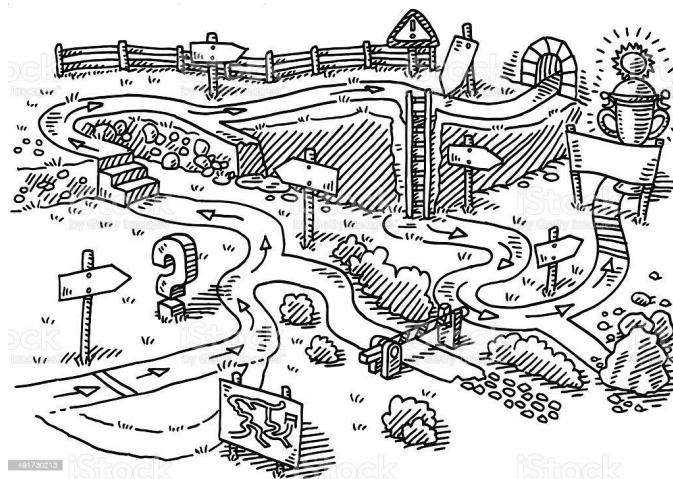
Status is about where we see ourselves in the 'pecking order'. Examples of status rewards are public recognition and explicit acknowledgment.



Certainty

Certainty is about knowing what to expect.

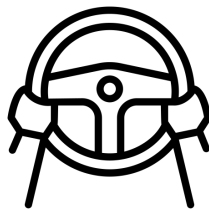
Examples of certainty needs are: what's going to happen? When will something happen? What will be delivered?



Autonomy

Autonomy is about the need to exercise choice and control. Examples of autonomy needs are: being consulted about decisions, agreeing to workload and work patterns.

Relatedness



Relatedness is about a sense of belonging and safety. How connected you feel to others. Examples of relatedness needs are: wanting to share knowledge and collaborate,

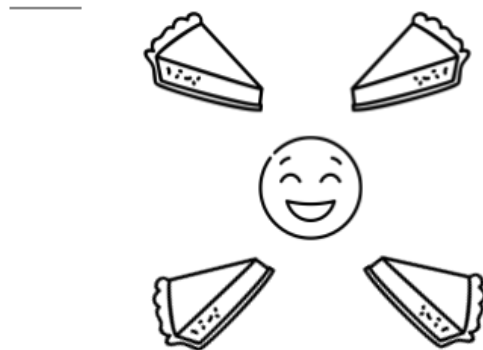


wanting to socialise and relax outside of the work routine.

Fairness

Fairness is about a sense of equal treatment.

Examples of fairness needs are: being recognised when goals are met, spreading workload evenly across a team, equitable opportunities to work well.



Sources and resources

[The SCARF Model of Engagement: Your Ultimate Guide!](#)

You can keep learning about SCARF by [Naming your SCARF needs](#)

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Trauma informed care

Being 'trauma informed' begins with acknowledging that we can all experience trauma and carry the effects of trauma with us. Trauma can be 'physical' (e.g., a physical injury) and trauma can be psychological. The effects of physical injuries can cause trauma. The effects of social injuries can cause trauma.

Everyone has the capacity to be traumatised, but we don't all react the same way. Two people can experience the same thing, but only one becomes traumatised.

Some of us may experience trauma in the workplace. Some of us may be carrying the effects of trauma with us into the workplace.

We should not try to work out 'who has what trauma'. We need to accept, trauma is pervasive, and our assumption is that trauma can be affecting ourselves and our co-workers.

So, because we always assume trauma can be a factor, we need to care for ourselves and others in a 'trauma informed' way.



Source: Phoenix Australia, Trauma Informed Care

Trauma Informed Care in the Workplace

This diagram from [Phoenix Australia](#) displays the principles of Trauma Informed Care. These

practices together are 'trauma aware' and 'culturally responsive'. They provide:

- Worker wellbeing
- Organisational support

The five Trauma Informed Care principles are:

1. Give choice and control
2. Believe in recovery (from the effects of trauma)
3. Facilitate connections
4. Focus on strengths
5. Build safety and trust

Understanding the role of our nervous system, and models like 'window of tolerance' and 'SCARF' are all trauma informed viewpoints.

There is a lot of information about trauma and trauma informed care on the internet. There are even training courses in how to become trauma informed.

PTSD

If your feelings are taking you back to past bad experiences, or if your feelings remind you of feelings you've had in the past, it might show that you are carrying trauma over from those experiences.

Having feelings from past experiences well up because of things happening now, can be called being 'triggered'. It can mean that you have Post Traumatic Stress.

When Post Traumatic Stress interferes with our ability to live life in the way we would like to, it's called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is often thought to be caused by dramatic events like natural disasters, or combat zones. This is true, but it can also be caused by acute or prolonged emotional, mental and social trauma. These can cause exactly the same SNS responses as natural disasters or armed conflict.

So, if you think work may be triggering feelings from past events, events outside of work, or severe anxiety, it's time to seek professional help.

Please contact your GP or a trusted mental healthcare provider to refer you for PTSD support.

You can try searching local health directories for professional PTSD support services.

Sources and resources

UK: [I think I have PTSD – what should I do?](#)

USA: [Do I Have PTSD?](#)

Australia: [Post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#)
[healthdirect](#)

Phoenix Australia 2022 [\(TIC training provider\)](#)

[SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for
a Trauma-Informed Approach](#)

[Fight, Flight, Freeze, or Fawn? Understanding
Trauma Responses](#)

[Fawn Response: Adding to The Fight, Flight, or
Freeze Framework](#)

[**Go to Next Steps**](#)

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I don't feel safe right now

If someone is unsafe, it's very important to respond right away. For physical hazards, go to:

[I feel that I am or someone else is physically unsafe.](#)

I feel psychologically unsafe.

If you are **not** in **physical** danger, but feel psychologically unsafe, first [get settled](#). Then you can decide what to do next.

I feel both physically and psychologically unsafe.

If you feel both physically and psychologically unsafe, deal with the physical safety issue first. See below for what to do if someone is physically unsafe.

I am, or someone else is, physically unsafe.

They are at risk of

[Physical aggression](#)

[Physical injury](#)

Physical aggression

Immediate danger

If anyone is in immediate danger, call the Police straight away.

1. Use a 'circuit breaker'

If you feel safe enough to speak you can use a 'circuit breaker' phrase, such as

- 'This is not ok'
- 'This needs to stop'
- 'This is not acceptable behaviour'

2. Find help:

- Seek support or intervention from other workers, security personnel, people nearby.

3. Remove yourself

- Go to a safe location
- Ask the aggressor to leave the work area

4. Log the incident

- Make a record of what happened as soon as you can.
- If your workplace has one, contact a Health and Safety Representative or Union Representative.
- If you feel confident to report to a line manager or HR representative you can report the incident.

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Physical injury

In most jurisdictions workers have the right to be safe and feel safe at work. This means you have the right to refuse to carry out or stop unsafe work.

Immediate danger

1. If anyone is in immediate danger, refuse to carry out the unsafe work or stop the unsafe work from continuing.
2. Sound the alarm and evacuate the area if there is risk of a fire or gas leak.

3. If someone is seriously injured, or suspected of a serious injury, phone for an ambulance immediately.
4. If it's safe, apply first aid, or find somebody who can apply first aid until an ambulance arrives.
5. Make sure there's no danger to yourself or anybody else around the incident site.
6. Remove yourself or whoever is at risk, making sure safety precautions are followed.
7. Don't disturb the incident site - don't touch or move anything at the incident site, unless it's to provide first aid or stop further injury or property damage. This is because the site may need to be investigated.

Not immediate danger

1. Flag the safety hazard

Communicate 'this is a safety hazard, it needs to stop.'

2. Report the safety issue

These steps may include:

- reporting the issue verbally to your supervisor or manager
- reporting the issue through the workplace's hazard reporting procedures
- raising the issue with the health and safety representative
- raising the issue with management through your union representative

- If you are worried about reporting the safety issue you can report anonymously through a safety hotline or workplace safety regulator website/app.

Once you feel that anything unsafe physically has been resolved for now you might find it helpful to look at [I feel psychologically unsafe](#).

Sources and Resources

Contacts

USA

[OSHA Worker Rights and Protections |](#)

[Occupational Safety and Health Administration](#)

[Contact Us | Occupational Safety and Health
Administration](#)

UK

[Tell us about a health and safety issue - Contact
HSE](#)

- Telephone: 0300 003 1647
- Monday to Tuesday, 8:30am to 5pm
- Wednesday, 10am to 5pm
- Thursday to Friday, 8:30am to 5pm

Australia

ACT [Contact Us - WorkSafe ACT](#)

NSW [Speak Up Save Lives](#)

NT [Contact Us | NT WorkSafe](#)

QLD [Notify Workplace Health and Safety
Queensland or the Electrical Safety Office |
WorkSafe.qld.gov.au](#)

VIC [Contact WorkSafe](#)

WA TBC

TAS [Notify WorkSafe](#)

Can't find your jurisdiction?

*Please google 'workplace safety emergency
contact' for your region/country to search for
the relevant authority. Please feel free to let us
know what we should add to this list.*

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What could my next steps be?

- I know why I'm upset, I need to [log an incident](#).
 - I have read [Why do I get upset at work?](#) And I am ready to [Name my SCARF needs](#).
 - [I want to go back and read the safety information](#)
-

Log an incident

It can help to log incidents that make you or others feel unsafe, or make you feel upset.

If you are recording a safety violation your workplace should have documentation and procedures to do that.

Create your own document, spreadsheet or journal. Keep it where you can trust it will be private and you will remember to use it. It's important to use what you are comfortable with.

What to include in your incident log:

- Date
- What I heard / what I saw
- What I thought/think
- What I felt/feel
- What was done
- What I did
- What happened next:

- What the outcomes are:

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Naming my SCARF needs

Have you read: Getting Settled: [Step 2: naming my feelings](#) ? If you haven't read that yet, have a look at it now. This is the same exercise, but using the SCARF needs labels.

For this exercise you will need to create a document, spreadsheet, or journal for where you would like to log your feelings as SCARF needs.

Keep it where you can trust it will be private and you will remember to use it. It's important to use what you are comfortable with.

Steps for Naming your SCARF needs

- a. Name your emotion / feeling
- b. Describe what triggered that feeling
- c. Compare the triggering incident and the feeling to the SCARF model ([Status](#), [Certainty](#), [Autonomy](#), [Relatedness](#), [Fairness](#))
- d. Allocate which SCARF need applies to that incident and feeling. There's usually one dominant, but maybe two are involved.
- e. Say out loud "I had a _____ threat when _____ happened." (Insert either Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, Fairness.

SCARF naming example

“I had a fairness threat when my team member was praised for our joint work but I wasn’t mentioned.”

NB, this example could apply to a number of the SCARF needs, such as Status and Relatedness. Try to identify which need is really ‘eating’ at you.

Ask yourself:

Why do I care?

Is it because I don’t get public recognition?

(Status)

Or is it because the truth is not being accurately represented? (Fairness)

Or is it because I feel left out? (Relatedness)

- f. Add your description of your SCARF need to your incident log/journal.

As described in [Naming feelings](#), the exercise by itself helps to calm the nervous system.

How has this SCARF model helped?

You may feel the benefits of naming your SCARF needs straight away, or you may notice you're more self aware the next time an incident triggers you.

You may also start to anticipate an unmet SCARF need, and communicate with others what you need at that moment.

You may also recognise unmet SCARF needs in other people. This can be very useful for empathising with our coworkers and families and learning how to ‘give people what they need’ when we communicate with them.



This is the end of the
Emotional First Aid Kit.

We would love to hear your
feedback or if you have any
updates to resources. Please

feel free to email

emotional1staidkit@designingforhealth.org

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