

Brain Driver's Education: Operator's Guide

Using Your Brain to Get Where You Want to Go

A GUIDE FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS



MASSACHUSETTS
GENERAL HOSPITAL

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Introduction: Get comfortable in the driver's seat

In high school you have more opportunities than ever before, many choices to make, and lots of new challenges to take on. Friendships are more complicated than they used to be. Teachers, parents, coaches, and employers expect you to work hard. Finding your path forward, learning your strengths and how to access them, and figuring out how to manage your increasingly complex relationships, responsibilities, and feelings is what high school is about. Your brain plays an important role in this. Learning how to use it will allow you to take charge of your feelings and reactions, rather than letting your feelings take charge of you!

- **Feelings: it's a brain thing**

The brain is like an engine that generates the thoughts, memories, and moods that form your emotions. You might expect that the brain automatically “knows” how to run itself, but that’s only partly true. The way we feel and how we process what’s happening around us depends a lot on which parts of the brain are active at any moment, and how well they’re functioning. (Neuroscientists can actually see which regions of the brain are especially active when people feel different emotions.) Without your active guidance, your brain doesn’t always automatically interpret situations accurately or activate your most sensible feelings. As a result, you may say things or act in ways that do not necessarily help the situation. Fortunately, by steering your brain in the right direction, you can stay in charge of your feelings and how they affect you. It’s *your* brain – you are in the driver’s seat.

- **How you think affects how you feel**

There’s a lot going on inside our heads. While our own thoughts seem absolutely justified, valid, and beyond question, in fact, we don’t all think about things the same way. Why? Because we each have our own perspectives, based on our unique experiences, through which we filter and interpret our lives. If you can step back to examine your own thinking, you will become more aware of how your thinking affects your emotional response to different situations. This will allow you to more appropriately act on your thoughts and feelings.

- **Your brain can help you take charge of your feelings**

Some of our emotions are constructive and some are not. By mobilizing the helpful emotions and neutralizing the not-so-helpful ones, you can learn to regulate how your emotions affect you, which gives you much more control over the situations and relationships in your life. The first step in achieving more control is to become aware of what emotions you’re experiencing and how they are influencing your thoughts and actions.



How hot or cold does your emotional “engine” run? *Emotional regulation*

There's a normal spectrum of how people experience their own feelings. At one end of the spectrum are those whose emotional “engine” seems frequently revved up; if you are one of these people, you may feel your emotions (such as mad, sad, or worried) more powerfully than other people do. At times your emotions may get so intense that they cause you to react to things in ways you may later regret.

At the other end of the spectrum are those whose emotional “engine” frequently seems to be barely turned on; these are people who work really hard to not feel anything at all. If you are one of these people, you may appear tough and uncaring to others. If you're someone who usually tries to shut down your feelings, life may feel boring or empty without access to your emotions.

Some people are right in the middle of the feelings spectrum. They feel their emotions strongly when something warrants a strong reaction, but most of the time, their feelings are more moderate, in the middle. For most people, finding the right balance takes some effort. It's a good idea to check in with your feelings on a regular basis to make sure you know what you're feeling and why. (Sometimes it's easier to do this by talking about it with another person.)

- **When your emotional engine won't start**

Some people shut down their emotions in an effort to stay in control. They may sit through a violent horror film without flinching while their friends are terrified. Or they may act like they don't care when a teacher is mad at them. Or they may not show any sign of frustration when the coach makes the whole team do 100 push-ups because one kid was late to practice.

How do they do it? In order to get through a difficult situation without losing control or experiencing a lot of negative feelings, they may tell themselves that they don't care about the situation. This strategy can be useful to temporarily get control in a challenging situation—for example, to overcome anxiety about singing on stage during a performance, you might tell yourself that there's no need to be nervous because it's really just a dress rehearsal.

But sometimes – without your realizing it – the brain might take protective action as a way of keeping emotions in check. For example, if you lose an election for the Student Council, your brain might prevent you from feeling disappointment by telling you that you never were a serious candidate and that you entered the race only as a joke. The problem with trying to protect yourself too much from

painful feelings is that if you aren't even aware that the emotions are there, the feelings might stay hidden and not go away. They could surface unexpectedly in another situation and influence your behavior in ways that are not helpful.

- **When the engine overheats**

People who feel their emotions very intensely may sob at sad movies, for example, when everyone else is just a little sad. They may stay up all night worrying about an exam while others in the class simply study for the exam without missing any sleep. Or they may yell at a classmate for accidentally bumping into them in the hallway and later regret having acted that way.

When emotions are very intense, it is difficult to be reasonable and rational and to make wise decisions. Intense feelings often are triggered by other people's words or actions, or by disagreements with others. We often find ourselves experiencing the same conflicts, or reacting the same way to different situations, over and over again. It may seem as though the conflicts are always someone else's fault (for example: "she started it," or "my teacher's an idiot"). But, in fact, even if we're justified in our reactions, having a strong reaction to a situation (for example, yelling or complaining loudly) can often make the situation worse.

Sometimes—without your realizing it—intense feelings may cause you to say or do you things that you wish you could take back. For example, if you come home past your curfew on a Saturday night, instead of apologizing, you might yell at your mom because your brain is telling you that your mom is ridiculous for setting a curfew in the first place. The problem with letting unchecked, intense emotions drive your reactions is that these feelings might cause you to say or do things that get you into trouble unnecessarily.

- **Notice how others are reacting to you.**

Seeing how others are responding to you can help you gauge the level of your own emotions. (For example, are they looking relaxed? Turning away? Becoming agitated?) If people are reacting negatively to you, maybe your emotional engine is revved up too high, or shut down, and you are causing others to become uncomfortable. Or maybe the signals others are receiving about your state of mind are being misinterpreted. In that case, you can make sure to convey your feelings in another way that might get your message across better.

- **How can you monitor the intensity of your emotions?**

Think about how you react to different situations. Is your emotional engine usually revved up high? Is it usually shut down? When you're experiencing feelings such as anger, fear, or worry, try asking yourself, "How intense are my feelings right now? Are they helping me make the right decisions, or are they interfering?"

Notice your body sensations. (Is your heart racing? Are your muscles tense? Are you sweating?) Notice how you're speaking. (Are you swearing, yelling, ranting, or perhaps unusually quiet?) At a rally for the school football team, it makes sense and feels good to shout out your intense feelings of school pride, but it probably isn't very constructive to yell at a teacher for giving you a bad grade. Following are some examples of the range of intensities for different emotional reactions:

Spectrum of Emotional Intensity

| Emotion | Emotionally shut down | Emotionally revved up | Balanced |
|------------------|---|--|--|
| Anxiety | Without some anxiety to motivate, may go into a situation unprepared or get caught off-guard. | Unable to distinguish between true danger and personal fears. May overreact and cause undue tension for self and others. | Able to evaluate situations and decide what steps are necessary to reduce risks. |
| Anger | Passive, may have difficulty getting needs met. | May bully and alienate others. May say or do things that will be regretted later. | Can consciously decide when to be assertive and when to "let things go." |
| Sadness | Unacknowledged feelings can build up and break through in unexpected ways. | May lead to loss of ability to carry out daily functions, leading to further sadness and withdrawal. | Can feel sadness when appropriate. Knows strategies for taking care of self, doing enjoyable things to make room for other emotions. |
| Happiness | Difficulty enjoying successes, feels they are temporary and/or not due to own efforts. | May alienate others by denying/avoiding problems or failing to appreciate others' struggles and perspectives. | Takes pleasure in own successes and successes of others, acknowledges and learns from challenges along the way. |



Downshift to a lower gear, with help from your body *Self-calming methods*

When the emotional intensity is high enough to cloud your judgment, or when your emotions are so shut down that you need to re-connect with the inner you, take a break from the situation and give yourself a chance to calm your mind and body. By doing so you can clear your mind and get yourself back into the driver's seat with your feelings. There are many ways to downshift – different methods work well for different people, so it is helpful to try out several and see which work best for you. First, take some space by walking away from the situation.

- **Soothe the senses**

Calm your five senses (vision, hearing, smell, taste, and touch). For example, look at photos of people, pets, or places you care about, listen to comforting or enjoyable music, light a candle that has a soothing aroma, savor the taste of a favorite food, or focus on the sensation of something with a pleasing feel against your skin, such as a soft blanket or a furry pet, or put a warm towel on your forehead.

- **Do relaxation activities**

For example, take deep breaths while you slowly count to 10. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Or clench your fists or tense the muscles throughout your body as you slowly count to 10, then slowly release. Repeat.

- **Use meditation techniques to focus on being “centered”**

Meditating is simple. Start by finding a quiet, comfortable place to sit. You'll be sitting in this spot for the next 15 - 20 minutes. While you're sitting, close your eyes and silently, slowly repeat a single word or syllable in your mind. Some people repeat a syllable, such as “om.” Other people prefer to repeat a word, such as “peace” or “love.” While you silently repeat your word, it's likely that your mind will wander. That's normal. When you notice your mind wandering, bring your thoughts back to the word you've chosen to repeat. Do this every time your mind starts to wander. After 20 minutes, open your eyes. You will likely feel more relaxed than when you started. Scientists have discovered that meditating regularly is good for the brain and the body because it helps reduce stress.

- **Move your body!**

Head for the gym to shoot baskets, go for a run, or even squeeze a stress ball to release some tensions. Getting exercise is a great way to relax the mind.

- **Act in the opposite way of the emotion**
Sometimes it can be helpful to purposely act in a way that opposes, or is inconsistent with, the upsetting emotion. You can change actions, thoughts, facial expressions, or even body posture. For example, if you feel anxious about socializing at a party, go up and talk with someone at the party with the goal of just chatting for a few minutes and getting one smile from that person. If you feel angry and want to punch someone or something, walk away and do a peaceful activity with your hands (such as drawing or playing your guitar). If you feel depressed and unmotivated to get out of bed, push yourself to go outside or engage in an activity you usually enjoy.
- **Distract yourself with something fun**
Do something fun that competes for your brain's attention. For example, call or text a friend, go for a bike ride, listen to music, or watch a movie you like. Engage with other people to take your mind off what's troubling you.



Slow down and look around you *Reframing feelings before acting on them*

Sometimes our emotional reactions are *reflexive* – like a habit – rather than *reflective* of the reality of a situation. This can cause us to misinterpret a situation and react in ways that are not helpful or make the situation worse. Stepping back and thinking about a situation allows you to figure out if your emotional response matches the situation. If it doesn't, you can adjust your response to your new perspective. First, you need to take time to stop and think. When reflecting on your reaction to a situation, consider the following:

- **Is there another way to view things?**

Most of us pay more attention to negative things than to positive ones. We tend to remember the one bad thing that occurred during our day, instead of taking into account all the good, “normal” events that happened. The downside of this way of thinking is that it can get the brain stuck in a negative rut, preventing us from recognizing and valuing what's going well in our lives.

Here are some examples of over-focusing on the negative:

- Thinking, “I'm so dumb in math,” after you do poorly on a math test
- Thinking, “No one likes me,” after a classmate doesn't say “hi” in the hall
- Thinking, “Today is the worst day of my life...I hate school,” after making the junior varsity team instead of the varsity team.

Are there any alternative ways of viewing the examples described above? Here are examples of some alternative responses:

- “I got a bad grade on the test, which makes me feel really dumb in math. I didn't really study for the test and haven't been putting much effort into my homework. Maybe it's not that I'm dumb in math, but that I need to pay more attention and prepare more for tests.”
- “She didn't say ‘hi,’ but she was talking with a friend and the hall was crowded, so maybe she didn't see me.”
- “At least I get to play on the team. It was a competitive year and I did well to make the team. Plus, I got an A on my English paper – maybe school wasn't all bad today.”

See Attachment 1 to learn about common reflexive emotional reactions, and what you can do to take back control of your reactions.

- **Ask yourself, what is the worst that could happen?**

While at first a bad situation may seem really awful, often it is not really as grim as your first reaction supposes. Thinking through the logic of your assessment may help you see that the situation may not be so terrible after all.

Here's an example of a first reaction followed by a logical assessment of the situation:

First reaction: "If I don't do well on this test, I'll never get into a good college, or get a decent job."

Logical assessment: "In reality, if I don't ace this test, I can probably retake it, do extra credit, or make it up with other grades. Plus, I've never actually heard of anyone being unable to find a good job just because they failed one test in high school."

- **Think of pro's and con's and consider the consequences**

It can be very helpful to take a moment to think of, or even make a list of, advantages and disadvantages before deciding what to say or do. Taking time to decide whether what you're about to do is worth the consequences can potentially save you from a lot of trouble. For example, suppose you're mad at your friend...

Problem: He posted a picture of you the day after you got that horrible haircut.

Possible response: "I have some pictures of him, too, where he looks pretty bad. I'm going to put them up on Facebook and it'll be really great because everyone will see them."

Pro's: It might feel really good to get even. Maybe he would learn that he needs to respect any photos of you, or else...

Con's: There's the risk that the situation will continue escalating and you'll find additional pictures of you on his Facebook page that you like even less. Will he still study with you tonight? What if he decides he doesn't want you as a friend anymore? Maybe he'll tell everyone you're a jerk for not being able to take a joke.

Alternative response, after considering pro's and con's: Send him a private message with an attached photo that you like better and suggest a caption for it. "If you want to post a picture of me, how about this one? You could call it "Slam dunk." Can you swap this one for the picture you've got up there now?"

- **Consider the "big picture"**

Try to put things in perspective. Here are a few ways you might go about it:

- Put yourself in the other person's shoes. Recognize that other people have their own difficulties, and the way someone is treating you, or reacting to you, may

have nothing to do with you but may instead reflect their own problems or concerns.

- Try to find meaning in a difficult situation – no matter how bad a situation is, we can always learn and grow from it. As a result of getting through the difficult situation, think about what you've learned that will help you in the future.
 - Decide whether the situation is worth being aggravated about. Sometimes the things you're going through seem hugely important in the moment, but in the grand scheme of things, they are really not worth the pain and effort. Imagine yourself looking back a year from now: will all the worry, anger, fear, sadness, or agitation have been worth it?
 - Realize that in your life there are many things for which you are grateful, even if you might not think about them too often. Recognize the ways in which the situation could be worse. In that context, how crucial is the current problem?
- **Consider the effect of changing your own thinking**
If you change the way you think about this situation, how will your life go better? For example:

Before: "I feel terrible that my French teacher didn't ask me to join the French Club. I must not be as good at French as I thought. Now I'm not sure I should stick with it. I never wanted to take French, anyway."

After: "Maybe the French teacher doesn't realize I'm interested in French Club. I'll ask about the club after class today, wonder aloud with her if it might be a good activity for me, and see what she says. If I stop being so down on myself about French, maybe I can get what I want."

- **Use self-talk**
Tell yourself soothing or positive messages in place of negative messages that stick in your mind and make you upset. For example:

Instead of: "This problem is ridiculous. It's so complicated, there's no way I can answer it."

Try thinking: "If I can break down this math problem into parts, I can probably answer each part."

Instead of: "Everyone hates me. No one wants to be with me."

Consider: "I don't really know most of these kids, but I can have some fun with one kid in this room."

- **Accept that you may not be able to get what you want**
Sometimes even if we feel justified or right, life is not always fair. There might not always be an ideal solution to a situation. If you are unable to change a situation, it can be helpful to work toward accepting the situation for what it is rather than continuing to struggle to change a situation that cannot be changed. Accepting the situation as it is helps make it feel less miserable by allowing you to move on.



Find the best route to your destination

Conflict resolution

Conflicts with other people tend to come about when two people have trouble seeing the other's perspective. In contrast, mindful problem solving involves shifting your focus from getting what you want from someone else (a battle), to getting what you want while the other person does, too (a collaboration).

Before engaging in a conflict, decide what is most important to you – getting your own way or preserving the relationship. If the conflict is with a person who matters to you (including an authority figure who has say over important things such as punishments or rewards), it makes sense to put the effort into finding an effective way to preserve the relationship and find a mutually acceptable solution to the conflict. Here are some strategies:

- **Recognize there's a conflict, and define it**
 - Figure out what you really want in this situation. Since others can't read your mind, you may need to describe what you want.
 - Figure out what the other person really wants (you may have to ask the person to state this clearly).
 - Figure out what it is that you both want that doesn't "fit" together.
- **Empathize with the other person**
 - Recognize the other person's point of view. The other person needs to trust that you are not considering just your own interests.
 - Let the other person know that you understand his/her point of view. For example, if someone says "I hate having you as my lab partner," consider saying in response, "I get it...it doesn't feel like we're working well together and that's really annoying to you."
 - Find the "good intent gone awry." Usually people do things with good intentions, so finding that intention makes it easier to connect with that person. For example, if a good friend says, "Those shoes look awful on you," realize that the person is probably trying to help you look good for the other kids.
 - Use "it" to describe what you think the other person is feeling; instead of saying, "you seem mad," or "you're annoying me," consider "it's frustrating,"

since “it” doesn’t seem like you’re blaming or accusing the other person, and “it” suggests that you both share this feeling.

- **Agree on what the problem is**
 - First, try to define the problem in a way that makes it seem fixable. Then generate multiple solutions and consider the consequences and logistics of each one. Seek the other person’s view. Ask, “How do you understand our situation?”
 - Invite the other person to help generate and then invest in solutions. Consider phrases such as, “Let’s see if we can come up with a way that works okay for both of us,” rather than, “You’re not being fair,” or “I have an idea.” (“I have an idea” is the better of these two, but it still positions the other person to argue against your idea.)
 - Offer solutions that would be hard for anyone to disagree with. For example, “Sounds like it was pretty complicated last night—maybe we could just do something that we both enjoy to relax together.”
- **Collaborate on a solution that’s workable for both people**
 - A potential solution must be feasible, doable, and helpful for both people.
 - Consider saying something like: “How would it work if we tried _____?” This helps both people predict what will happen if a particular solution is attempted.
 - People operate on their own timelines. Even though you and the other person may have considered the same information and same solutions, it may take the other person some time to completely grasp and enact a solution, even when you’re both in agreement on the solution. So revisiting the solution, and patience, are sometimes very important.
 - Allow the other person to save face. Consider solutions that don’t embarrass the other person, or result in one of you looking like the bad guy.
- **Recognize that there may not be a solution**

Sometimes even the best solution may not feel like a solution to you. If that happens during a conflict, probably the best thing to do is to “agree to disagree” or agree to “let it be.” When people are in this situation, if they indicate by what they say and by the way they say it that they respect each other, it doesn’t feel so bad to have had a conflict. Agreeing to make due with the situation leaves the door open to arriving at a better resolution in the future, and provides a way out of the conflict in a way that doesn’t blame anyone.

- **Offer a sincere apology if you've said or done something hurtful to someone**
If the other person apologizes first, try your best to put any bad feelings behind you and accept the apology. If you apologize first, think carefully about your words. "I'm sorry you're mad," implies that you're not sorry about what you did; you're just sorry the other person reacted. "I'm sorry for what I said," shows that you're taking responsibility for your contribution to the problem or conflict.

Most kids in high school don't find it easy to apologize. (Some adults struggle with this, too.) But you might find that if you apologize, the other person may apologize to you – either in the moment or at some future time.



Reflection: Did your trip go as planned?

- **Mistakes are learning opportunities**

Mastering strategies to balance your thoughts and emotions requires a lot of practice! Some of this is pretty easy and straightforward, and some requires experience and practice. We all make mistakes. Rather than getting stuck in them, think of mistakes as learning opportunities. You might need some distance from a situation before you're ready to think about what went well and what might have gone better. Maybe a close friend or an adult you trust can help you review how things unfolded and what you might do differently should you be in similar circumstances again.

- **Don't be afraid to ask for help**

If you're not sure you are going to be able to handle a situation well, or if it just feels like you can't find a reasonable solution to a conflict, it may be tempting to avoid the situation or a particular person and hope the problem will go away. But difficult situations usually do not disappear by themselves. And, to make matters worse, by "ignoring" something we usually end up worrying and carrying around a feeling of dread about having to deal with it. It's better to ask for help along the way than to keep feeling bad about something. Good drivers stop to ask for directions when they lose their way!

- **Enjoy the ride!**

Getting a driver's license offers freedom, responsibility, and the opportunity to use new skills. Similarly, learning how to understand and manage your feelings will give you more freedom to make thoughtful choices, more responsibility for understanding how your feelings affect your reactions to everyday situations, and the opportunity to use new skills to stay in the driver's seat.

And just like driving, even when you feel confident, you will still have to use your head to think about what you're doing, follow the rules of the road, stay aware of the big picture, keep an eye out for others, learn to manage new situations, and leave yourself a safe way out of any situation. You will always need to stay alert for situations where your emotions are running too hot or too cold for you to make good decisions. With experience and conscious effort, your brain will become increasingly adept at helping you handle whatever comes your way.



Attachment 1

Common Reflexive Reactions and Some Alternative Explanations

Sometimes – even without being aware of it – we have automatic thoughts or automatic interpretations of events. These habits of thought are so deeply rooted that they are like reflexes, automatically being triggered even if they aren't accurate or justified by the situation.

You can use the table that follows to recognize common types of reflexive reactions and learn ways to re-direct the way you think. If you can learn to recognize certain reflexive reactions in yourself that tend to trigger intense feelings, you may be able to adjust the intensity of those feelings more easily.

| Reaction | Description | Example | Alternative Strategies | Example |
|--------------------|---|--|---|---|
| Overgeneralization | If it's true in one case, it's always true | I missed every attempted basket today. I'm not a very good athlete. | Look for an alternative explanation | I do OK in soccer. Maybe what I need is some extra practice shooting baskets. |
| Personalization | I am responsible for failures and other negative events | It is my fault that my parents are getting divorced. | Look for alternative sources of responsibility | It is my parents' responsibility to work on their marriage and to figure out whether or not it is going to work. |
| Mind-reading | Assuming what others think or assuming I know an outcome without checking | My teacher must think I don't deserve to be in the advanced class | Look for evidence to support/refute the assumption/prediction | I have done well on homework and tests in this class and I often participate, so he has seen that I can understand the material. |
| Fortune-telling | Predicting without evidence | Our team lost our first game – we're going to lose all the games this season | Look for evidence to support/refute the assumption/prediction | It's only the first game. Last year we lost the opening game, too, but then we got better and even made it to the playoffs. |
| Catastrophizing | I know the worst thing that I can imagine will happen | If I ask her out, she'll laugh in my face and tell all her friends. | Calculate the probability that the worst will happen. What is the evidence that it won't? | She spent half an hour talking with me after school, and she really laughed hard at my jokes. If she didn't like me at least a little, that wouldn't have happened. |



Attachment 1 (continued)

Common Reflexive Reactions and Some Alternative Explanations

| Reaction | Description | Example | Alternative Strategies | Example |
|----------------------------|--|---|---|---|
| All-or-none thinking | Things are either black or white; all or none | If my friend isn't excited to hear from me every time I call, she must not like me anymore. | Learn to use a continuum for evaluating situations | Sometimes people need time alone or some time with family and other friends – my friend can still care about me at the same time. |
| Emotional Reasoning | My emotions equal fact. If I feel it, then it's true. | I know I'm going to make a fool of myself in front of the class when I read my speech. | Separate the objective facts from emotional beliefs | I've spoken in front of the class before and did fine. It's actually a pretty good speech, and I don't need to have it memorized. |
| "Should" Statements | I just know how I "should, must, or ought to be," and how others ought to be. If things aren't that way, I feel guilty or resentful. | I need to bring an expensive gift, because all the other kids can afford to. The presents will be opened in front of everybody. | Recognize that "should" statements represent preferences instead of vital needs | It would be great to be able to buy a fancy present, but money is pretty tight right now. She really liked it the last time I gave her one of the bracelets I made. |
| Emotional Labeling | I tend to use extreme emotional terms in describing myself, events, or others, no matter what. | It's the end of the world when my friend and I have a fight, because I'm all alone. | Separate objective facts from emotional beliefs | We've argued before and we were able to work it out. I have other good friends, too, so it's not as if I have no one to talk to. |
| Minimization/Magnification | Positive events count less than negative events; failures count more than successes | Even though I came in 1 st in the 200-yard race and did well in my relay, I let myself and the team down because I didn't win the 400-yard race. | Identify all parts of a given situation (positive, negative, and neutral) | Wow, I won the 200 yard race! I wish I'd done better in the 400, but I feel good that I helped my relay team do well. |

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