

BODY SIGNALS[®]



*Learning to notice, name and interpret body signals
opens up a treasure-trove of life skills for everyone*

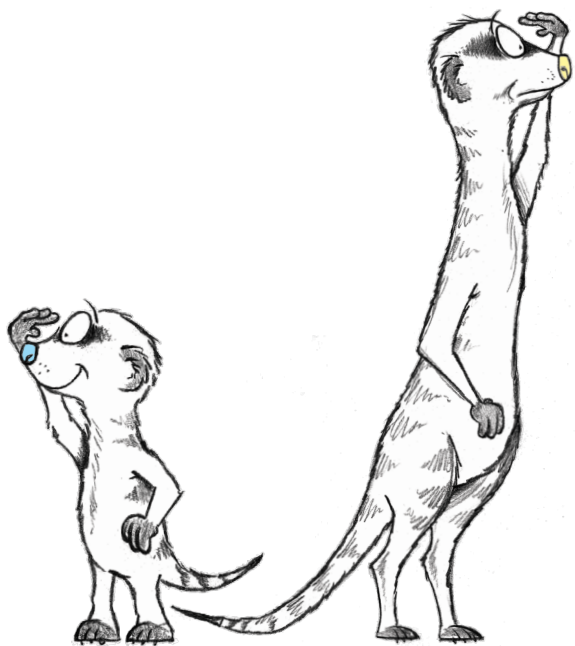
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**Innovative
Resources**

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opens up a treasure-trove of life skills for everyone*

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Innovative Resources acknowledges the Jaara people of Dja Dja Wurrung country, the traditional custodians of the land upon which our premises are located and where our resources are developed and published. We pay our respects to the elders—past, present and future—for they hold the memories, traditions, cultures and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, and other First Nations peoples. We must remember that underneath this earth, upon which we so firmly stand, this is, was and always will be, the traditional land of First Nations peoples.

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BODY SIGNALS—WISDOM FROM WITHIN



The message of the *Body Signals*® cards is a simple yet profound one: learning to recognise, interpret and manage our body signals is crucial. Our body communicates its wisdom to us long before our conscious mind can get a word in. That's why body signals are sometimes called our 'early warning signs'. They are an important key to staying safe, and building social and emotional wellbeing.

The *Body Signals*® cards are designed for having conversations with children, young people and adults about body signals. Such conversations help people recognise what their body is telling them, and become more skillful at interpreting and acting on the message in an appropriate way. The action required may be as simple and yet as significant as: 'Tell an adult you trust.' For example, tell an adult such as a teacher that your tummy is in a knot at school and you need some help.

How are body signals different from body language?

What do we mean by body signals and how are they different from body language? 'Body language' is a term that has been around for quite some time. A cursory search through the internet reveals a plethora of material about 'body language'; how it is essential to communication and how so much of what we say is communicated not by words but by gesture, posture, facial expression, stance and other aspects of non-verbal, physical behaviour.

The human body is an extremely sensitive instrument. People can pick up subtle changes in personal relationships, in temperature and in atmosphere. We notice changes in tone of voice, facial expressions and gesture. This sensitivity to the language and tonal energy of the body is a highly sophisticated part of what it is to be human—it is at the heart of how we build connections with others.

While body language sends powerful ‘signals’ to others, this is not what we mean by the term ‘Body Signals’ in this card set. A body signal—or a cluster of body signals—is the physiological response of the body to something in the internal or external environment, whether it be a perceived threat or something quite the opposite such as pleasure or comfort. Body signals are visceral responses such as blushing, goose bumps, palpitations, butterflies in the tummy, constricted throat, perspiration or trembling.

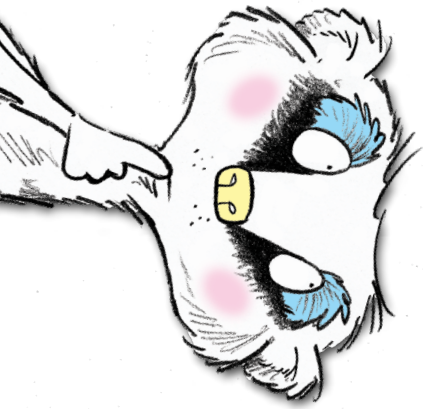
In creating this card set we discovered how difficult it is to be cut and dried about where a ‘body signal’ ends and where ‘body language’ begins. They go together. A body signal such as a fluttery, nervous tummy may easily result in a gesture such as rubbing your tummy, or an expression such as a frown. So, while the forty *Body Signals*® cards focus on body signals, you will also be able to identify aspects of body language such as gesture, expression and posture. These factors can be used to add layers of richness to your conversation with people about body signals.

I’ve heard of Emotional Intelligence (EQ) but what is BQ?

Many of us would agree that becoming increasingly skilful in working with our emotions is part of what it is to grow to maturity as a human being. In fact, managing our emotions and developing empathy are seen as central to developing ‘Emotional Intelligence’ (EQ). You have probably heard of EQ, here now is the matching component of ‘Body Intelligence’ (BQ).

There are times when each of us, no matter how emotionally intelligent we may be, has trouble recognising how we are feeling emotionally.





'Emotional Intelligence and Body Intelligence together form the "language" of Emotional Literacy—a set of skills with foundations that are best laid in childhood and then developed throughout our whole lives.'

This is where body signals are a great support. Even when we are unable say how we are feeling emotionally, most of us can learn to identify and describe what is happening in our body—our 'body signals'. They are our most reliable and direct barometers of feeling. Body signals can be thought of as signposts for feelings. For example, we may not know consciously that we feel unsafe, but our body may be giving us a clear warning sign through a tight tummy, sweaty palms or a beating heart. Or we may be unaware that throughout the day we have accumulated quite a lot of stress, until we notice the tightness in our shoulders when we arrive home.

Emotional Literacy

In this way, Emotional Intelligence and Body Intelligence *together* form the 'language' of Emotional Literacy—a set of skills with foundations that are best laid in childhood and then developed throughout our whole lives.

With practice even very young children can learn to recognise their body signals (and those of others) as strong indicators of emotion. In fact, our bodies can be described as our most honest communicators, especially if we have learnt to disregard, suppress or second-guess our feelings. Of course, we can all do this from time to time, but unfortunately it can become entrenched if abuse has taken place.

Trauma-informed practice and protective behaviours

With sexual abuse or family violence, for example, a person's social and emotional boundaries and their body's autonomy are seriously disrespected. As a result they can become unsure about who is a safe person and what places or behaviours are safe and respectful. As a protective mechanism, they can also 'dissociate' – detach from an unbearable present situation, and subsequently lose touch with what their own body is signalling.

Many counsellors, therapists and social workers are now using body signals to help children and adults learn (or re-learn) what they are feeling in their body. By tuning into the signals that their body is giving them, they ground themselves in their body and access its wisdom. They learn to recognise the signs that they feel unsafe, and what to do to seek help.

For these reasons, people working in protective behaviours and trauma-informed care with children, young people and adults will find the *Body Signals*® cards very useful. Teachers and early years educators also support children and young people who have experienced trauma or who are experiencing anxiety. By building BQ into the curriculum, educators can teach children and young people to recognise and respond to the symptoms of trauma or anxiety in proactive and empowering ways.

Body signals are particularly helpful for supporting any child to navigate change. For example, learning to recognise and name a few key body signals can greatly support children who are transitioning from kinder to big school. If children are encouraged to let the teacher know when they are experiencing a key body signal (like butterflies or a sore tummy) the teacher then knows that they are feeling upset or afraid or anxious, and need help.

(Please see page 29 for activities related to protective behaviours and trauma-informed care.)

Interoception

‘Interoception’ is the technical term used for our ability to perceive signals and sensations from our body—hunger, pain, hot, cold, itchy, painful, beating heart, and so on. These signals can be experienced and interpreted very differently by different people. For example, some people on the autism spectrum may experience touching or hugging as uncomfortable, or even painful. Studies also indicate that many people with anxiety possess a pattern of high interoceptive awareness and sensitivity*. This means that they may be hyper-aware of a particular body signal and interpret it as unpleasant, leading to increased anxiety and distress about those sensations (which to others are neutral or even pleasant).

Varying levels of sensitivity and accuracy regarding interoceptive awareness is more than simply different interpretations. Harm or significant difficulty may result if the person is not able to tell when they are cold, for example, or that they need to go to the toilet. ‘Faulty’ interoception can also be associated with illness. For example, a person experiencing an eating disorder may lose touch with the ability to recognise signals of hunger from the body.

Body signals and our threat response

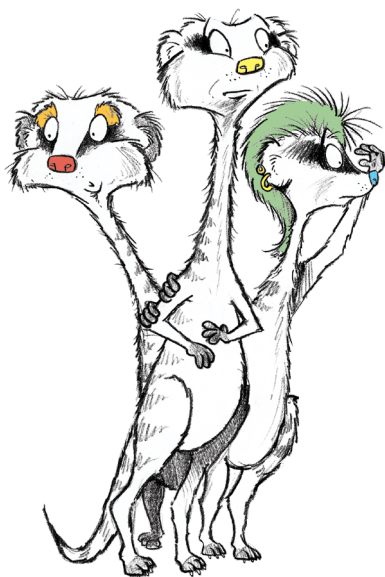
Many of the body signals portrayed in this card set (but not all) are indicators of a stress response, because this is when we need the most help.

When danger or threat are perceived, certain parts of the brain (such as the amygdala) spring into action automatically, releasing a chain of chemicals commonly known as the ‘fight, flight, freeze’ response. More recently, ‘flop’ and ‘(be)friend’ have been added to this list of threat responses. Then comes the higher brain functions or skills that we can learn and develop—i.e. interpreting what the signal means and taking steps to act on it in some way.

* Mahler K 2016, *Interoception: the eighth sensory system practical solutions for improving self-regulation, self-awareness and social understanding of individuals with autism spectrum and related disorders*, AAPC Publishing, USA.

Sometimes our brain may cause our body to have a strong threat response to a situation even when our rational mind can see that there is actually no real threat. When this becomes a habit, it can lead to uncomfortable, and sometimes debilitating, states of recurring anxiety. Even if we don't all experience a diagnosable condition of anxiety, we all experience anxious thoughts or other difficult emotional states from time to time. For this reason it is very helpful to learn some simple techniques for defusing our brain's unwanted threat response, such as distracting ourselves, challenging our perceptions, creating new thought patterns, arriving mindfully in the moment, working with the breath, using specific movements such as tapping, and so on. (Please see two other card sets published by Innovative Resources—[Anxiety Solutions](#) and [Anxiety Solutions for Kids](#)—for a range of these techniques for soothing body signals associated with anxiety).

Most of us do not have sufficient control to stop body signals at will, nor to make them happen at will. But we can develop the skills needed to de-escalate them, release them, and make decisions about acting on them or not. In other words, while body responses (such as short, sharp breathing when we are anxious or panicked) are involuntary, we can learn to respond to them consciously and even to mitigate them or provide 'antidotes' to help them subside when they are triggered erroneously.



Interpreting body signals

You have probably noticed that a body signal can have multiple meanings. It can mean different things at different times—even opposite things. For example, butterflies in the tummy can mean fear and anxiety or excitement and positive anticipation. Similarly, wide-eyed and staring can signal shock and fear or amazement and awe.

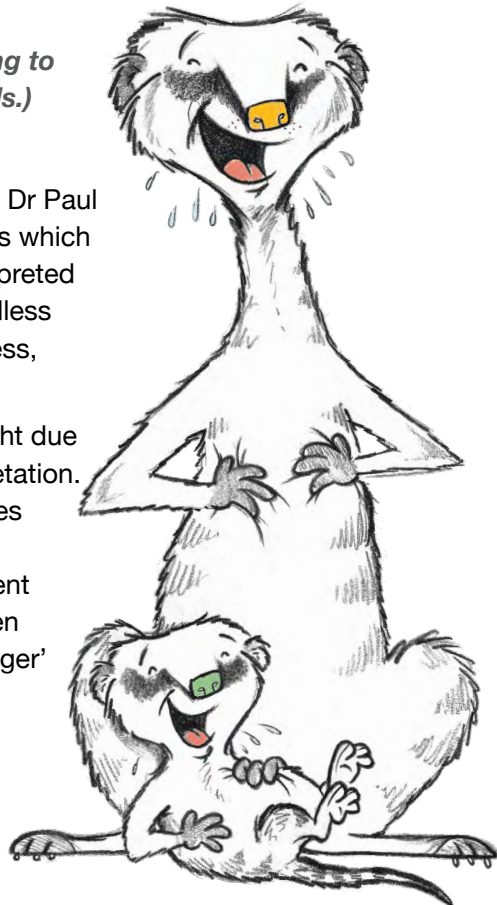
For these reasons, in the *Body Signals*® cards we have attempted to illustrate and name the body signal but not to assign a meaning to that signal. Interpreting the meaning of a particular body signal is the rich territory of the conversation that takes place while using the cards. The starting point is being able to perceive the signal arising from within our body, then we are in a position to develop skill in interpreting what the signal means.

(Please see page 25 for activities relating to interpreting the meaning of body signals.)

Cultural meanings of body signals

A commonly-held belief, first proposed by Dr Paul Ekman, posits there are six basic emotions which are universally recognised and easily interpreted through specific facial expressions, regardless of language or culture. These are: happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise and disgust.

This may not be as clear cut as first thought due to cultural factors that weigh in on interpretation. For example, further studies gave examples such as Trobriand Islanders consistently associating the classic ‘fear’ face movement pattern — that is, knitted brows, wide-open eyes, laterally stretched mouth — with ‘anger’ as well as ‘fear’.



Perhaps we can say that while body signals are universal (for example, fear will elicit the same physiological response the world over) there are cultural differences in what causes a fear or threat response. For example, a black cat running across your path will cause great fear in some cultures and not in others. Also, certain body signals are assigned different meanings in different cultures—itchy palms means ‘money is coming’ in some cultures and simply an allergic reaction in others. So while body signals may be common to all humans, our interpretations of them can vary between individuals and across cultures.

Two books that give some delightful windows into cultural interpretations of body signals are *Lost in Translation—an illustrated Compendium of Untranslatable Words from Around the World*, by Ella Frances Sanders (Square Peg, Random House, London, 2015) and *The Meaning of Tingo: and Other Extraordinary Words from Around the World* by Adam Jacot de Boinod (Penguin Press HC, 2006). Here are some wonderful words from other languages:

Kilig: the feeling of butterflies in your stomach, usually when something romantic or cute takes place (Tagalog).

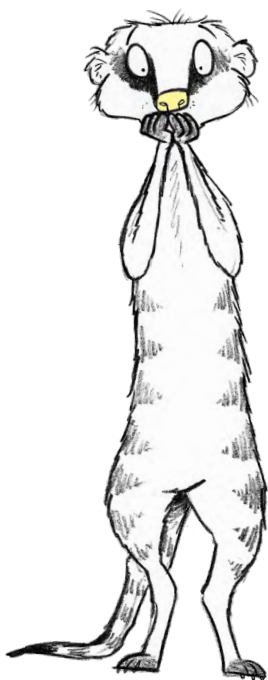
Boketto: gazing vacantly into the distance without thinking about anything much (Japanese).

Resfeber: the restless beat of a traveller’s heart before the journey begins, a mix of anxiety and anticipation (Swedish).

Tiam: the twinkle in your eye when you first meet someone (Farsi).

Sgriob: the peculiar itchiness that settles on the upper lip before taking a sip of whiskey (Gaelic).

Saudade: longing or aching in the heart for something that does not, and probably cannot, exist; yearning for someone or something loved and then lost (Portuguese).



The 'tell'

We may want our internal body signals to be private but sometimes they broadcast to others in ways we wish they didn't. Who does not remember how excruciating it is to blush in the classroom as a child or in a social setting as an adolescent? And this can continue into adulthood. Right at the 'wrong' moment, our face can flush revealing that we may not be as cool, calm and collected as we would like to appear. In fact, our body signals indicate that we are quite annoyed, embarrassed or otherwise activated by the situation.

This is the 'tell' that a poker player is looking for; those involuntary signals of something happening internally, even when we are deliberately trying to conceal it such as the dilation of the pupils or beads of perspiration that may betray a bluff.

Often, of course, our body signals are completely private. Others may not know that we are hungry, or that we want to go to the toilet, or that we are feeling slightly uneasy. Whether visible or invisible, body signals are precious. They keep us safe. They alert us to danger. They tell us to beware, even when our conscious mind has not yet realised that danger is present. This is the great value of body signals.

A mischief of meerkats

Meerkats are beloved and highly expressive characters, full of fun and entertaining antics. No creature on earth does hypervigilance quite as well as a meerkat! For these reasons meerkats scampered and tumbled their way onto our *Body Signals* cards.

Because the cards depict meerkat characters of varying ages and indeterminate gender (and not human characters with particular skin colour, gender and other identifying characteristics) people from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds and ages may be able to relate to the illustrations.



On each card you will find one or two words in English that can be used to describe the body signal depicted. These words are not necessarily the 'right' words or the only words for that particular body signal. Users are free to interpret and name the body signals in their own way, or in whatever language is most comfortable for them. We recommend having conversations about other possible words to describe the body signal as this helps the person build their vocabulary for describing what they are experiencing.

And for those who love words, there are a few possible collective nouns for describing a group of meerkats. They can be called a 'clan', a 'gang', a 'mob' or a 'manner' of meerkats. But by far our favourite and the winner is: a 'mischief' of meerkats.

What could you call a collection of body signals? A trampoline of body signals? A tremble of body signals? A transmission of body signals?

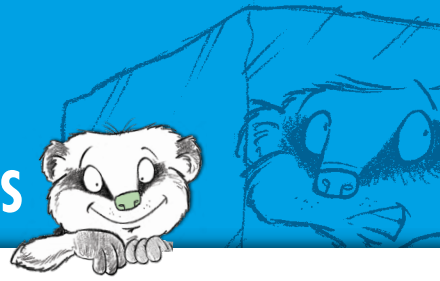
Whatever you call them, learning to notice, name and interpret the meaning of body signals opens up a treasure-trove of life skills for everyone—whether it is pre-schoolers transitioning to big school, young people building identity, or adults facing the inevitable challenges of life.

Teachers, family workers, youth workers, counsellors, chaplains, foster carers, parents and anyone who works with others: we hope you find *Body Signals*® a useful and versatile tool for developing greater understanding about who we are as humans and how to tune into this extraordinarily sensitive instrument we inhabit—our very own body.



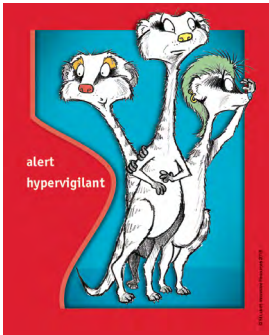
'Whether visible or invisible, body signals are precious. They keep us safe. They alert us to danger. They tell us to beware, even when our conscious mind has not yet realised that danger is present.'

THE COMPLETE SET OF CARDS

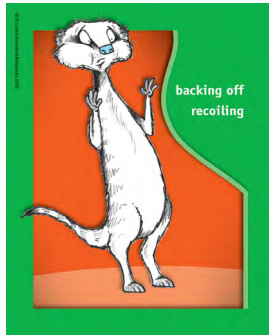


Here are thumbnail images of all 40 cards in the *Body Signals*® set. On each card you will find one, or sometimes two, words to describe the primary body signal depicted.

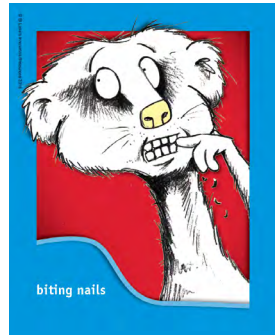
Other body signals can be identified in each card and other possible words used. By inviting people using the cards to identify a range of possible words, you support them to build a rich vocabulary for describing body signals.



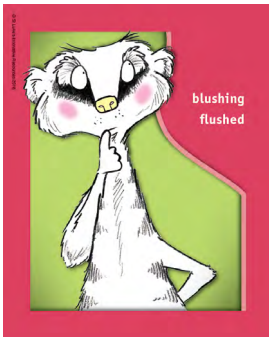
Alert, hypervigilant



Backing off, recoiling



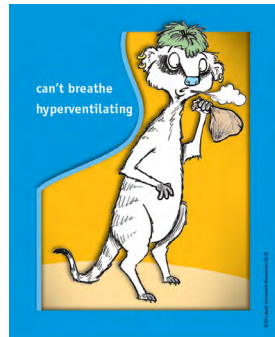
Biting nails



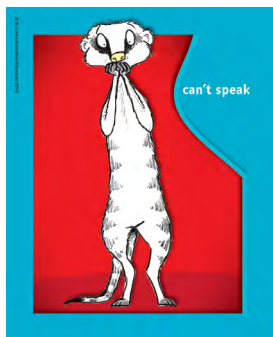
Blushing, flushed



Butterflies



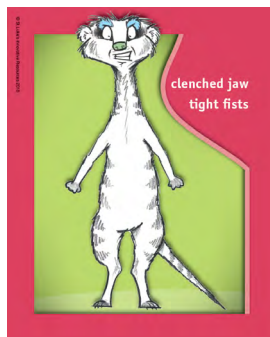
Can't breathe, hyperventilating



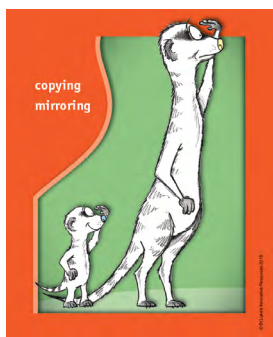
Can't speak



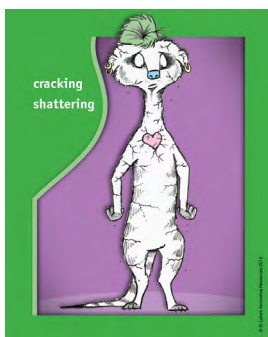
Choking, tight throat



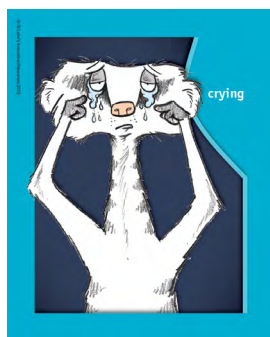
Clenched jaw, tight fists



Copying, mirroring



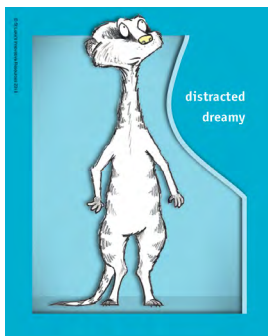
Cracking, shattering



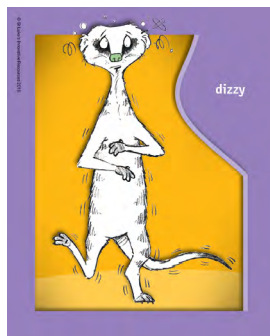
Crying



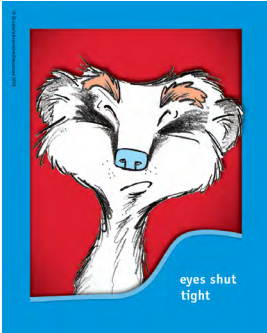
Curling up, foetal position



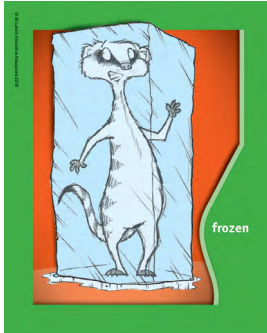
Distracted, dreamy



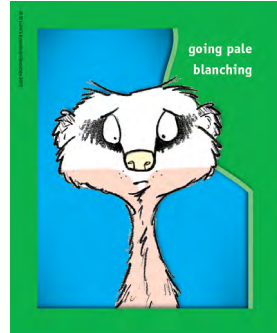
Dizzy



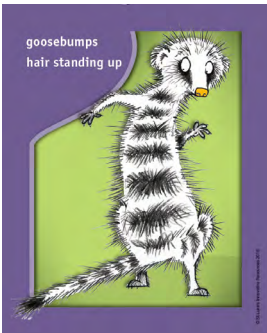
Eyes shut tight



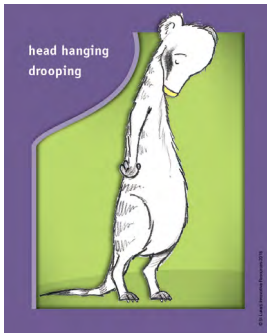
Frozen



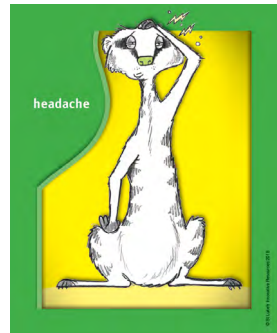
Going pale, blanching



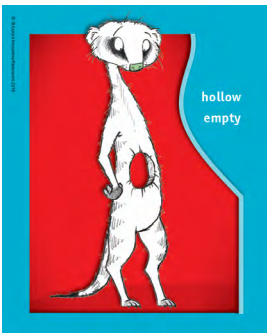
Goosebumps, hair standing up



Head hanging, drooping



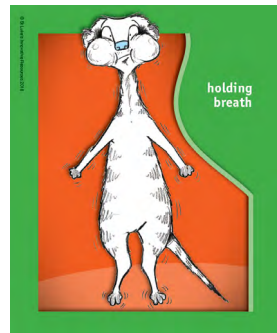
Headache



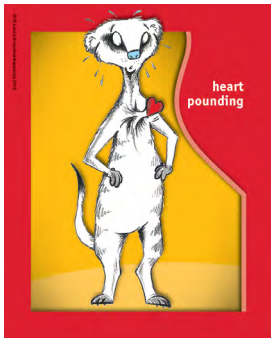
Hollow, empty



Hiding



Holding breath



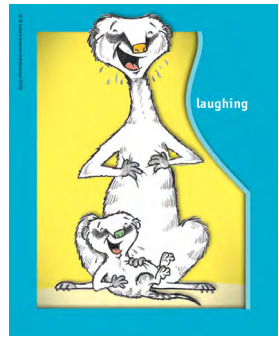
heart
pounding

Heart pounding



itching
scratching

Itching, scratching



laughing

Laughing



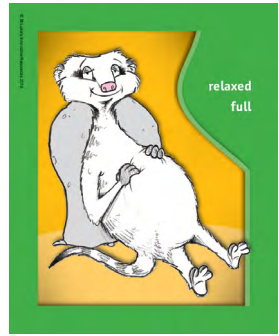
open

Open



raised
shoulders
hunched

Raised shoulders, hunched



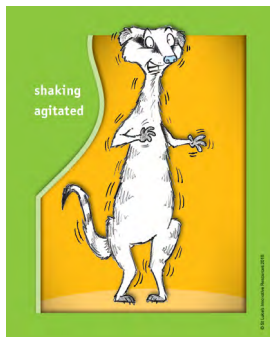
relaxed
full

Relaxed, full



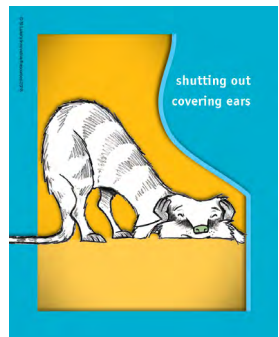
running away
fleeing

Running away, fleeing



shaking
agitated

Shaking, trembling

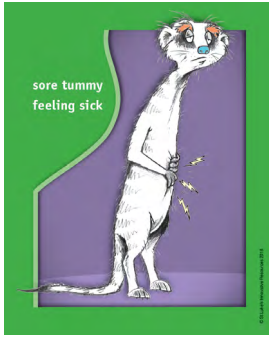


shutting out
covering ears

Shutting out, covering ears



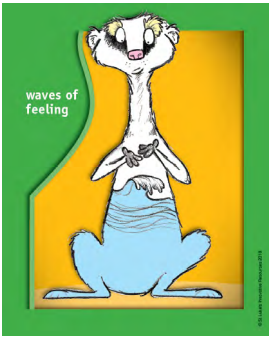
Smiling



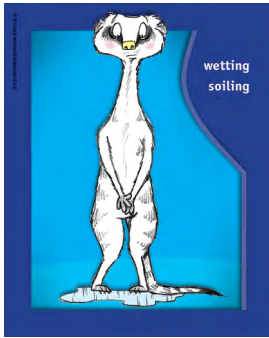
Sore tummy, feeling sick



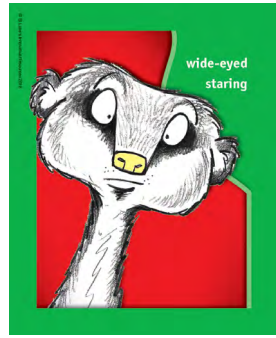
Sweating



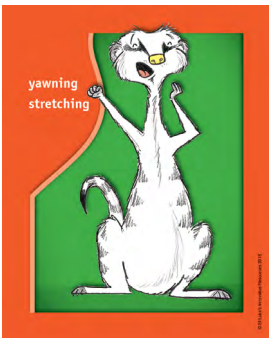
Waves of feeling



Wetting, soiling



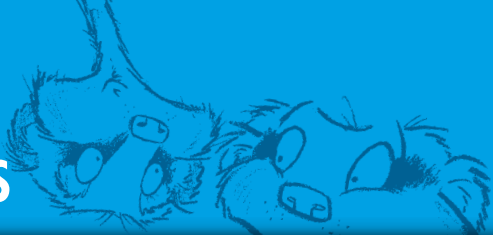
Wide-eyed, staring



Yawning, stretching



CREATING SAFE SPACES



As many facilitators know, simple visual tools can be surprisingly powerful, especially when they are designed to open up reflection and conversation about our personal experiences. Vulnerabilities can surface when talking about feelings, especially if the person has experienced trauma or is going through a significant life event. Memories, thoughts and images can arise—sometimes bringing joy and laughter with them—but equally, they can evoke painful and challenging feelings.

Of course, the sensitivity and skill of the facilitator come into play when introducing any tool or activity. Before you begin, please consider a range of factors, such as:

- *Your own reaction to the cards:* Try using the cards yourself first. What did you notice? What worked? What was challenging?
- *Your knowledge of the cards:* Are all the cards appropriate? Are there any that you may want to leave out? What activities are you planning and will any additional materials be needed?
- *Your knowledge of those using the cards:* Consider literacy levels and cultural background. Is the activity mentally, emotionally, developmentally and culturally appropriate?
- *Timing and pacing:* Is it the right time and place for using this card set? Is there enough time for the activities to take place without rushing? How will you plan a mix of activities?
- *The safety of the setting—especially in groups:* Is there likely to be respect in the group? How will people's confidentiality, privacy and dignity be respected? How will people be supported if the cards elicit strong emotions?

- *Being inclusive:* How will you ensure that everyone gets a turn and that quiet voices can be heard?
- *Opting out:* How will people be given the option to 'pass', if they wish to?
- *Plan B:* Sometimes an activity simply doesn't work. Be prepared to adjust it or abandon it altogether and go to Plan B.
- *Following up:* Is any follow up or feedback needed after the session? Does anyone's response to the cards indicate they may be unsafe or need some further help or support?



GETTING STARTED



An endless variety of activities and conversations can be built around these cards (see the next section for lots of ideas). However, most activities will arise out of two broad methods for getting the cards into the hands of participants: ‘Deliberate Selection’ and ‘Random Choice’.

Deliberate Selection

This method involves spreading the cards out on a table or other surface and inviting participants to look them over and make a selection based on a question or other prompt. It might be as simple as, ‘Pick a card that represents something you are feeling in your body today.’ Some activities may involve picking more than one card—or even a series of cards.

Spreading the cards out on the floor can also be lots of fun. Children or adults can get a bird’s eye view of the cards, and they can walk around them or follow a line (or meandering path) of cards as they look over them.

Activities that involve movement can open up different pathways to learning, particularly for those who favour a kinesthetic learning style.

The cards can also be displayed on a wall or window.

Random Choice

Activities using random selection often bring a great sense of fun into the room. It is amazing how meaningful random selections can be for people. Time and again people see synchronicity and significance in ‘their’ cards. Often an element of whimsy, playfulness and serendipity enters the conversation with random selection—kids and adults alike love to play games and great learning can happen when people have fun. Let your imagination come into play!

Here are some fun-filled possibilities for random selection games:

- Shuffle and deal one, or several, cards to each participant (or use two packs and create a game of 'Snap').
- Place all the cards in a bag or container and invite participants to select one from the 'lucky dip'.
- Place one card randomly on each person's seat (you can even play musical chairs).
- Form pairs. Each participant randomly selects a card for their partner.
- Create a 'treasure hunt' where the cards are hidden and each person takes a turn to find a card. If you wish, you can play games of 'hot and cold' where you say 'hotter' or 'colder' as the person moves closer or further away from the hiding place of the card.
- Randomly deal each person one card and play 'charades' where each person acts out the body signal depicted on their card and the others have to guess which one it is.
- Each person holds a card behind their back. They form a pair with another person and the two swap their cards. The facilitator builds activities and questions until it is time to swap randomly with another person, and the activities begin again.



'Let your imagination come into play. Kids and adults alike love to play games and great learning can happen when people have fun.'

IDEAS FOR USING THE CARDS



Whether you use deliberate selection or random choice for getting the activity started, in this section you will find lots more ideas for using the cards. The following activities can be adapted to suit children, young people or adults ... and to suit the style of the facilitator. As you shape and change these activities, take into account the specific needs of your clients, students, teams, groups or individuals.

When using the cards for the first time, people sometimes say they initially found it hard to think of activities, but as soon as they got started with one activity, lots more ideas spontaneously occurred to them. We hope that the endearing antics of these marvellous meerkats will spark your imagination.

Here are some ideas for creating dynamic conversations and opportunities for reflection with children or adults:

Describing body signals

- Can you find one or more cards for body signals you are feeling right now (or have felt sometime recently)?
- Do you feel these body signals often?
- Which ones would you like to feel more often?
- Which ones would you like to feel less often?
- Are the words on the card the ones you would use to describe these body signals?
- What other words could you use to describe these body signals?
- Can you give even more detail about what those body signals feel like to you?
- If you had to make up a name for one of those body signals, what would it be? For example, 'Wormy Wiggles' for a tight tummy.

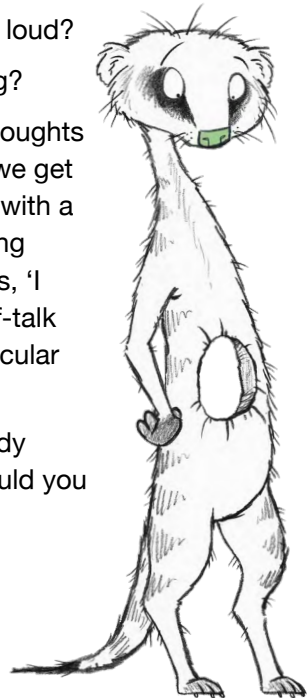
- If the body signal was an animal or a plant, what would be?
For example, goosebumps could be a cactus, a pounding heart could be a bouncing kangaroo.
- Pick cards for body signals you experience often.
- Do you have any strategies for alleviating an unpleasant body signal you experience often?
- Have you ever felt more than one body signal at once?
- Exactly how does the meerkat's whole body play a part in communicating what they are feeling? For example, ask participants to identify not only the physiological body signal that is arising from within the meerkat, but aspects of body language that can accompany a body signal such as the meerkat's expressions, gestures, posture, or other possible discernible reactions such as sighing, blinking, biting lips, agitated fingers, jumpy legs, darting gaze.
- Invite participants to act these out. For example, what does frowning look like when you do it? You can create lots of fun by inviting them to really ham it up!
- Pick a card that shows a body signal you experience fairly often. How else does your body react? For example, you might have raised shoulders when you are tense or feeling unsafe or embarrassed, and you might notice that along with that body signal, your jaw is tight, your fists are clenched and you are frowning and backing away, or hunching forward.
- Do you ever try to hide your body signals? What would other people notice if you are feeling really uncomfortable? Anything?



Interpreting the meaning of body signals

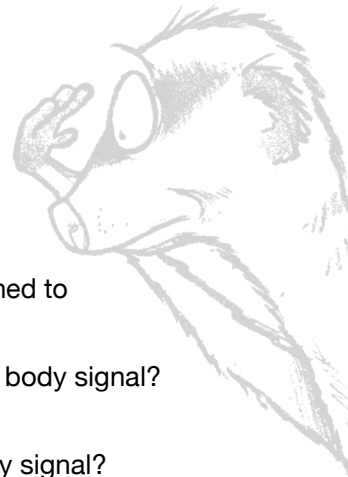
- Can you pick cards that show body signals you find pleasant/unpleasant or comfortable/uncomfortable?
- Why? What exactly is pleasant or unpleasant about them?
- Or are they just sensations in the body—neither uncomfortable nor comfortable?
- Do you think any of the body signals can mean different things at different times? For example, one of the cards shows butterflies in the tummy: this might be experienced as excitement or nausea or fear, depending on the situation. What kinds of body signals do you experience in your tummy?
- Butterflies is a metaphor. There are not actual butterflies with wings in your tummy! Can you find out what metaphors other languages use to describe this body signal or other ones?
- Can you choose cards that might be interpreted in several different ways?
- Have you ever misread a body signal? For example, you thought you were scared but actually you were excited, or you thought you were angry but actually you were hungry.
- Body signals are often accompanied by emotions. Choose cards that show what is happening in your body when you are happy, sad, scared, angry, surprised and disgusted. Or nervous, excited, ashamed and so on.
- What about body signals that tell you something about your physical state such as cold, hot, hungry, tired, needing to go to the toilet?
- Describe each one in great detail. Exactly how does your body tell you that you are cold or hungry and so on?
- How do babies let others know when they are hungry or cold?
- Who helped you learn to interpret body signals as a child?

- Is there one or more that you have trouble recognising these days?
- Sometimes you may not know what emotion you are feeling until you notice the associated body signals. For example, you may not notice that frustration has built up until you feel tightness in your jaw, shoulders, fists or chest and realise that you are angry or disappointed. Which emotions do you find easy to recognise and which ones are more difficult to notice?
- For emotions that are related yet different, are the body signals different? For example, 'feeling lonely' is different from 'solitude or being alone'. How are the body signals different?
- Which body signals help you most to recognise what emotion you are feeling?
- Pick several cards at random. If each meerkat could say something about what they are experiencing, what do you think they would say?
- When you feel like this what do you say out loud?
- What do you think the meerkats are thinking?
- What we say to ourselves inside our own thoughts is sometimes called 'self-talk'. Sometimes we get into a habit of negative self-talk associated with a particular body signal. (For example, blushing might be accompanied by self-talk that says, 'I am always such a hopeless idiot.' What self-talk tends to happen when you experience particular body signals?
- If your self-talk when feeling a particular body signal tends to be self-critical, what else could you say instead that is kinder?



Acting on body signals and staying safe

- Do you think your body signals are useful?
- How do they help you? What do they tell you?
- Do you pay attention to them?
- Can you give an example of when you really listened to a body signal? What happened?
- Can you give an example of when you ignored a body signal? What happened?
- Do you think it is always useful to listen to a body signal?
- Do you always act on your body signals or do you sometimes ignore them?
- How do you know which ones to ignore and which ones to act on?
- How do you decide how to respond to a body signal?
- What if you act on it but it doesn't go away?
- Which cards show that the meerkats feel unsafe or need help? These are sometimes called 'early warning signs'.
- What should the meerkats do to get help or to make sure they are safe?
- How do you know when you feel unsafe? Which body signals tell you that?
- Have you felt any early warning signs recently? Where and when? What did you do?
- Do you tell anyone when your body has an uncomfortable feeling or do you keep it to yourself?
- Who could you tell or who could help you when you feel unsafe?
- Who would be the first person you would feel safe to tell?



- Have you noticed any patterns in your early warning signs—for example, you always get a tight tummy when talking with a particular person, or when you are in a particular place?
- What do you think someone should do when they feel that way?
- What would you say and do if a friend or family member told you they had a particular body signal (or you just noticed) and you think they are feeling unsafe?

(Please see the section on page 29 for more activities relating to safety and trauma.)

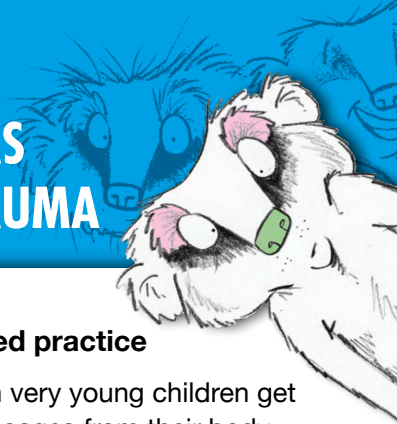
Developing empathy

- Choose a few cards randomly. What do you think is happening for each of the meerkats right now?
- What do you think the meerkat was doing just before this moment?
- What do you think they might do just after?
- What would you do?
- Have you ever felt like this meerkat?
- Has someone you know felt like that too?
- Do you think you can notice body signals in others? How? What do you notice?
- What can you do to help someone who might be feeling what these meerkats are feeling?



The next section features more ideas for using the cards in specialist areas, including safety and trauma, anxiety and transition, storytelling and journalling.

IDEAS FOR SPECIALIST AREAS OF FOCUS: SAFETY AND TRAUMA



Protective behaviour and trauma-informed practice

Body Signals® cards can be used to help even very young children get in touch with their 'Early Warning Signs'—messages from their body that they are feeling unsafe. This has particular relevance for protective behaviours and trauma-informed practice.

At the heart of such conversations is not only learning to recognise body signals, but also learning what action to take. Simple messages like 'tell a trusted adult' (such as a teacher, grandparent or school counsellor) can be powerful in helping children develop protective behaviours. Consider combining *Body Signals*® with our [Tell A Trusted Adult](#) cards, when having conversations about safety.

Here are some ideas:

- Let children know that they have a right to be safe and their body can help them know when they are safe or unsafe. Their body is very clever and is sending them important messages all the time. They just need to understand what their body is saying. What are different parts of your body saying?
- Pick out cards that represent body signals associated with feeling safe and feeling unsafe: The latter could include butterflies or pains in the tummy, tension in the body such as raised shoulders or tight fists, headache, perspiring, trembling or beating heart.
- Discuss each one in detail with children.
- When their tummy feels like this, what is it saying—what are some different things your tummy might say?
- Maybe their shoulders or legs or heart have something to say as well? What do they say about feeling safe or unsafe, worried or relaxed?

- Invite children to talk about a time when they felt scared or unsafe and pick out cards that show how they felt. Let them know everyone feels scared sometimes but everyone has the right to feel safe. And sometimes we need help to feel that way. It is very good to know when to ask for help, how to ask for help and who to ask.
- Play mirroring or copying games such as ‘Simon Says’ or ‘Charades’ where children copy that body signal. Encourage them to ham it up and exaggerate! But also let them know it can be a quiet little voice your body has at times. But it’s still important to listen to your body even when it is ‘talking’ to you quietly.
- Draw outlines of the body and ask children to draw different body signals on the outline to show where they feel them in their body. For example, tight throat, or beating heart, or wobbly tummy.
- Discuss different words that can be used to describe various body signals. There are words on the cards—but what other words might be good for that body signal?
- Ask them to match a body signal with an emotion—for example, tight fists might go with feeling angry (or scared). Smiling might go with feeling happy (or nervous).
- Match some body signals with physical needs rather than an emotional state, for example, a hollow tummy might go with being hungry, sweating might go with being too hot.
- Pick a ‘Card of the Day’ or ‘Card of the Week’. Place it on a box with a slot (like an empty tissue box) and ask children to post their name in the box when they are feeling like that.
- Create several slotted boxes for key ‘Feeling Unsafe and Need Help’ body signals. When they post their names in the box, the teacher knows they need help.

- Sometimes secrets are exciting and wonderful because your body somehow knows that these secrets ‘feel’ good and happy. But sometimes secrets don’t feel good. Someone tells you not to tell anyone about the secret and you don’t feel good about this secret in your body. Your tummy might feel upset or you might have a scared feeling like you are going to get into trouble or be hurt if you tell. Pick meerkats that show how your body feels when you have a good secret.
- Pick meerkats that show how your body feels when you have a secret that doesn’t feel good, or when you are scared or worried or uncomfortable.
- Why is it important to tell someone straight away when you have a secret that feels bad, uncomfortable or scary?
- Who could you tell if you had a secret that feels bad or uncomfortable or scary? Draw a circle of all the people you could tell. Put a tick beside the person you would tell first. Who would you tell next if that person is not available or doesn’t help you straight away?
- Which cards show how someone’s body can react when trauma is experienced?
- Which cards show how someone’s body can react early in a trauma situation and which ones show reactions that can happen later?
- What are some things that you can do to help yourself and to get help from others?



De-escalating body signals in times of anxiety and transition

Times of change or transition—or ‘liminal’ times as they are sometimes called, can be stressful—whether the change is wanted or not.

For young children such times include beginning kindergarten or transition to ‘big school’. For a young person it may be social situations or sitting exams. For adults it may be starting a new job, the birth of a baby, or retiring.

While it is always important to notice and respect body signals, we can also become more and more skilful in learning how to soothe them when they are being triggered out of past trauma or habit, but no threat is actually present now.

Consulting psychologist, clinical nutritionist and author of *Anxiety Solutions*, Selina Byrne (M.A.P.S) says:

Like a faulty alarm system on a car, sometimes our brain pushes the panic button when there is no real danger. When the car alarm goes off randomly, it’s important to remain calm, assess that there is no actual threat, and do what we need to do to stop the alarm sound. If you feel your brain hitting the panic button and yet you know that there is no real danger, use the same process. Remain calm. Remind yourself that there is no actual threat; it’s just a feeling or thought or both. It’s ok. It passes. Talk to yourself calmly, breathe slowly through your nose, and find a pleasant, distracting activity as soon as you can. Focus on the outside world—for example, things you can see, or count, or list, colors you can name—rather than on the internal state. Remain calm and nonchalant until the wave passes. It will.

Encouraging children, young people and adults to recognise body signals associated with stress and anxiety, and to learn how to soothe them when there is no actual danger present, is an essential part of developing emotional literacy.



Techniques for soothing or de-escalating body signals include:

- Mindfulness. Simply describing the body signal in detail like a curious observer, without judging it as good or bad, is a foundational aspect of mindfulness. This creates the capacity to ‘witness’ what the body is doing, without becoming overwhelmed or overtaken by the body signal or associated thoughts. This attitude of curiosity without judgement helps to unstick the identification with the body signal, and as such is a form of ‘externalisation’.
- Giving a body signal a pet name such as ‘Old Tight Tummy Worry Wort’ can be useful as long as it is very clear that no danger is actually present and that the anxiety is no longer serving a useful or protective function.
- Pay attention also to how we label a body signal. The label we give something can accelerate the sensations. For example, a body signal associated with nerves before a performance could be ‘reframed’ as energy moving in the body gearing us up to deliver a peak effort rather than as unwanted nerves.
- Distraction is another time-honoured method for soothing body signals associated with our brain’s threat response. Counting colours, listing things, going through the alphabet, singing songs, reciting a poem are all effective distraction techniques to allow the body’s threat response chemicals to slowly dissipate. The body signals soothe as this happens—the racing heart beat slows, the breathing rate slows as well.
- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) techniques can also be very effective in soothing thoughts and de-escalating body signals. These include things like affirmations and repeating phrases that challenge the thoughts that arise in our mind when certain body signals are taking place.

- Physical movements such as tapping, jumping up and down, running, swimming, dancing also alter our brain chemistry and allow those threat systems to ‘stand down’.
- Art, craft, music, gardening, woodwork, and so on are all good ways to allow the body’s stress signals to subside.

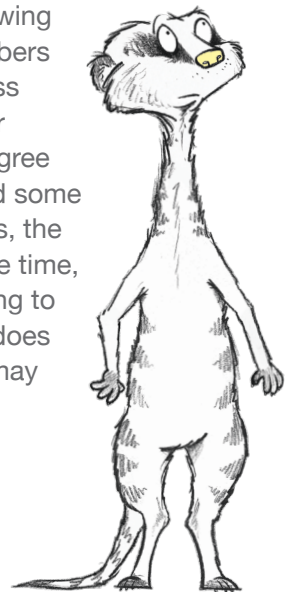
For those who are particularly interested in a range of creative activities for soothing body signals associated with anxiety, please see [Anxiety Solutions for Kids](#) and [Anxiety Solutions](#)—both written by Selina Byrne and published by Innovative Resources. These card sets can be used in conjunction with *Body Signals*®:

- Invite people to pick cards for body signals that may be bothering them unnecessarily. Then ask them to pick different activities from the *Anxiety Solutions* card sets, and give them a ‘calm rating’ from one to ten according to how well the activity helps to release or calm the body signal.

The healing power of storytelling and journalling

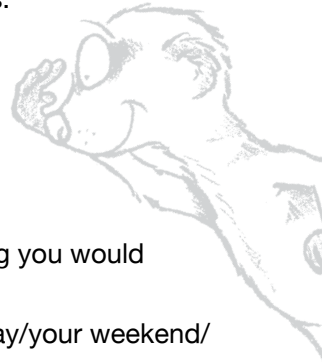
In a blog called ‘The Empowerment Diary’ posted on July 10, 2017 by Diana Raab, she writes:

During my doctoral research, I read a great deal about the powerful effect of writing on healing, especially following trauma. It’s obvious that the conscious mind remembers the details of events, but what is more subtle and less talked about is what the body actually remembers or stores from our life experiences. Most researchers agree that there is a significant mind-body connection, and some people go so far as to say that what the mind forgets, the body remembers. The fact is, the body speaks all the time, but we might not always hear its messages...Learning to listen to one’s body takes practice. The body really does have a voice, but it just speaks a language that we may not be used to hearing.



Journal writing and storytelling can be powerful ways to tune into the body's messages:

- Pick one or more cards either deliberately or randomly and write or tell a story about a time when you experienced this.
- What were you doing at the time?
- Who else was there?
- What happened?
- Did other people know how you were feeling?
- What did you do in the end?
- If you could change the story now, is there anything you would do differently?
- Choose several cards to talk or write about your day/your weekend/your holiday.
- Pick several cards to represent various characters (could be fictional characters or people you know). Tell or write a story using these cards.
- Write a character profile for these characters. What would you name each of these characters? What are their personality traits? What are their favourite sayings, their habitual thought patterns? What is most important or least important to each one? Does each one have a defining moment that has shaped 'their story'?
- Which of these characters is dominant? Which is quiet? Is any one of these characters more important to you than another? Or do they all play an equal part in making up your whole story?
- Pick two cards that seem to be opposites, for example a relaxed meerkat and an agitated one. What do you think these two meerkats have to say to each other? Write a dialogue between the two.
- Pick cards for various parts of your body and write what each part may have to say as a message to you.
- What message do you have in return for each of those body parts?



ABOUT THE DEVELOPMENT TEAM



Body Signals® began with a list of over 144 possible body signals. For well over a year, Karen Bedford and Sue King-Smith from Innovative Resources (part of Anglicare Victoria) refined the list in consultation with many other colleagues.

Mat Jones, our in-house artist and graphic designer, presented a range of possible characters and styles. It was a unanimous vote for this marvellous ‘mischief’ of meerkat characters. Mat then brought them to life with a deep bow to the time-honoured and universally-loved style of Dr Seuss.

Karen Bedford was the managing editor at Innovative Resources for many years. Karen has a background in writing for therapeutic purpose, resource creation, education, counselling psychology, coaching and group facilitation. She is the author of a book called, *The Uses of Sadness*.

Sue King-Smith is the current managing editor at Innovative Resources and has a background in online course creation, managing social work services for children and families, writing, lecturing, research and community development.



MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT (IN AUSTRALIA)

Beyondblue

www.beyondblue.org.au

Depression and anxiety information and support service.

1300 22 4636

www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport

Headspace

www.headspace.org.au

National youth mental health foundation
for young Australians.

Lifeline

www.lifeline.org.au

13 11 14

Access to crisis support, suicide prevention
and mental health support services.

mindhealthconnect

www.mindhealthconnect.org.au

Access to mental health care services,
online programs and resources.

BODY SIGNALS[®]

Butterflies in your tummy?

**Tight jaw, beating heart
or goosebumps?**

Our body signals let us know when we're feeling stressed or unsafe, often before our conscious mind has time to think. That's why body signals are sometimes called 'early warning signs', and they're crucial for staying safe, navigating feelings and recovering from trauma.

This marvellous mob of meerkat characters will delight children, young people and adults alike with their expressions, gestures and antics. No one does hyper-alertness like meerkats, but wait 'til you see them with goosebumps, pounding hearts, knocking knees—and loads of other body signals associated with fight, flight, freeze, flop or be-friend.

'Learning to interpret body signals opens up a treasure-trove of life skills for everyone—whether it is pre-schoolers transitioning to big school, young people building identity, or adults facing the inevitable challenges of life. You've heard of emotional intelligence (EQ), here now is the matching component of body intelligence (BQ).'

**40 laminated cards featuring body signals
and possible words to describe them.**

**Innovative
Resources**

