

# The Amygdala

## Purpose

Bring dried beans to school this day and print out Symptoms and Coping Skills lists.

I LOVE the site “Hey Sigmund” both for information about my own mental health but also the plethora of resources on the mental health of kids. After coming across this article years ago and using it in my classroom, the posts on this cite have continued to influence my teaching and humanity. I used it initially after having a student with diagnosed anxiety in my classroom. I found out later that as soon as he walked in the door at home, he told his mom, “You won’t believe it... we talked about the amygdala today!” Apparently, the lesson in class came right after talking about the power of the amygdala at his counseling outside of school. He felt like an expert and knew I was going to be a safe person to help him work through his anxiety at school. I pulled the lesson right from the article, but to read it in its entirety (and check out all the other excellent articles), click the link on our website.

## Teacher Work

For lower grade levels, Class Dojo has a video introduction to the amygdala. Click on the our website for access.

Print and pass out the symptoms list to partners or small groups around the circle. (The list is at the end of this document.) Ask them to discuss times that they may feel those symptoms either one at a time or all at once. Use the talking piece to have students share out from their discussions. Remember to make each student feel involved – perhaps pass the talking piece yourself to get different students sharing.



*“I am a pretty good cook. I can make some delicious scrambled eggs and a mean peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Just yesterday, I put a slice of bread into the toaster then walked to the fridge to get butter. Before I knew it, the fire alarm was going off! Does it make sense for me to run from my house? Go out to a safe place away from my home? Am I in real danger?”*

*Of course not! My toast burned and it set off the alarm by accident. I unplugged the toaster and grabbed a dishtowel to wave the smoke away from the alarm. A minute later, everything was back to normal. We have a fire alarm in our bodies too. One that makes us ready for an emergency. It’s called the amygdala.”*

Pass out a bean to each student.

*“The amygdala is part of your brain. It’s about the size of this bean. It’s crazy that something so small can change our bodies so much. When your amygdala thinks you are in danger, like if you were being chased by a bear, your amygdala pumps up your body with oxygen and adrenaline. It makes your heart pump blood faster to your muscles, which makes them tense. It makes your breath get quicker to use the extra oxygen. It gives you a sinking feeling in your stomach because it slows down digestion so other parts of your body can work harder. All of this is controlled by this little bean sized piece of your brain!*

*This is really helpful when we are getting chased by a bear because we need all that extra stuff to make us move faster, but sometimes, just like a fire alarm, the amygdala goes off without real danger. In stressful situations, or sometimes when we are just upset, our amygdala goes off. We feel our fists tense, our breath quicken, our hearts beat fast, and our stomachs ache. We need to know when we feel these things happening. When we know it’s just a false alarm, we can convince our bodies to calm down.”*



Print and pass out the coping skill lists.

*“Read these tips one by one and try them with the people around you. Think about each thing and try to figure out what part of the amygdala alarm you are trying to shut off – just like using a dishtowel to wave the smoke away from the fire alarm.”*

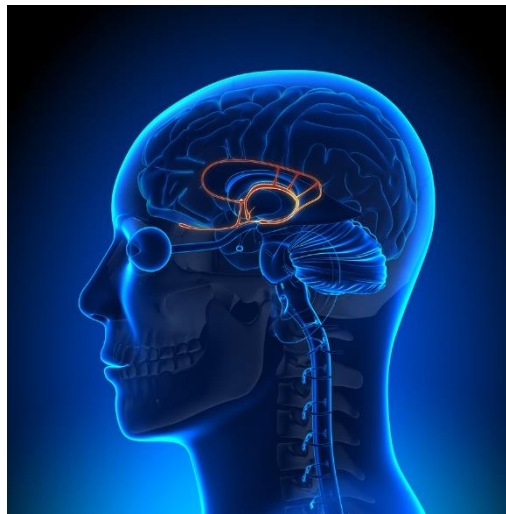
## Student Work

Be sure that the kids feel invested in this metaphor. Let them jump in on a time where their fire alarm went off without an emergency. I love this example because I can use it as a quick reminder later when I see someone exhibiting the symptoms of anxiety or frustration.

In lower grades, think about putting one coping skill or one symptom on a piece of paper with a picture. Try to make sure they have lots of access to talk about the things to look out for themselves. This ownership will help them remember.

## Closing

Let them keep their bean, name it something better than “amygdala”, and keep it in a special place. Tell them that being aware of how our bodies are feeling and changing is the best way to control ourselves. When we have better control, we can make better choices for ourselves and our friends.



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