

“The Hero Within” Lesson

“

I’ve just got so much on my mind, ya know?

– Miles Morales / Spider-Man™

”

CREATIVE ACTIVITY – STORYBOARD

Lesson Intention:

Everyone experiences difficult feelings in life – such as sadness, fear, loneliness, or anger. These emotions may feel intense, but they are not a sign that there is something wrong with us – this is a part of what it means to be human. When we experience difficult feelings, the first instinct for many of us can be to try to ignore them, but this can actually make our emotions grow and become larger and stronger. In “The Spider Within,” Miles is struggling with overwhelming feelings of anxiety. When his dad asks him how he is doing, he responds with a casual “Yeah, I’m good.” and goes to his room, trying to push his emotions away. By ignoring his feelings, they intensify – represented as a shadowy figure and then an enormous spider. We all have a ‘spider within’ – our uncomfortable feelings that grow larger when unexpressed. In this lesson, students will have the opportunity to rethink the way a hero is usually described – as someone who is invincible and never shows emotions. After watching Miles’ story, they will see that vulnerability is actually our superpower.

Students will learn several methods they can use to acknowledge and express their uncomfortable feelings:

- reaching out to a trusted adult to share what they are experiencing
- using drawing and writing as a form of expression
- sharing their stories with each other, helping them to know they are not alone when they feel overwhelmed

When discussing mental health, an emphasis is often placed on the importance of checking in on other people to see if they need support. However, there is an equally crucial step we need to take – we must teach young people how to reach out when they are struggling themselves. With Miles as their example, students will learn how to reach out to a trusted adult and begin the conversation by saying, “Hey, you got a minute?”

Learning Goals:

- Understand that difficult emotions and feelings are a part of life, and pretending that everything is okay can cause the emotions to grow and become more intense.
- Recognize that reaching out to a trusted adult can make challenging emotions or a difficult experience feel more manageable.
- Appreciate the role that sharing your story through writing and drawing can play in helping to work through difficult emotions.

Materials for Lesson:

- Featured Videos
- Lesson PowerPoint
- Downloadable Lesson Plan (PDF)
- Storyboard Template Handout
- Student Examples of Storyboards

In Preparation for Lesson:

Prior to teaching this lesson, watch “The Spider Within – A Spider-Verse Story” short film, along with the interview of Kevin Love and director Jarelle Dampier discussing their mental health.

Think of an experience from your own life that was challenging and would be age-appropriate to share with your students. If you would like, create your own storyboard to show students.

Print out the storyboard template handout for each student.

Give students something to write and draw with (pens, pencils, colored pencils, markers, etc.).

Featured Videos:

1. “The Spider Within – A Spider-Verse Story” short film. Miles Morales a.k.a. Spider-Man experiences a panic attack and learns the importance of sharing his feelings with a trusted adult when he gets overwhelmed.
2. Interview with Kevin Love and “The Spider Within” director Jarelle Dampier discussing their experiences with panic attacks and feelings of anxiety.

Lesson Plan:

Display the ‘welcome slide’ from the PowerPoint as you begin.

**Slide 1*

The text within quotation marks throughout the lesson are examples of what you could say. We know you are the expert on your classroom community, and we encourage you to customize this language for your students.

Launching the Lesson:

*Slide 2

Describe the importance of noticing how you are feeling and expressing those emotions, rather than ignoring them or pushing them away.

Example of What You Could Say:

“Today, we are going to talk about something that isn’t part of the usual school day. This is information that can help you for the rest of your life whenever you experience something that feels really tough. This happens to all of us. We lose people we love, we fail at something we are trying to accomplish, or we experience anxiety or depression that can feel unbearable. Today, I want to talk about what to do when you’re feeling overwhelmed by these experiences. I have certainly felt all of these things. And oftentimes, our first instinct is to push these feelings down and pretend they’re not happening, which may actually cause them to grow and feel worse. We are going to watch a short film that features one of the most well known characters in the world, who you might have thought you didn’t have much in common with. This film shows that *everyone* is going through something.”

Notes on What You Plan to Say:

Play “The Spider Within – A Spider-Verse Story” Short Film:

The film illustrates how important it is to express your emotions rather than trying to push them away and the importance of reaching out to a trusted adult if you need support.

Reflect on “The Spider Within – A Spider-Verse Story” and Introduce the Interview of Kevin and Jarelle:

After playing the film, discuss how the message around mental health has often been focused on checking in with people when you see *they* need help, but the Spider-Man film illustrates that reaching out for yourself when *you* need help is equally important.

Connect Miles' experience with an experience from your own life. Remember to share something age appropriate for your students. It is also important to be intentional about the topic you choose. For more guidance on sharing your story, consult Dr. Ellie Foster's article in the supplemental links section of this lesson.

Introduce the mental health conversation between Kevin Love and Jarelle Dampier.

Example of What You Could Say:

"In this film, Miles decided to open up and tell his dad how he was *really* feeling, taking a brave step to reach out for support when he felt overwhelmed. You can see the sense of relief he has once he says, "Hey, you got a minute?" and starts sharing. When we talk about mental health, often the message is conveyed to us that we should check in on our friends to see if they are okay – which is important, of course – but the film we just watched also emphasizes how important it is to advocate for *yourself* when you need support. And all it took to start this conversation and reach out for help was just a few words. Those few words take courage to say out loud, but the relief that you can feel afterwards will be worth it.

While you were watching this film, did it remind you of a time in your own life when you felt like Miles – overwhelmed by intense feelings but trying to ignore them? I know it reminded me of a few times in my life, for example, (*the educator shares an age-appropriate example of a challenging time when they felt strong emotions: the loss of someone they love, feeling overwhelmed with work, a medical scare, etc.*).

We are about to watch a conversation between the director of this film, Jarelle Dampier, and Kevin Love – an NBA basketball player. They both have experiences of pushing away their emotions until they had panic attacks, and they both learned the importance of finding methods for coping and reaching out."

Notes on What You Plan to Say:

Play the Interview of Kevin Love and Jarelle Dampier:

Kevin Love and Jarelle Dampier discuss their experiences with panic attacks and feelings of anxiety. They share methods that they have learned to express their emotions and reach out for support.

Reflect on the Interview and Introduce the Creative Activity:

Connect the video with the social emotional learning goals of this lesson and the creative activity. Select one or two student examples that you know will resonate with your students.

Example of What You Could Say:

"I wonder if, as you listened to Kevin and Jarelle, you connected with anything that you heard them share. Does anyone want to share their thoughts as they listened to Kevin and Jarelle discuss mental health? (*Invite students to share in a brief discussion.*)

Whether it's opening up and reaching out to a trusted family member or friend, writing about your feelings or experiences, or turning them into art – these are all healthy ways to process your feelings and keep the emotions from getting bottled up and then getting so intense that they become overwhelming or paralyzing.

We are now going to have a chance to express ourselves through drawing and writing. "The Spider Within" filmmakers used storyboards to help tell Miles' story. Take a look at this slide (*Slide 3*) to see what a storyboard looks like – each panel illustrates an important moment in Miles' story.

(*Slide 4*) And here are examples of high school students' storyboards, which illustrate a difficult time in their lives.

Before we begin, (*Slide 5*) think of a time in your life when you experienced difficult emotions that felt overwhelming. Please take two or three minutes to write about the story you want to share."

Students take 2-3 minutes to freewrite about the story that is coming to mind.

"Now, let's try to tell the story of that experience by creating your own storyboard. Don't worry about your drawing ability – just allow yourself to try to tell your story through images and words. Let's take about 15 minutes to work on this." (*Hand out the storyboard template.*)

Notes on What You Plan to Say:

Creative Activity:

*Slide 6

Students spend approximately 15 minutes creating their storyboards.

Lesson Closure:

Invite students to share their storyboards if you feel they can listen to each other's stories with compassion, respect and confidentiality. They could also describe the topic they wrote about instead of sharing their storyboard.

Remember that as the trusted adult leading this activity, it is important to listen with empathy and respond with support.

Example of what you could say:

"Thank you for sharing your story with us. It takes so much courage to open up in that way. Sharing your story helps us to know that we are not alone if we are going through something difficult."

If sharing stories aloud does not fit with the classroom environment, you can invite students to share *how it felt* to do the activity. They could also hand in their storyboards at the end of class, and then you can follow up by writing a kind note on their storyboard or having a one-on-one check-in on another day.

Example of What You Could Say if Students are Invited to Share Aloud:

"I want to invite you to share the storyboards you created. You could describe each of the images, or you could share the topic you wrote about. As we listen to each other's stories, let's listen with compassion, and remember that anything we share with each other in this lesson remains confidential.

I hope your takeaway from today is to remember that feelings can get overwhelming when we try to avoid them or push them down. Whether it's sharing your story with someone you trust or writing and drawing about a difficult experience, finding your own way to express emotions really can help. Today we learned to rethink the way a hero is usually described – as someone who is invincible and never shows emotions. After watching Miles, Kevin, and Jarelle share their stories, I hope you got to experience something that Kevin often says, "Our vulnerability is our superpower."

Example of What You Could Say if Students are Not Sharing their Storyboards Aloud:

“Would anyone like to describe how it felt to do this activity? (*Allow a few moments for students to share their thoughts.*) If you prefer not to share your story with the class, you can leave your storyboards on my desk, and I will write a short response to you.

I hope your takeaway from today is to remember that feelings can get overwhelming when we try to avoid them or push them down. Whether it’s sharing your story with someone you trust or writing and drawing about a difficult experience, finding your own way to express emotions really can help. Today we learned to rethink the way a hero is usually described – as someone who is invincible and never shows emotions. After watching Miles, Kevin and Jarelle share their stories, I hope you got to experience something that Kevin often says, “Our vulnerability is our superpower.”

Notes on What You Plan to Say:**Resources:**

**Slide 7*

Display Resource Page for Additional Support. Encourage students to reach out for help if needed.

Example of What You Could Say:

“Remember that the purpose of this lesson is to recognize that it is okay to reach out for help when you need it. If you or someone you know is in crisis or in need of immediate support, call 988 or text HOME to 741741. Here are some additional resources that you can use.”

Supplemental Information:

1. Kevin Love and Jarelle Dampier discussed their experience with anxiety and panic attacks, and an abbreviated version of this conversation is included in the lesson plan. For educators or students who want to watch the full interview, they can access it [here](#).
2. [In this article](#) in *The Wrap*, director Jarelle Dampier speaks about making his short film, which finds Miles tackling anxiety and being open and vulnerable about his own mental health.
3. Kevin Love shares his message and explains why he was inspired to create The Kevin Love Fund in his [ESPY Award Video](#).
4. [This video](#) describes the process of making “The Spider Within” and also describes Sony Pictures Animation and Sony Pictures Imageworks joint mentorship program Leading and Empowering New Storytellers (LENS) that aims to develop talents from under-represented groups – four of whom were part of creating “The Spider Within.”
5. This lesson illustrated the way sharing our stories can take away the stigma that still surrounds vulnerability and emotions. In 2018, Kevin shared his own story of a panic attack he experienced during a nationally televised basketball game. Here is a copy of his letter “[Everyone is Going Through Something](#)” in The Players Tribune.
6. [This article](#) describes the plot of “The Spider Within” where protagonist Miles Morales suffers from an anxiety attack as he feels overwhelmed by school work, exams and relationships.
7. To learn more about how to share the story of a challenging experience with students, consult “[Your Story Belongs Here](#)” by Dr. Ellie Foster in [Developing Trauma-Informed Teachers: Creating Classrooms that Foster Equity, Resiliency, and Asset-Based Approaches](#). The article offers a brief introduction to research on the impact of vulnerability in the classroom.
8. If your students would like additional support to help them expand their mental health toolkit, scientific advisors for the Kevin Love Fund have created [this list of resources](#).