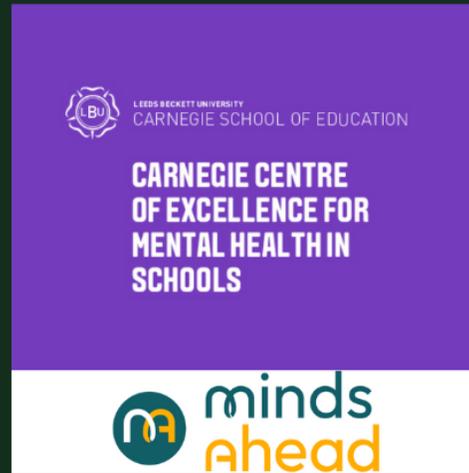




LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY
CARNEGIE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION



MENTAL HEALTH INSIGHTS WORKING PAPER

December 2024



Editorial

The Carnegie Centre of Excellence for Mental Health in Schools was launched in 2017. Over the years, we have grown into a vibrant community focused on mental health and wellbeing, now with over 1,400 members.

Our vision is to create a community that supports and empowers school-based colleagues dedicated to strengthening mental health and wellbeing across their whole school communities.

For this December 2024 edition, we invited our members to submit case studies, think pieces, and research documents on 'alternative' interventions which explore unusual ways of opening lines of communication and building resilience in schools.

We have been overwhelmed by the response and are excited to announce that we will be publishing contributions in both this December edition and the April edition next year.

One Mental Health lead and their school stood out with their innovative work, and we have decided to dedicate this edition to profiling their efforts and multiple contributions.

When it comes to talking to teens about mental health, graphic novels have proven to be an unexpectedly powerful tool. Combining engaging visuals with real-world issues, comics make complex topics like anxiety, depression, and self-esteem more accessible and relatable.

The strength of comics lies in their ability to transform abstract emotions into something tangible. Anxiety can be depicted as a storm cloud, while depression is shown as a weight on a character's shoulders, making feelings that might otherwise seem too overwhelming to express and easier to grasp. This approach helps teens connect with the material on a deeper level, recognising that their emotions are valid and shared by others.

Dr Susan Woodshore is a teacher of Religious, Moral and Philosophical studies at the Mary Erskine School in Edinburgh. She also runs the school's Mental Health Ambassador Programme and has been exploring the comic format to start conversations about Wellbeing. Her research shows that using comics in the classroom helps to normalise conversations about mental health. By seeing characters—as ordinary teens—face emotional struggles, students can relate to their experiences and learn that seeking help is a strength, not a weakness. This shift in mindset can play a vital role in reducing stigma and fostering empathy.

In the next few pages, we will profile the research from The Mary Erskine School, showcasing some of the fantastic comic strips developed as part of this research. These strips are more than just stories—they include thought-provoking questions designed to spark discussion in classrooms or group settings. For example, after a comic strip titled *Why Your Friend Self-Harms*, students might be asked:

- ◆ “What do you think of Mandy’s plan to make Niki stop harming herself?”
- ◆ “Are Mandy and Fisher good friends to Niki? Why?”
- ◆ “If you found out a friend was self-harming, where could you go for support?”

These questions encourage self-reflection and create a safe space for teens to talk about mental health openly.

The project demonstrates that graphic novels are not only an engaging way to teach teens about mental health—they are also a tool for empowerment. Comics help break down the barriers that often surround mental health discussions, offering a creative yet structured way to tackle important issues.

We hope you will gain insight into how these comic strips are helping students open up and reflect and feel more confident about managing their own mental health. It is a compelling reminder that sometimes the best way to connect is through a story—and these comics could be one key to changing how we talk about mental health.

Finally, in our last edition, Dr Susan Woodshore talked about the impact of her delightful comic strips at a recent Staff Wellbeing Conference. If you did not manage to read the article and the strip you can access the edition, [here](#) , I am sure you will relate and empathise as much as I did at how relevant her scenarios are.

Note: For future editions we will have different themes as we intend to continue to produce case studies to shine a light on best practice.

In every edition, along with case studies we welcome Think *Pieces*, and any *Research* conducted about how we can change culture & reframe our thinking and approaches in supporting the mental wellbeing for our students/ staff and parents

Guest Editor

Clare Erasmus

How we used comics in designing a new Mental Health Ambassador programme

Introduction

When our school's Mental Health Ambassador (MHA) programme was brought in-house, we had the opportunity to design something personalised and fit for the twenty-first century. We developed the idea of writing graphic-novel-style comics based on a friendship group as one of the building blocks of our resources. These fictional 'friends' could help our MHAs open discussions with younger pupils about mental health in an entertaining and engaging way. This article explains how we constructed our new programme, how it is going so far, and the role of the comics within an integrated set of resources.

Background

Many schools now offer some form of peer mentoring for mental health, encouraging older students to work with and support younger students. The wide range both of models and names (from Wellbeing Champion to Mental Health Ambassador) means it can be difficult to know what this type of programme involves. While a growing number of providers offer educators access to training programmes for their older students, they are often behind paywalls and their credentials can be difficult to verify.

A common model offers peer support by trained pupils through drop-in sessions for individuals (I call this the **drop-in model**).

Another model offers knowledge dissemination by trained pupils through organised para-lessons for whole classes of pupils (I'll call this the **knowledge dissemination model**).

Various settings also allow pupils to promote mental health and challenge stigma in other ways, championing a positive whole-school approach (the **policy model**).

There is growing evidence that, if peers are given adequate training, outcomes of each type of programme can be very successful. I Booth et al.'s recent study suggests that well-trained pupils can be just as successful as adults at disseminating information about mental health,ⁱⁱ while Curtin et al. assert confidently that 'peer education can work to improve mental health literacy'.ⁱⁱⁱ More research needs to be done in this area, and I hope that this case study can be a useful starting point.

Context

Our school is a 12-18 girls' school (S1-S6) in Edinburgh with approximately 720 pupils, part of a wider diamond-structure foundation. There are around 120 pupils in each year group, split into 6 classes.

For several years, the school undertook an ambitious Mental Health Ambassador programme that combined the **drop-in** and **knowledge dissemination models**. In a competitive process, S5 students applied, and some were selected as the MHAs for the coming year. The training and resource provision

for this programme were outsourced to an external provider. My colleague Jo McLaren (Head of S2 and a long-time supporter of the programme and mental health provision in our school) and I were responsible for ongoing support for our school MHAs. Although we did not complete formal surveys of the S2s as we were uncomfortable about undermining the existing programme, we asked for ongoing feedback from their teachers and undertook evaluative reviews with the MHAs. We discovered a range of problems with the content, resources and, primarily, the delivery of the messages.

The MHAs kept giving us similar feedback:

The training day was not very helpful, and they were just a bit didactic on what we should do and say. They didn't respond well to our questions. They treated us like children and were a bit condescending. It was quite offensive.

A lot of the materials are delivering information that is already familiar to the pupils and the delivery itself is challenging, with pupils often being disengaged and occasionally talking over us, even to the extent of the form-teacher having to shout. Some of the video resources are not particularly helpful either, when better resources are available.

Standing at the front of the class and talking 'at' the pupils is challenging.^{iv}

We did our best to support the MHAs in their work. We developed PowerPoints based on their training materials to help with delivery, and made substantial changes to their lunchtime drop-in sessions, introducing games, colouring, music and a more relaxed atmosphere. These received positive feedback. However, more needed to be done. We wanted to create our own training, using our teaching and pastoral skills to support the MHAs in the knowledge dissemination aspect of their programme, enabling them to listen and talk to younger students in a meaningful way, while helping improve the mental health literacy of both sets of students.

Finally, in 2023, the school allowed us to take the programme in-house. We now had a clean slate to develop a new programme ourselves.

These were our aims:

- Enhance the social capital and sense of belonging for both sets of pupils through discussion-based, inductive learning;
- Increase confidence and openness in discussing mental health and wellbeing issues for both sets of pupils, improving mental health literacy and reducing taboos and stigma;
- Enable and empower MHAs with transferable skills of presentation, leading discussions sensitively, and active listening;
- Enhance a sense of meaningful student voice for S5 MHAs, including delivering a whole-school assembly and other initiatives of their choice.

Our programme design and the role of the comics

After much discussion, including with the previous year's MHAs, Jo McLaren and I designed a new knowledge dissemination programme (which I call our Monday programme), which would run over seven weekly sessions, as follows.

- 1) Icebreakers
- 2) Introducing mental health
- 3) Self-care: biological needs
- 4) Self-care: mental health needs
- 5) Self harm
- 6) Friendships
- 7) Resilience and coping strategies

Each week's session runs for approximately 30 minutes but is designed to be flexible. This course is delivered by the MHAs in 'guidance time': part of an administrative period built into the school week after the weekly Monday assembly, running from around 9:15-9:45 am. This is more by necessity than design: it is the one time during the school week when both our S2 and S5 pupils are available and not in formal taught lessons or free time.

Now that we had designed the programme structure, our next challenge was to develop resources that would be both original and meaningful, to give the inexperienced MHAs an easy but notably 'different' tool to work with that could lead to positive outcomes.

Knowing from our experience what works well, we aimed to give our MHAs an inquiry-based, inductive teaching framework that would build up younger pupils' discussion skills and understanding naturally.^v How better to do this than have a series of 'friends', much like one of their own friendship groups, who together go through the experiences they are exploring in their sessions?

We initially experimented with having a series of 'case studies or short stories about a group of friends for classes to read and discuss with their MHAs. But these were quite dry and were not, we felt, 'different enough' from normal teaching resources. To make these stories more accessible and visually appealing for all our learners, we decided to develop these into a series of comic strips using Pixton software.^{vi}

For the comic strips, I designed a friendship group, aiming to cover a range of characters from diverse backgrounds to broadly reflect our pupil base. Due to our demographic as an independent girls' school, most of the characters are female, although one is non-binary (Jez), and a boy (Daniel) is a friend at another school. While some characters feel lonely or isolated at home, they are intended to reflect a middle-income socio-economic status and do not represent looked-after children, extreme trauma, or those with language difficulties. Although we may want to revisit this in the future, we were keen to

focus on normalising mental health struggles in everyday situations first and wanted to avoid the distractions of bringing ‘dramatic’ stories into too much focus.

The comics exist in printed format on cards (which are distributed to the S2 classes in each session), booklets (which are given to the MHAs), and digitally as one among a range of resources in the on-screen PowerPoint presentations used by the MHAs in lesson times.^{vii}

Our MHAs were inevitably going to be inexperienced teachers, and Kyriacou warns against allowing truly ‘interactive teaching’ to regress into a traditional ‘initiation-response-feedback framework’, which will be unable to move beyond low-level thinking.^{viii} To promote and maintain higher-order responses, each comic has a set of questions that run alongside it, which gradually progress in terms of taxonomical challenge and encourage reflective and inductive thinking. For example:



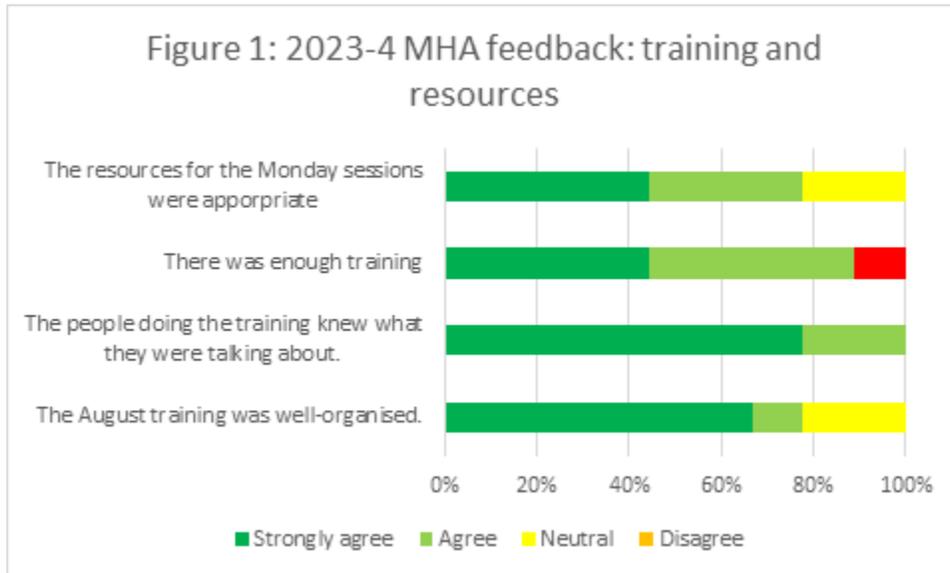
We also designed a new training programme for the MHAs, aiming to give them the skills they needed both to listen to the S2s and to lead semi-structured discussions with confidence.

The 2023-4 rollout

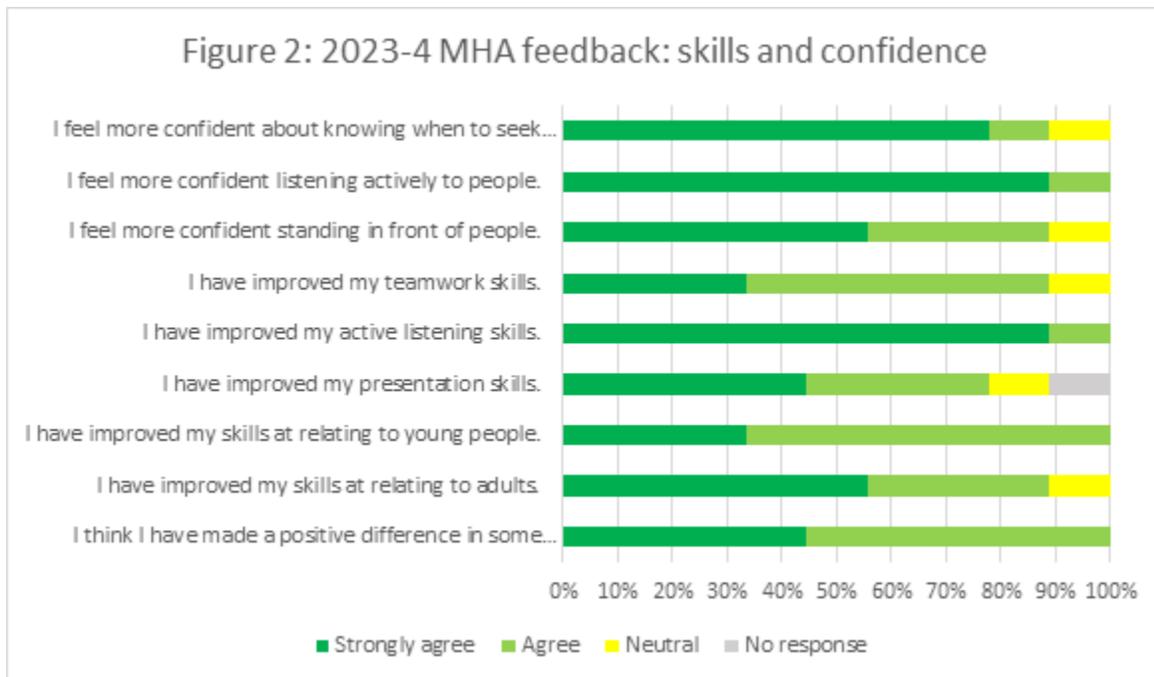
Over the one and a half day training course (eight hours and fifteen minutes including a one-hour lunch break) in August 2023, we delivered a range of sessions to the new MHAs: an introduction to mental health, active listening skills and coaching, how to lead a discussion, and how to run a lunchtime drop-in (complete with fill-in-the-gaps scenarios). We also modelled a lesson based on ‘myth-busting,’ using a comic that we devised for their training. We then organised the MHAs into the pairs they would be working with for the year and gave them time to plan how to deliver one of the course lessons themselves. We encouraged them to use the comics as a basis for lesson delivery alongside PowerPoints, lesson plans and other resources that we provided for them, but also to adopt a flexible, semi-structured approach to their questioning. Each pair then had 20 minutes to deliver a lesson to the rest of the group, with the S2 form teacher in attendance too. After this, we had a feedback session, talking through what had gone well and what needed more work.

Our feedback from the course of the 2023-4 academic year includes MS forms surveys and in-person discussions with both the MHAs and S2 pupils.

Survey 1: S5 MHAs (2023-4 cohort) who have completed the programme, Spring 2024 (9 respondents)



Our MHAs were mostly positive about the resources, the training, and our competence as trainers, with a few suggesting that resources or training could have been improved further.



Almost all MHA respondents said that the programme had helped them improve their skills and confidence in a range of areas, with other responses being neutral. All the respondents said that they felt they had made a positive difference in young people's lives because of the programme.

Overall, this programme has had a positive impact on our S5s MHAs.

Feedback 1: An evaluative discussion with MHAs who had completed the programme.

Compared to previous years, anecdotally the MHAs were much more positive about what they had achieved in the Monday programme. They said that overall, the sessions worked well, and many pupils were engaged. However, they also noted that the later sessions, for example on self-harm and friendships, had been more successful as they were seen as less likely to repeat material that the students already knew. They said sessions worked better when they could be informal and discussion-based rather than relying too much on formal resources.

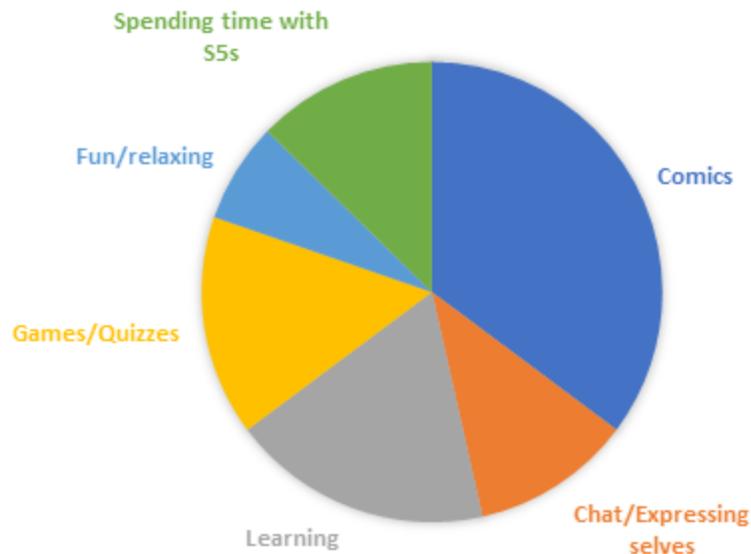
We also discovered that one set of MHAs, based with class 2C, had a much less positive view of the programme than others. They seemed to feel that their class had not engaged and had a more negative view of the morning sessions. I address this in more detail later.

Survey 2: S2 pupils who had been through our MHA programme, December 2023 (94 respondents)

This survey asked a wide range of questions, investigating the attitudes and responses of S2 students to the Monday programme after it had been completed. It also asked students whether they had attended the lunchtime drop-in.

Only 10 respondents (10.6%) admitted to attending lunchtime drop-in sessions, although many of these were regular attendees. It should also be noted that many visitors to drop-in sessions were in other year groups (as they are open to students in S1-S4). A further 44% said they might consider going to the drop-in if they felt they needed to talk to someone, with the remainder saying they would not consider this. The impact of lunchtime drop-ins is limited to those who voluntarily attend in an already packed extra-curricular schedule. This further emphasises the importance of the knowledge dissemination model in our MHA course: whereas the drop-in is in its nature opt-in, all S2 students will experience mental health lessons led by an older peer.

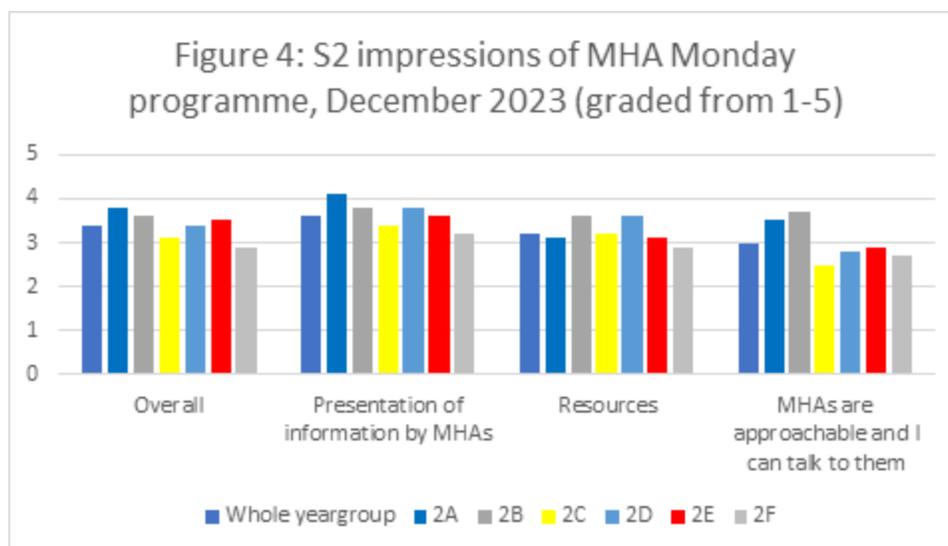
FIGURE 3: WHAT WAS THE BEST THING ABOUT THE MONDAY MHA SESSIONS?



What was the best thing about the Monday sessions?	Number of pupils
Comics	25
Learning	13
Games/Quizzes	11
Spending time with S5s	9
Chat/Expressing selves	8
Fun/relaxing	5

This was an open question, with answers grouped and collated afterwards. The comics were named by 25 students (27%) as being their favourite aspect of the Monday programme. Although we would need to ask further questions to be sure what they found positive about the comics, I tentatively suggest that they were meeting their aim of engaging students, acting as a 'way in' to challenging subject matter, and building their empathy and discussion skills through an inductive framework. Spending time with S5s and being able to talk and express themselves were also key features for S2s (together amounting to 17 respondents), underlining the significance of this programme in building a sense of belonging and social capital. The knowledge acquisition element should also not be overlooked, with 13 respondents naming this as the highlight of the course for them.

We will aim to gather more feedback on the impact of the comics after this year's sessions are complete, and these categories can give us a starting point for a more formalised survey list.



	Whole year	2A	2B	2C	2D	2E	2F
Overall	3.4	3.8	3.6	3.1	3.4	3.5	2.9
Presentation of information by MHAs	3.6	4.1	3.8	3.4	3.8	3.6	3.2
Resources	3.2	3.1	3.6	3.2	3.6	3.1	2.9
MHAs are approachable and I can talk to them	3	3.5	3.7	2.5	2.8	2.9	2.7

This shows that overall impressions of the Monday programme varied from class to class, with for example 2A and 2B having a much more positive impression of the course while 2C and 2F were more negative.^{ix} Views of the MHAs' presentation and approachability were broadly in line with this, suggesting that the MHAs themselves had a big impact on how the course was received. Views of the resources were slightly more varied, with 2A less positive and 2C more so than expected. This suggests that while views of the resources are more likely to be positive if the class has a positive atmosphere, they are also a matter of personal preference. No one resource will be ideal for every learner.

Feedback 2: A discussion with 2C, a class that was seen to have not engaged well with the programme overall.

I was keen to find out what had gone wrong with class 2C, so I visited them during a cover lesson and asked them about their experiences with the Monday programme.

The pupils commented that they were not convinced that the MHAs had particularly 'bought in' to the programme; they felt that 'they were just doing it for their uni applications' and that they tended to 'read off the PowerPoint' when they were presenting information. They also said that the MHAs kept asking them questions even when discussion was not going well, and then the teacher tried to 'force' the S2s to answer, which ended up in an awkward dynamic (and the low-level learning that Kyriacou warned of). They said they thought more flexibility would work better. Finally, they also stated that the

Friendship comic was somewhat ‘unrealistic.’ In the comic, pupils end up talking to teachers to get help: pupils in 2C said this may not always have the best outcome. In the original version of the comic, pupils in 2C also said the characters all ‘seem to be living happily ever after’ at the end, which they also felt was unrealistic.^x

Although it should be noted that the ‘Friendships’ session overall was well-received, this valuable feedback helped us to make some small modifications to both the training and one of the comics for this year’s delivery.

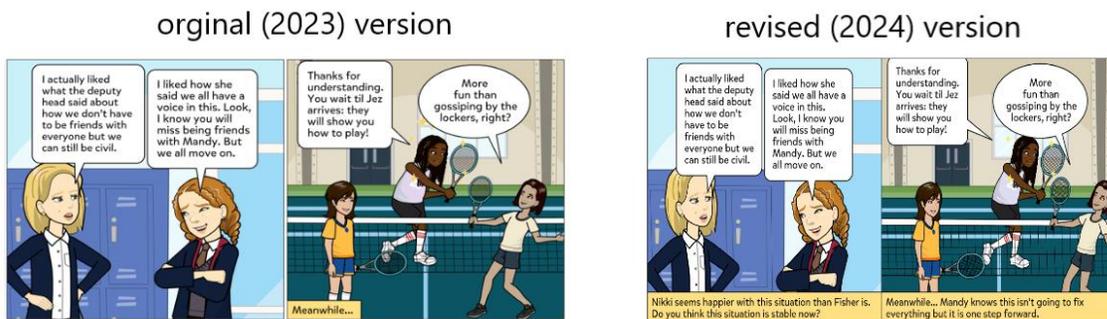
Observations and modifications

We felt that our training in 2023-4 had been rushed and we were able to add an extra hour and fifteen minutes to extend the training time to 9½ hours.

For this year’s August training, we ensured we had more time for feedback about teaching and listening skills and encouraging the MHAs and form tutors to ‘buy in’ to the comics and the programme. We also ensured that in our session feedback we gave specific tips on classroom behaviour management, volume/pitch control, and body language to help build the MHAs’ confidence.

We also edited the ending of the Friendships comic to ensure it was clear that this was not a ‘happily ever after’ scenario, and we encouraged the MHAs to use more nuanced questions such as ‘who would you speak to in this situation’? We emphasised in training that the group of friends in the comics are not intended as idealised examples but merely as characters, and that questioning and critically analysing their choices is part of the reading and reflection process.

Figure 5: original and revised endings of the ‘Friendships’ comic

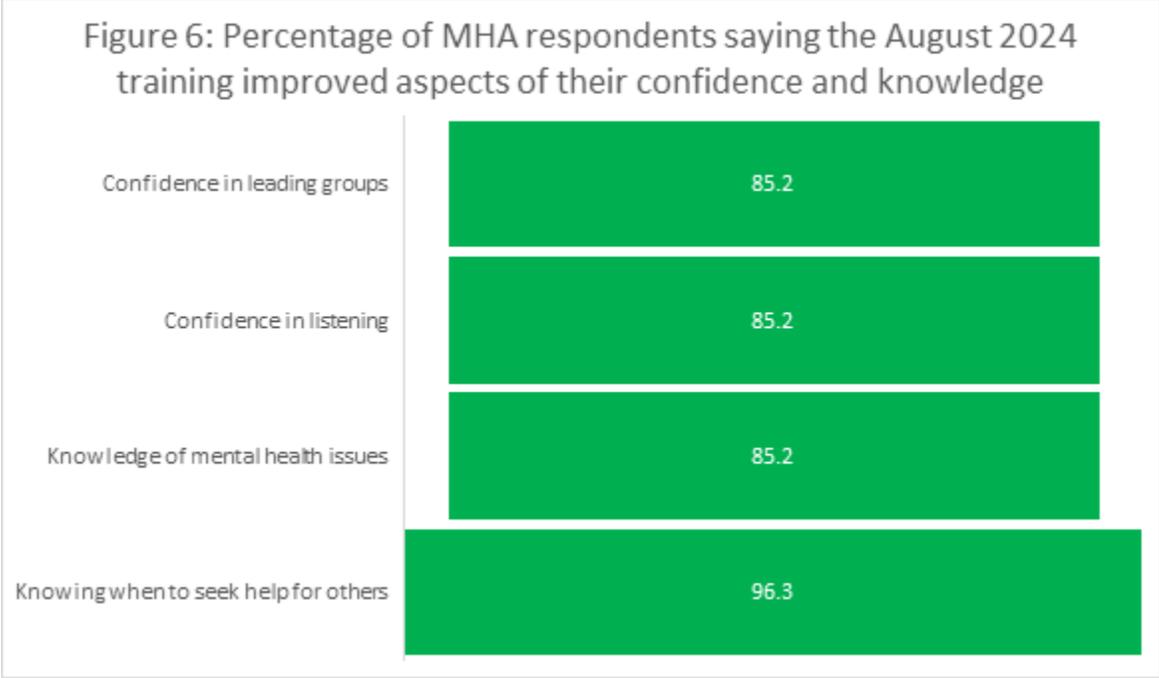


This year so far (2024-5)

This year, the number of MHAs was increased from 15 to 29 participants. Since we only need two MHAs per form class (12 overall, plus three reserves to cover absences), we decided to divide the MHA roles into two: 15 Guidance MHAs (responsible for the **knowledge dissemination** aspect of our MHA model)

and 14 Policy MHAs (responsible for whole-school **policy** initiatives). Both groups would continue to run the lunchtime **drop-in** sessions three days a week (with an individual commitment of once or twice a fortnight). Our MHA programme now combines all three models of peer support.

Survey 3: MHAs in August 2024 at the end of their initial training (27 respondents)



We were pleased that most MHAs reported a growth in confidence and knowledge in each of these areas and will look forward to seeing their view is still this positive by the end of the year.

Assembly

Our new Policy MHAs wrote, organised, and ran a whole-school assembly on Monday 9 September. They chose to base their content around the idea of ‘myth-busting,’ taking inspiration from the ‘myth-busting’ training comic to film themselves and other students and teachers around school.

Figures 7 & 8: excerpt from ‘Myth-busting’ comic and still from ‘Myth-busting’ assembly presentation, September 2024.



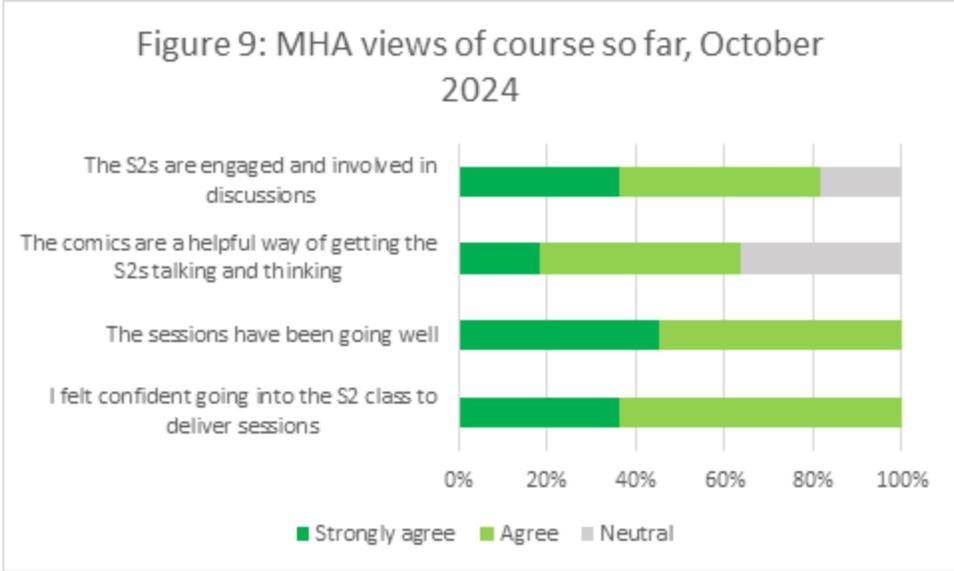
TACKLING MYTHS ON TICS



Each video clip began with a student or students stating a well-known myth about a condition, and then the 'Myth-Busters' gently corrected them, to great comical effect. We were delighted to see the direct influence of our comics on this assembly, which was very well received and has been one step in normalising a range of mental health issues and neurodivergence.

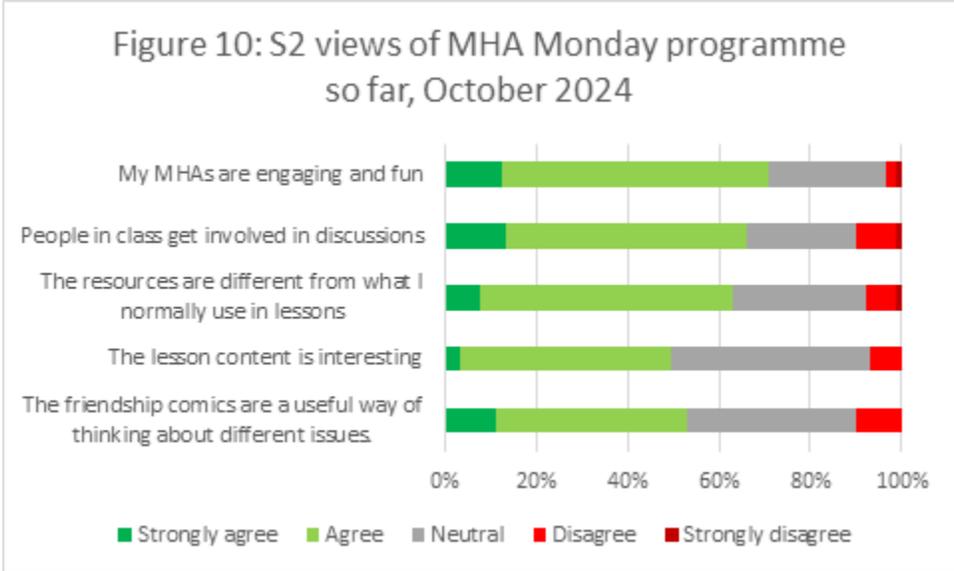
Our Policy MHAs are now producing a newsletter and poster campaign aimed at further reducing stigma and normalising discussions around mental health. The training, including features of the comics, has helped them to have a clear vision for their place within the school.

Survey 4: Guidance MHAs in October 2024, after 4 Monday sessions have been delivered (11 respondents)



These results are positive so far. This year’s training has certainly been successful, and the Guidance MHAs are positive about their Monday sessions to date. Some have found the comics more helpful than others, but overall, they have been a positive starting point for discussing challenging issues.

Survey 5: S2s in October 2024, after 4 sessions have been delivered (83 respondents)



	The comics are useful (%)	The lesson content is interesting (%)	The resources are different (%)	People in class get involved in discussions (%)	My MHAs are engaging and fun (%)
Strongly agree	11.2	3.4	7.9	13.5	12.4

Agree	41.6	46.1	55.1	52.8	58.4
Neutral	37.1	43.8	29.2	23.6	25.8
Disagree	10.1	6.7	6.7	9.0	2.2
Strongly disagree	0.0	0.0	1.1	1.1	1.1

First, it is unsurprising that S2 feedback is slightly less positive than that of the MHAs.^{xi} However, we can see that it is still broadly positive, with S2s agreeing that their MHAs are engaging and fun, getting involved in lessons, and finding the resources different and interesting (only 6.7% saying it is not interesting is a positive result for a Monday morning!). Likewise, 52.8% of the S2s already see the comics as a useful way of thinking about different issues, with only 10.1% disagreeing.

It is worth bearing in mind that the aspects of the course they have done so far this year – on introducing mental health, biological and mental health self-care – are mostly topics with which they would be familiar. The second half of the course content – on self-harm, friendship issues, and coping strategies – is both more unfamiliar and more challenging. I am interested to see their feedback on this half of the course and hope that the positive start, and the familiarity of the ‘friendship group’ in the comics, will lead to more meaningful and beneficial discussions.

Evaluation

The comics have had a positive impact on the MHA programme, both for our new Policy MHAs, through their assembly and other activities, and for our knowledge dissemination model, which has improved over the last two years through the Monday programme. It is difficult to separate the impact of the comics from the programme, as the comics have become an integral part both of the training and content delivery. This is important: no single resource could work as a stand-alone panacea in a complex and evolving world of mental health education.

These comics, or their descendants, have the potential to be successful as one part of a robust, varied and flexible programme for older students to deliver. The narratives relating to the ‘friendship group’ are simple and accessible, providing a non-threatening route to begin discussions about challenging mental health issues such as self-harm and friendship breakdowns. Although they are not perfect and the inductive questioning style does not work for all pupils, we hope that the rest of our programme provides enough variety, so that each pupil has something positive that they can take away from it.

This knowledge dissemination model gives both younger and older students something that teacher-taught lessons could not. It works because it is based on relationships, a sense of belonging, and building horizontal social capital between students in the school. This is a powerful context for improving mental health literacy.

Looking to the future

We have been pleased with the success of our new MHA programme to date. We continue to build on it but feel that we now have a workable model that engages pupils.

In October 2024, as I am writing this, the school has just announced that it is going fully co-educational in August 2026, with the girls' and boys' schools being absorbed into the wider foundation. While our 'brother' boys' school does currently run an MHA programme, it is a 'drop-in' only model with a much more basic training and no pedagogical input by the young people. This is for historic and timetabling rather than theoretical reasons: a recent study indicates that male students are even more likely than females to benefit from a peer-led knowledge acquisition approach.^{xiii} In any case, we now face the challenge of creating a sustainable model that will work in a large mixed environment, possibly across 12 forms in a year group, and ensuring that we have sufficient buy-in from both sides of the new school. As the entire timetable is also being revised, we may also need to 'fight' to ensure that time is available for a new 'Monday programme' equivalent.

We need to persuade those involved in the merger discussions to recognise the value of our knowledge dissemination model, in terms of social capital, confidence-building and skills acquisition for both sets of learners involved. Since we have had such positive outcomes with our new programme to date, we think we have the evidence base to continue to build our programme for the future. I hope that some of the resources we have created can also be useful to readers of this article and look forward to further discussions about how to improve peer-led support.

- i Morgan, Fran, and Ellie Costello. 2023. Square Pegs. Crown House Publishing Ltd, 274.
- ii Booth, Ailbhe, Elizabeth Doyle, and Aileen O'Reilly. 2022. "School-Based Health Promotion to Improve Mental Health Literacy: A Comparative Study of Peer- versus Adult-Led Delivery." *Journal of Mental Health*, January 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638237.2021.2022621>.
- iii Curtin, Esther Louise, Emily Widnall, Steve Dodd, Mark Limmer, Ruth Simmonds, Abigail Emma Russell, and Judi Kidger. 2022. "The Peer Education Project to Improve Mental Health Literacy in Secondary School Students in England: A Qualitative Realist Evaluation." *The Lancet* 400 (1): S34. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(22\)02244-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(22)02244-9).
- iv Quotations from my notes taken during MHA feedback sessions in December 2021 and February 2023.
- v Hattie ranks each of the following highly for its weighted Effect Size: Enquiry-based teaching (0.5), Inductive teaching (0.6), Questioning (0.49) and Classroom Discussion (0.82) (Hattie, John. 2023. *Visible Learning: The Sequel*. Taylor & Francis).
- vi See "Pixton | Comic Maker | Avatar Maker." <<https://www.pixton.com/welcome>>
- vii The digital resource that runs alongside this paper is broadly similar to the booklet given to MHAs as part of their training.
- viii Kyriacou, Chris. 2018. *Essential Teaching Skills*. Oxford University Press, 64-65.
- ix Class names have been changed to protect the anonymity of students.
- x Taken from my notes from discussion with class 2C on 13 March 2024.
- xi Educators consistently over-estimate the positive impact of their credibility with relation to mental health. In "Student Mental Health Survey Results from Students and Education Leaders." 2023. <https://epe.brightspotcdn.com/9e/3d/2231b3d94efda45e5b279c23a46d/student-mental-health-survey-report-final-12-29-23.pdf>, EduLearn notes that 90% of school leaders thought that students would talk to teachers if they had issues, whereas only 39% of students agreed.
- xii Booth, Ailbhe, et al., 2022.

Meet the friends

Mandy (she/her)



Fisher (she/her)



Margot (she/her)



Jez (they/them)



Arty (she/her)

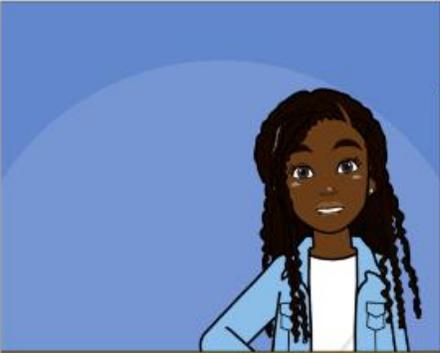


Niki (she/her)



Danny (he/him)





Mandy has always enjoyed school, but S2 seems like a big deal. Suddenly there are lots of other people to worry about, subject choice coming up soon and tensions with her parents - she's an only child.

She likes Netflix, blending interesting fruit smoothies, and still secretly has a whale plushie in her bed. Her favourite subject is Drama, but she's not so keen on friendship drama.

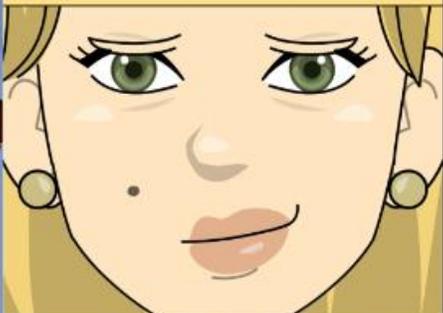


Jez has been friends with Mandy since P1. Jez is currently gender exploring. They came out as non-binary last year and feel most comfortable with they/them pronouns but they're not sure that's where they will always be. Their parents are supportive but have also said they think it's just a phase.

Jez loves coding and gaming and dreams of being a professional gamer but worries that they are not doing well enough in Maths. They have two older sisters and hate getting hand-me-down clothes as they are both very 'girly'.

Meet Fisher. She is a hockey girl and everyone thinks of her as popular and funny. Everyone wants to be like Fisher. Everyone vies for her attention, and whenever she posts anything she gets hundreds of comments.

She has been friends with Jez and Mandy forever. She likes that people care about what she thinks but sometimes wonders if people talk about her behind her back. At home, her older sister has just left for university so she now just lives with her Mum most of the time.



Margot joined the school at the start of S2 having just moved back to Scotland. She has lived in several different countries across the world for the last 5 years and has gone to international schools. She has been looking forward to settling down in Edinburgh now her Dad's job has changed.

She's glad she is finally in a city where she can get out more. She's looking forward to finding her freedom. She has a younger brother in P7 but mostly ignores him these days.

Niki joined at the start of S1 and became good friends with Fisher, Margot and Jez. She plays on the hockey A team with Fisher and has a great sense of humour. She posts a lot of hilarious content on social media and she isn't afraid to speak up in class if things seem unfair, or just in general. Other people think she always knows what to say.



Niki gets good marks in most subjects without even seeming to try. At home, she has a sister in S3 and a brother in P7.



No-one really knows Arty. It's short for Artemis, 'because my parents are weird', she tells people. She seems to have been around for years: Mandy remembers her in P4. But she's a bit quiet and most people don't seem to know much about her.



At the start of S2 Arty suddenly seems to be edging towards Mandy and her friends all the time. She sits near Niki in choir and she plays the oboe: she always seems to be doing music things.



Danny is at SMC but he's an honorary member of the friendship group. He likes baking and Motocross racing. He lives a few doors down from Mandy but these days they mostly talk on video chat or IM. He has a twin sister, Betty, who is in another class and has a totally different friendship group.



Danny has always been there for Mandy, Jez and Fisher and is a good person to talk to.



Introducing Mental Health

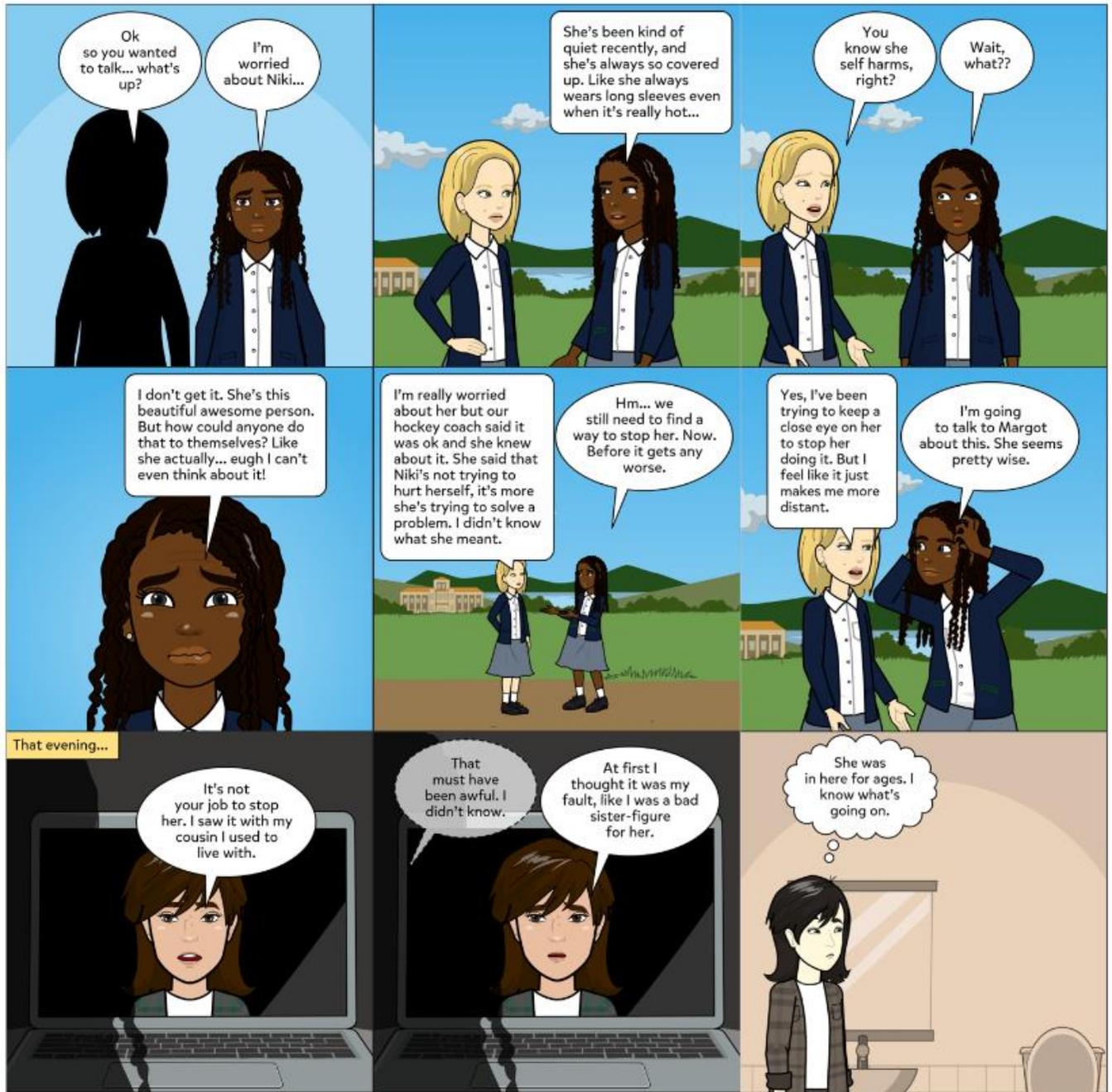
Monday morning. Jez and Mandy have just arrived at school.



Small group discussion questions:

- ◆ Do people ask you about how you are? Do you ask other people how they are?
- ◆ Can 'checking in' with people make a difference to your day?
- ◆ How was Margot's weekend?
- ◆ Why doesn't she tell the truth? Does it matter?
- ◆ Why do they find Arty embarrassing?
- ◆ How do you think she is feeling?
- ◆ Did anyone do anything wrong here?

When your friend self-harms



But one day we spoke about it. She told me how it felt and I could understand it.



It's as if everything is caving in on you, so much pain, you can't deal with your emotions.



Hurting yourself is not a good solution, and it's never the only option, but it brings temporary relief. Sometimes people feel it's the only way to cope. Stopping her from doing it would make things worse. It wasn't my job, and none of this was my fault.

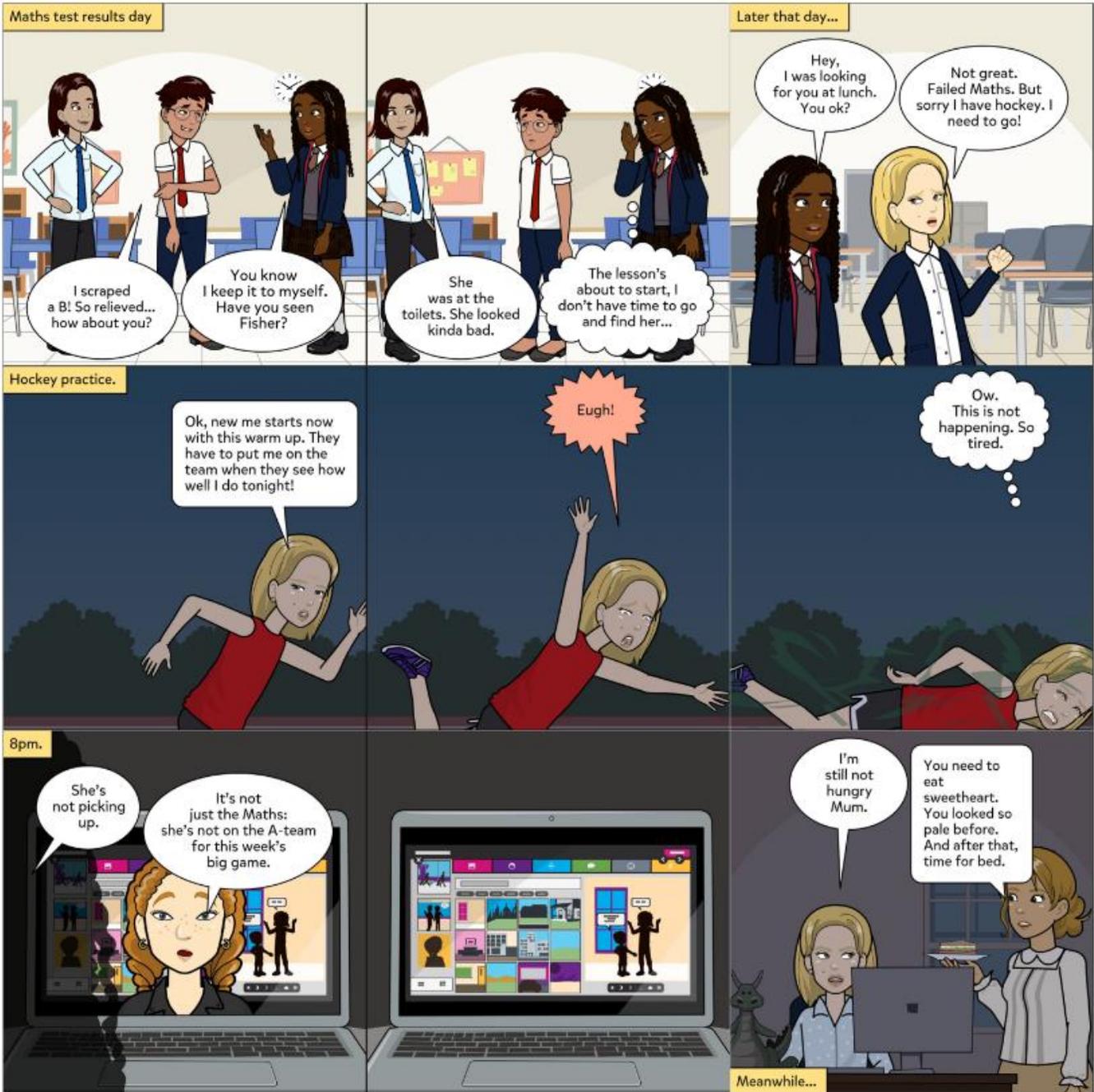




Small group discussion questions:

- ◆ Why do people self-harm?
- ◆ What do you think of Mandy's plan to 'make' Niki stop harming herself?
- ◆ How do you think someone who is self-harming feels?
- ◆ What do they need from their friends?
- ◆ What does resilience mean to you?
- ◆ Are Mandy and Fisher good friends to Niki? Why?
- ◆ If you found out a friend was self-harming, where can you go for support?

Self-care: biological needs

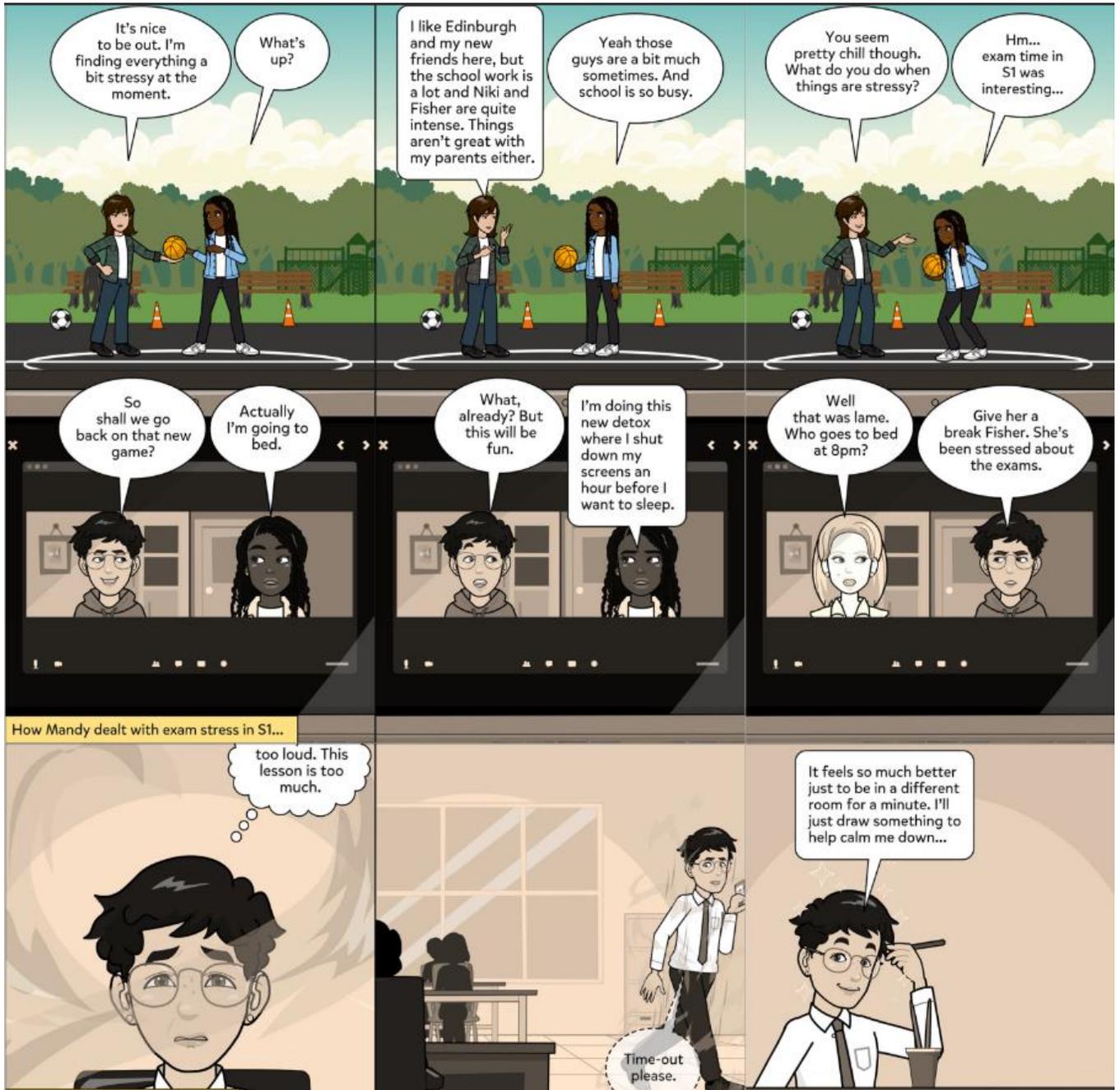




Small group discussion questions:

- ◆ Why is Mandy worried about Fisher?
- ◆ What do you think might be happening to her?
- ◆ Why is Fisher so tired at school?
- ◆ What is the impact of Fisher's behavior?
- ◆ What does Fisher need? Who can help her?
- ◆ Does any of this seem familiar to you? What can we learn from it?

Self-care: mental health needs





How Arty dealt with exam stress...

Small group discussion questions:

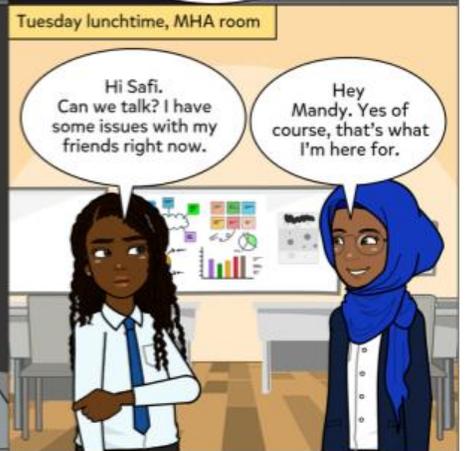
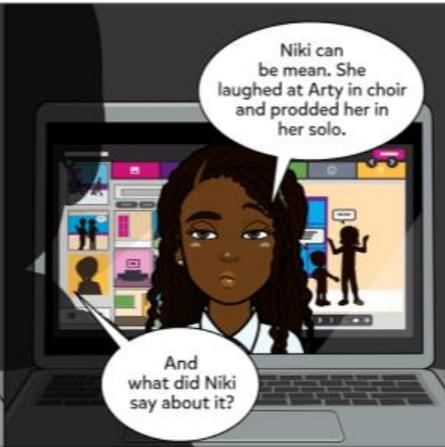
- ◆ Are there times that have been particularly stressful for you since the start of S1?
- ◆ Are there certain times at school that you think will put pressure on your mental health and wellbeing?
- ◆ How are the different characters dealing with stress?
- ◆ Are they being good friends to each other?
- ◆ What helps you when you are feeling overwhelmed?

Friendships: A week



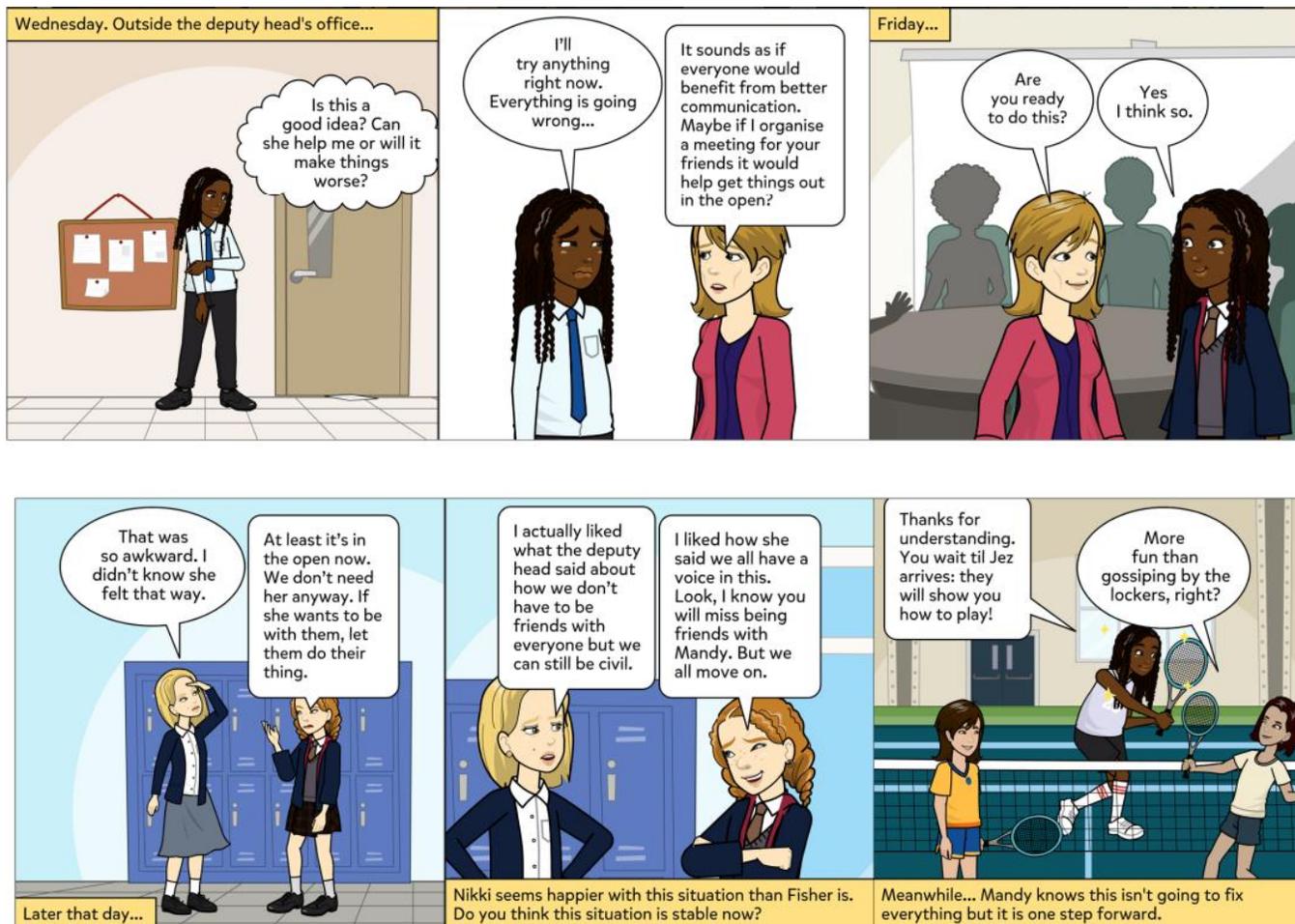


Monday evening



Tuesday lunchtime, MHA room



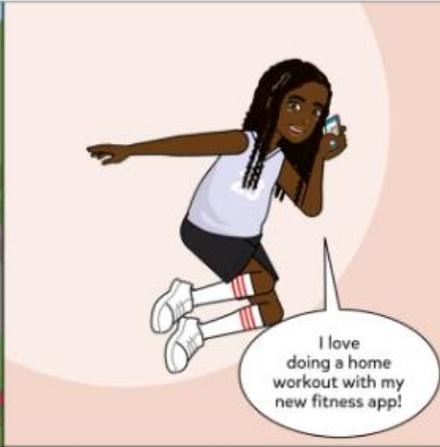
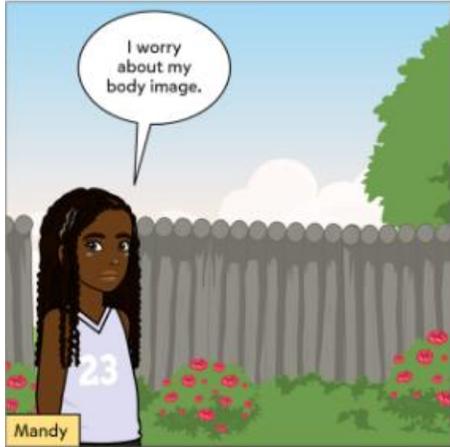


Small group discussion questions:

- ◆ How do you think Mandy is feeling at the start?
- ◆ How do you think Arty and Margot are feeling?
- ◆ What would you do if you were Mandy (be honest)?
- ◆ What do you think Mandy should do?
- ◆ How do you think Mandy needs to fix her friendship situation?
- ◆ Why could going to Safi help?
- ◆ Is going to the deputy head a good idea?
- ◆ How do you think they are all feeling at the end

Coping Strategies: Just right & too much





Small group discussion questions:

- ◆ Are these strategies good?
- ◆ What do we need to consider to use them in balance?
- ◆ What strategies work for you