



The BrainWaves 11-18 wellbeing curriculum

The goal of the BrainWaves curriculum is to design a programme of mental health education for secondary schools and sixth form colleges that is:

1. Evidence-based
2. Engaging
3. Empowering for students

The student content is intended to give young people a greater sense of agency in managing their mental health and a sense of optimism about the potential for change based on the development of mental health knowledge and emotional, communication and critical literacy skills. We believe this means supporting students in the development of:

- critical thinking and information literacy
- an understanding of the relationship between mind and body
- self-awareness and a positive self-concept
- the benefits of focus and engagement
- relationship and social and emotional skills
- resilience, persistence and achieving
- the ability to think beyond one's own concerns and focus on others: e.g. gratitude, causes, community

The teacher content should give Senior Leaders, Year Heads, Pastoral Care Leaders, PSHE Leaders and other teachers a scientific understanding of adolescent mental health and its implications for the school environment, as well as the technical skills to deliver mental health education in the classroom and some practical approaches to supporting pupils' wellbeing. Ultimately Brainwaves aspires to provide a whole-school resource encompassing children, parents and all adults in the school community.

Curriculum rationale

The BrainWaves curriculum is centred on the principles of positive psychology, building on the work of Martin Seligman (*Flourish, Learned Optimism, Authentic Happiness*), Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (*Flow* and, with Seligman, *Positive Psychology*), Barbara Fredrickson (*Positive Emotions*) and Ilona Bonniwell (*Positive Psychology*).

The key ideas here are that positive emotions, resilience and optimism can be actively 'grown' with resulting benefits for happiness and wellbeing. In contrast, the curriculum avoids attempting to "*cure the negatives as this does not produce the positives*" (Seligman). Discussions with schools and academics indicated that there were dangers in producing resources focused on mental health *disorders* as opposed to the positive strategies that can help students to thrive.



Giving young people a sense that they have choices to make that can influence their own wellbeing increases agency and reduces helplessness. Seligman distinguished different levels of happiness equating to 'having', 'doing' and 'being', where the most deep-rooted sense of happiness derived from an ongoing pursuit of meaning outside of oneself (gratitude, relationships, worthwhile causes etc).

The following table shows the five elements of the Seligman's PERMA model of wellbeing and the outcomes we aim to encourage:

PERMA	PERMA explanation	BrainWaves outcomes
Positive emotion	Instant gratification in the moment, caused by simply choosing to do the things we enjoy.	Intentionally choosing activities that make us feel good. Focusing on positive attitudes as a way of managing low mood, worry and stress.
Engagement	The pursuit of happiness by being fully immersed in an activity that requires our strengths, skills, and focus.	Achieving 'flow' through taking part and losing yourself in absorbing and engaging activities.
Relationships	Intentionally investing in positive relationships gives purpose to our lives and is the single best antidote to the ups and downs of life.	Learning to listen and talk about mental health friends, and coping with change and conflict in relationships.
Meaning	Using our strengths and character traits to instil a sense of purpose, value and worth and serving a cause or purpose that is bigger than ourselves.	Practising gratitude and intentionally choosing activities that help ourselves and others to bring meaning and satisfaction to our lives.
Accomplishment	Having a sense of accomplishment by achieving goals that are important to us.	Using and knowing your strengths, setting goals and having the confidence and resilience to achieve them.

Other psychological approaches that inform the ethos of the BrainWaves lessons include:

- **Growth mindset** and the idea that mental, emotional and other skills and competencies are not fixed but can be developed (Dweck, *Mindset*; Hildrew;



Schleider & Weisz 2017).

- **Grit** that associates perseverance, passion and resilience with success and wellbeing (Duckworth).
- **Brain development** and change in the years 11-25, pruning, plasticity and hormones (Coleman, *Teachers and the teenage brain*).
- **Emotional intelligence** (Goleman) and in an education context, Social and Emotional Learning (Sue Roffey, *Circle Solutions and 12 dimensions of SEL*), particularly the benefits of developing emotional regulation, situational emotional skills and communication skills. We will also borrow Roffey's concept of mental wealth as something that can be accumulated and developed.
- **Strengths-based** approaches and building strengths-based schools (Saleebey and Weick, Fox Eades).
- **Benefits of sleep** and the link between poor sleep and emotional lability and symptoms of anxiety (Foster, *Lifetime*; Short, Bartel, Caskadon).

Pedagogical approach

In designing this curriculum, we have drawn on Claxton's (2018) metaphor of a river of learning, which describes three levels at which we can consider the aims and approaches taken:

1. Content and information
2. Skills and literacies
3. Attitudes and dispositions

For Level 1, the content of the lessons is described below. This content has been selected through careful consultation with teachers and educational experts.

Level 2 refers to the skills, strategies and literacies we hope to support through these lessons. This includes but is not limited to, scientific literacy, information literacy, personal reflection, active listening, emotional regulation, healthy sleep habits as well as others outlined in more detail in the lesson plans and teacher guidance. These will be supported mainly through the activities carried out in the lessons.

Level 3 speaks to the broader ideals that guide our approach as a whole, as well as the attitudes and dispositions we seek both to model and to encourage in pupils. These include ideas such as Seligman's positive psychology and Dweck's growth mindset. Whilst we do not claim to be able to develop these over the course of a series of lessons, it is hoped that in modelling them and in highlighting their importance, we can emphasize their value to learners. Whilst this third level is important across the education branch as a whole, it is particularly prominent with the work involving the BrainWaves Research Schools/Colleges, with whom we have a closer and more integrated relationship.

The pedagogy will be based on Active Learning concepts (e.g. Anderson and de Silva) and



use the ASPIRE principles developed by Dr Sue Roffey (Agency, Safety, Positivity, Inclusion, Respect and Equity). Lessons include both data/science elements and peer-learning and discussion.

Information literacy will be an ongoing theme, particularly news literacy, science literacy and the mental health implications of negativity bias in news and social media (Jodie Jackson, *You are What You Read*) and exposure to potentially damaging content such as promoting self-harm and eating disorders.

As a result, the BrainWaves pedagogical approach is for every mental health lesson to be built on three qualities:

- **Empowering:** the aim is not so much to give students all the information about mental health that could be useful to them (that would be impossible in the timetable space available) but instead to empower them to navigate through the information available. We therefore aim to develop skills around critical thinking and an awareness of how scientific knowledge is developed and, where appropriate, enable them to contribute.
- **Practical:** each lesson will provide at least one practical, evidence-based strategy for students to try that will support their wellbeing. The aim is for students to try out and develop confidence in a 'toolkit' of strategies.
- **Active:** learning aims to be active and student-centred rather than passive. Not every lesson will contain every active learning technique, but each will include at least one example of a relatable scenario, a dilemma, reflective writing or discussion.

Additional themes

In addition to the PERMA elements, the BrainWaves curriculum includes two additional themes:

Brain and body focuses on helping students understand the changes that happen to them as teenagers, in terms of brain development, hormone production and sleep patterns, that can affect their mental health.

Thinking about mental health encourages students to think critically about the sources and quality of mental health information online, as well as navigating social media, avoiding negativity bias in the media, and dealing with harmful content and bullying online.



The BrainWaves Wellbeing Curriculum

This table outlines all of the lessons currently available as well as planned. Please click on the links to take you to the lessons on our website. You will need to create an account but all of the lessons and supporting teaching materials are available free of charge. Lessons without links are still in development.

Theme	11-14 years	14-16 years	16-18 years
Thinking about mental health	The science behind wellbeing Dealing with social media and online bullying	The science of happiness Negativity bias and thinking traps Dealing with harmful content online	The psychology of wellbeing Finding out about mental health
Brain and body	My changing brain Why sleep matters	My teenage brain Building good sleep habits	Recap on the teenage brain Sleep and teenagers
Positive emotions	Turning failures into success Challenging negative thoughts Managing worry	Learning to be optimistic The dangers of perfectionism Managing low mood	Boosting your mood Managing stress
Engagement	Understanding flow and the outdoors	Achieving flow through creativity	Finding flow in life



Relationships	Conflict and repair Talking about mental health	Coping with change Listening and responding about mental health	Having a conversation about mental health
Meaning	Thinking about others	Connecting with and helping others	Being a mentor
Accomplishments	Understanding your strengths	Developing your strengths Building your confidence	Working to your strengths Setting goals