

Mental Health Reading Activity for Grades 2-4

A Terrible Thing Happened

This interactive reading activity is designed for students in grades 2-4 and provides educators with opportunities to help students develop social-emotional intelligence and reduce mental health stigma by introducing mental health challenges that children sometimes face.

A link to purchase the book, the book's synopsis, and an activity guide with discussion questions have been provided to help facilitate the activity, create dialogue and teach strategies, tools and skills that help to develop resilience, mindfulness, positive self-talk, self-esteem, confidence-building, acceptance and compassion for oneself and others, as well as teach students how to be a supportive friend and that it's okay to ask for help.

BOOK DETAILS

[*A Terrible Thing Happened*](#), by Margaret M. Holmes

Sherman's story begins by describing, in a very matter-of-fact and nonjudgmental tone, the coping strategies he uses and the physical, emotional, and behavioral difficulties they end up causing him. When he begins to talk with a counselor and participate in art therapy, Sherman learns that the Terrible Thing that Happened wasn't his fault. His emotional load progressively lightens while his trauma symptoms abate. The trauma Sherman witnessed is never disclosed, so readers can relate to the story in whatever manner is manageable for them without upsetting descriptions of events that could leave them feeling triggered, frightened, or overwhelmed.

Emphasis: Stigma Reduction

Diversity Notes: Able-bodied animal characters, main character is a male raccoon

Relationships: Peers, vague school authority figure, Ms. Maple (counselor/therapist)

ACTIVITY + QUESTIONS

Read the Story:

1. Before you begin, explain that this lesson is about learning how we can heal if something terrible happens. Review your classroom's norms to ensure that students feel respected and safe. *To avoid trauma disclosures to the whole group, tell students: if*

they have stories about terrible things to share, do so one-on-one, with a trusted adult, outside of this activity.

2. There could be students in your class who have witnessed or experienced something traumatic: some that you are already aware of, others who may have not disclosed yet. Hearing this story may bring up feelings or cause them to act out or shut down. Pay attention to changes in students' body language, level of attention, behavior, and overall demeanor, and be sure to check in with students who look like they might need some help coping with what this story brings up for them. Practice the strategies introduced in the book until additional support and interventions can be arranged.
3. Use gestures and changes in your voice to represent Sherman's feelings and sensations.
4. Invite students to raise their hands silently if they've ever felt the same way as Sherman.

Discussion + Activities:

1. What kinds of tricks does Sherman use to try to not think about the terrible thing? How does it make him feel to try to stay busy all the time and not think about it?
2. Sometimes Sherman gets so angry that he does mean things. Then he gets in trouble for being mean and feels bad. What would you say to Sherman to help him understand why he does those things? What suggestions could you give him for ways to deal with his feelings that won't get him in so much trouble?
3. What kinds of things does Sherman do that help him feel stronger and less angry?
4. Is it ever a young raccoon or child's fault if something terrible happens? How does Sherman feel after he learns the answer to that question from Ms. Maple?
5. Sherman feels better after he starts to talk about his feelings, and he also discovers that he feels better when he draws how he feels, too. Do you feel better when you talk about or draw your feelings? What other ways can you think of to let feelings come out or to share them with someone you trust?
6. Help students connect with the concepts to be explored by writing/drawing individually, or sharing aloud in pairs, small groups, or whole class, their responses to:
 - Have you ever had a problem that you just didn't want to think about? What kinds of things did you do to try to not think about it? Did it work for you?

- Have you ever talked with someone you could trust about something that was difficult for you? How did it feel to be able to share it with another person?
7. Consider vocabulary that students might generate or that you might opt to introduce:
- Feelings: upset, scared, sad, nervous, angry, mean, bad, confused, afraid, worried, good, stronger
 - Sensations: not hungry, stomach or head hurt, not able to sleep
 - Strategies: talking and thinking about his feelings with a counselor or parent, drawing pictures of his feelings and the terrible thing, asking questions, learning it wasn't his fault