

# **EMOTIONAL LITERACY**

## **Pocketbook**











**By James Park &  
Marilyn Tew**

Cartoons:  
Phil Hailstone

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## Using the whole brain



The English language invites us to distinguish feeling from thinking. We accept this invitation whenever we praise people for being '*rational*' and use '*emotional*' as a putdown. Some other languages do not make such a clear distinction. They recognise that **thinking needs feeling** and **feeling needs thinking**.

Recent research by neuroscientists confirms that you cannot isolate the parts of the brain concerned with feeling from those concerned with thinking; they depend upon one another.

Emotional literacy is about ensuring that we really do use our:



## Keeping the bridge open

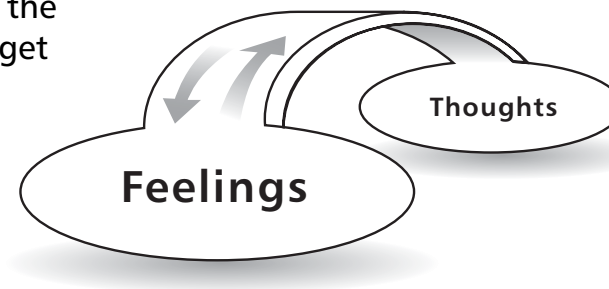


Imagine the emotional brain and the thinking brain as two parts of a town divided by a bridge. To use the whole brain, there has to be continuous passage across that bridge – feelings sparking thoughts, thoughts influencing feelings.

Strong feelings – confusion, anxiety, anger, longing, joy, excitement – tend to overwhelm us, making it more difficult for us to think clearly. If we are flooded by such feelings for too long, we break the links between our feeling and thinking brains. This stops us thinking about the painful messages we are receiving.

The result is that our feelings are no longer available to guide our thinking, and our thinking has little influence over our feeling. When the passage between the thinking brain and the feeling brain is repeatedly blocked, the bridge starts to decay, making it much harder to get from one part of the town to the other.

Emotional literacy involves rebuilding that bridge. We do that by reducing stress and increasing calm.



# Why we need our whole brain



## Emotions are:

- Very fast
- Shaped by deep memories
- Linked to instinct and intuition

They help us make rapid decisions as we assess people and situations.

## Thoughts are:

- Quite slow
- Draw on available memory
- Linked to analysis and reflection

They help us consider and reflect on what our feelings are telling us.

The more we can allow our thoughts and our emotions to feed into one another, the better we become at using the information we have available to shape our decisions and judgements.

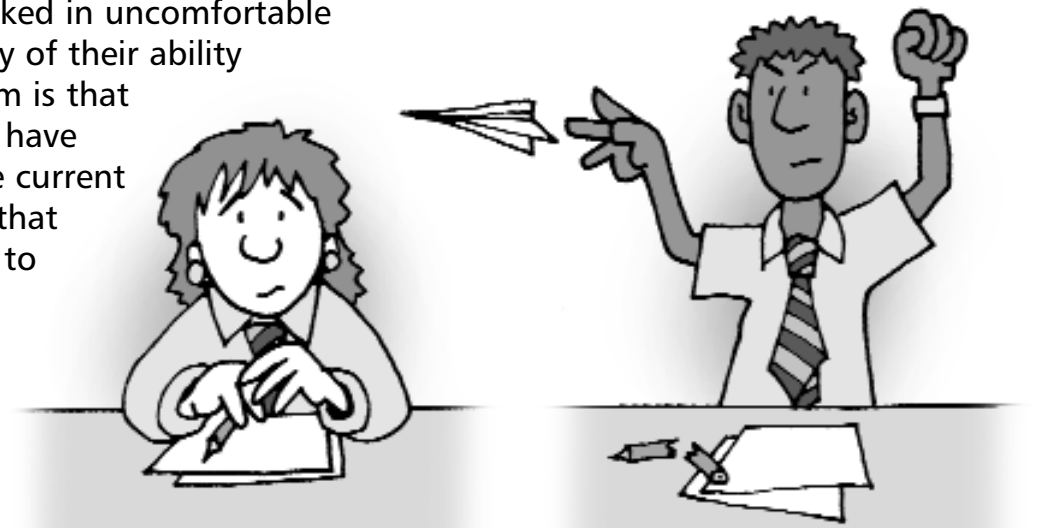
## Feeling disconnected



Anjali sits at the back of the class and never says a word. She is wrapped up in her anxiety about what might happen if she were to make her views known to the rest of the class.

Peter's restless movements during lessons unsettle everyone around him. They sense the simmering anger that occasionally threatens to explode from him.

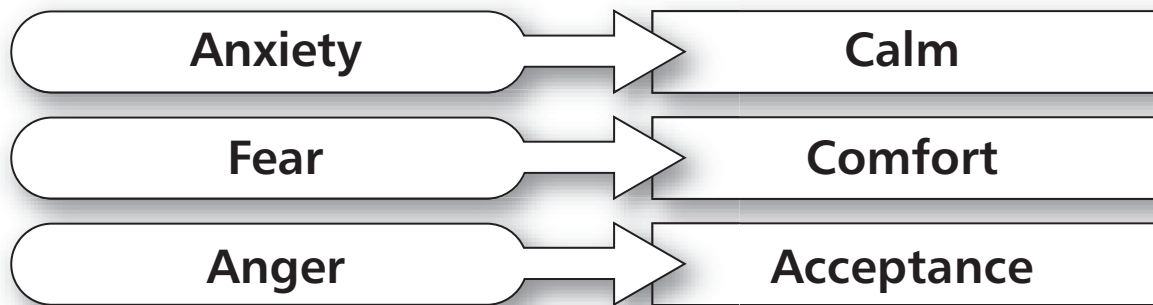
Anjali and Peter are both locked in uncomfortable feelings which get in the way of their ability to think clearly. Their problem is that previous events in their lives have caused them to interpret the current classroom situation in ways that make it impossible for them to engage in learning.



## How to rebuild the thinking-feeling bridge



To help Anjali and Peter reconnect their thinking to their feeling, you need to help them transform their current feeling states from:



This is about helping them to see that school is not like the situation that led to the development of their anxious, fearful and angry responses. They need to experience school as being safe. That means helping them change the stories they are telling themselves about what is happening, or might be about to happen, to them in the classroom.

## About the authors



### James Park



James is the founding director of Antidote, an organisation working with schools to help shape emotional environments that give young people the best possible opportunity to learn and grow. He led the team that developed the School Emotional Environment for Learning Survey (SEELS), a research-validated tool for measuring a school's emotional literacy. He is also editor of *Raising Achievement Update* which was launched in 2003 to provide schools with information and advice on how to use emotional literacy to improve behaviour, well-being and achievement.

### Marilyn Tew



Marilyn's career in education has taken her into many different contexts. She has worked in pre-school playgroups, grammar and special schools and as an assistant headteacher in a large comprehensive. She worked for ten years as a freelance consultant and trainer before becoming development director at Antidote. Her books include *School Effectiveness: Student success through emotional literacy* and (with Hilary Potter & Mary Read) *Circles, PSHE and Citizenship: The value of circle time in secondary schools*.