

# An Unusual Situation Guidebook

An Instructors Manual for An Unusual  
Situation Workbook





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*Text by Andrew O'Meara*  
*Illustrations by David Folk*  
*Design by Andrew O'Meara*



# Types of Workbook Activities

*Keep an eye out for these color-coded indicators which let you know the type of activity on each page*

## Creative Expression

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### Creative Expression

Children often have trouble describing their emotions using words. However, children are well versed in play and creative arts such as drawing pictures or writing out their feelings. Play and creative expression are ways that children can work through their emotions and situations that are new to them. The drawing and writing activity pages in the Workbook offer children space to help process their own distressing situation. Previous creative expression programs delivered to refugee and immigrant children have shown a reduction in posttraumatic, depressive, and anxiety symptoms when compared to those who did not receive a creative expression program (Rousseau et al., 2005; Sullivan & Simonson, 2016)

## Emotion Identification

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### Emotion Identification

Depending on a child's age and level of development, they may also have difficulty in identifying the emotions that they are experiencing. Children often do not yet have the vocabulary needed to accurately identify one emotion from another, especially when those emotions are overwhelming. Helping a child to

parse out which emotions they are feeling can give the child words to use to express their emotions, as well as helping adults to better know and address their emotional needs more accurately. By helping children to better understand and communicate their emotions and emotional needs, we can better assist them in managing their emotions and in utilizing effective coping strategies for dealing with their identified emotions.

## Coping Strategies

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### Coping Strategies

Now that we have identified which emotions the child is feeling and how those emotions may be affecting them, we want to start teaching them some strategies to better manage their own emotions. Routine is especially helpful in building coping strategies with children. Picking one or several strategies that children are going to engage in repeatedly will have a larger impact than picking strategies that will be engaged in infrequently. Positive coping strategies are those activities that make us both feel better and function better. For example, while staying up all night reading comic books may make a child temporarily feel better by distracting them from their difficulty sleeping, it will negatively impact their functioning the next day as they will be over tired.

# Activities & Processing Guide

## Creative Expression

**Page 1** encourages children to draw or write about a situation in their own lives which mirrors the situation that Milo goes through in An Unusual Situation. This activity allows children to express themselves with their own understanding of the event, what they recall, and what they believe to be true about the event. These types of activities allow children to have the freedom to express themselves without too much restriction from instructions. This activity also helps to inform us about what a child might have been exposed to during the traumatic event, and what they haven't been exposed to. This information can help us to better meet that child's needs.

Instruct youth who are completing this activity to use their imagination and creatively express their thoughts or feelings about the unusual situation that they have been through. This can include writing a story or using words to form a collage, or by using pictures or images to represent the elements of their unusual situation that they can remember. Remind the children that this activity does not need to result with a comprehensive story or even make cohesive sense, but that this activity is about expressing what they want to express about their situation.

Like Milo, we all have been through an unusual situation that confused us. Maybe you could draw or write about something unusual, confusing, or difficult that happened in your life.



## Creative Expression

One way to interact with children who are completing this activity is to ask them to explain to you what they have drawn. You can also ask them about the importance of each thing that they drew, and how each thing drawn relates to one another.

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In a group setting, encourage children to share about the situation they wrote or drew if they feel comfortable sharing. Never mandate that children must share with the group, and allow them to decide if they share and what they are willing to share. Look for common themes and emotions that are present in each situation. Even among children who have been through the same event, they will often process the event very differently and have parts of the event that are more salient in their memory than for others.

**Page 2** encourages children to draw or write about people in their lives that can help them through the difficult time that they are facing. As children are still learning how to manage their own feelings and regulate their emotions, they often rely on trusted adults to help them navigate their feelings. One of the biggest factors contributing toward healing after traumatic events is social support, and for children this is often social support with parents or other trusted adults in their lives.

In most cases, a child's parents are their closest and most trusted adults. However, in cases where a child has been separated from their parents or is being cared for by another adult, this other caregiver may take on the role of the trusted adult. Some situations may leave a child with a caregiver who is not their identified trusted adult. If this is the case, then it is even more important that the child identify someone in their lives outside of the household that can be their trusted adult.

Instruct youth who are completing this activity to think about the adults in their lives that they have talked to when they needed help figuring something out in the past. Often times children may have not thought about which adults they trust enough to disclose their struggles to. In the case where a child cannot easily identify a trusted adult in their life, ask them to write or draw things that can help them to identify a trusted adult in the future.



While Milo had his sister and parents to help him through the unusual situation, there are also other people in our lives who can help us through these difficult times. Use the space below to draw or write about the people in your life who can help you through hard times.

### Creative Expression



One way to interact with children who are completing this activity is to ask them who they identified as being a trusted adult, and what about that person makes the child feel like they can trust them. Trusted adults may often be family members, but can also include neighbors, parents of the child's friends, teachers, mentors, religious personnel, coaches, or other trusted adults in the community.

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In a group setting, encourage children to share who the people are in their lives who help them through hard times. Ask for children to provide some details on how that person has helped them through hard times before. This allows children to learn about other strategies that adults can use with them, and can help broaden their understanding of who is available to offer support.

**Pages 3 and 4** offer some common emotions that children may experience after a disrupting incident. Page 3 encourage children to go through the included emotions and select which ones they identified Milo experiencing in An Unusual Situation. This can help children to become familiar with identifying emotions that they are seeing in others, as well as gives us information about any difficulties that the child has in identifying emotions. This also helps children begin to link the behaviors that Milo is displaying (facial expressions, acting out, etc.) to the feelings that Milo is having.

Children are then asked to select some emotions that they have recently felt on page 4. The strong feelings that are experienced after a distressing situation can be confusing and isolating even for adults. Therefore, it is especially important to normalize feelings that children may be experiencing.

Instruct youth who are completing this activity to identify some emotions that they have felt since the distressing situation began. Ask children to explain how they know when they are feeling certain emotions, and if there are behaviors that tend to go along with that feeling for them. This emotion identification will be the basis for a lot of the work in later pages of the Workbook

Milo felt a lot of different emotions in the book because of his unusual situation. You might have noticed some of these different emotions that Milo was having. Take a marker or colored pencil and circle some emotions that you noticed Milo experienced in the story.



Milo's Tip: if you don't understand an emotion, you can ask an adult to help explain it to you!



When we have been through something like Milo's situation, we can experience a lot of different emotions too. This is normal, and is part of what makes us human. Take a marker or colored pencil in a different color than before, and circle some emotions that you have been feeling lately.



## Emotion Identification

Tip: especially for younger children, you may have to help explain each emotion to them to help them select the ones that best apply.

Additional activities can be completed with these pages, including having children identify times when they felt each listed emotion. Encourage children to fill in some emotions that they have experienced which are not listed here.

In a group setting, children can share why they identified that emotion and what identifying with that emotion means for them. This can include how they know when they are experiencing this emotion, such as behaviors that happen when they are feeling certain emotions.

**Page 5** asks children to use the emotions that they identified on pages 3 and 4 and compare them to see which emotions they share with Milo, and which emotions they do not share with Milo. Children will each have different individual reactions to a distressing event, even if they lived through the same event and had similar experiences as one another. In An Unusual Situation, Milo experiences several different reactions that are common to see amongst children, including becoming angry, having stomach pain, and trouble sleeping. It is important that children feel that their emotions and feelings are valid and do not make them “weird” for having different emotions than others around them, while also showing that often emotions are shared with others and that these shared emotions can connect them to others who are having similar feelings.

Instruct youth who are completing this activity to use the emotions they previously identified, and to bring in any other emotions that they are having that are not listed. These lists can include written emotions, or can accommodate pictures (i.e., smiley faces) depending on the youth’s developmental level. For younger children, pictures may be an easier way to navigate the emotions that are shared and not. If children are able to, identifying how youth express these emotions compared to Milo can also be helpful

You might have noticed that you circled some of the same emotions as Milo, while some emotions may be different. Don't be surprised, as we can all feel similar emotions after going through similar experiences.

## Emotion Identification

Use the space below to list some emotions that you share with Milo, and some emotions that you are having that Milo did not.

Emotions I share with  
Milo

Emotions that are different  
from Milo's



This activity can be expanded upon by asking youth to consider how they express these emotions in their behaviors, and how that compares to how Milo deals with his emotions ("When you are feeling \_\_\_\_, do you handle it the same way as Milo?")

In a group setting, make sure to highlight any emotions that members are having that are not shared by other group members. We want to both create connection between those who are experiencing similar emotions, while also not alienating those who are experiencing different emotions. Make sure to give group members with different emotions enough time to discuss their emotions and how they are dealing with them. Groups can also facilitate discussions about how we deal with these emotions, and the behaviors that can result from certain emotions.

**Page 6** encourages children to consider how their emotions might have changed over time, such as since their difficult situation began. Often in the immediate aftermath of an overwhelming event, children especially can find it difficult to cope with the strong emotions that they may be having. However, with time, these strong emotions tend to fade and can even begin to change. This activity encourages children to look back on their emotions in retrospect and explore how they may have noticed them changing.

Instruct youth who are completing this activity to use their creative abilities to think about the feelings that they have been having recently. Encourage children to use the identified emotions from previous activities and think about how those feelings have changed since they started having them. Have these youth draw or write about these emotions and how they have changed with time. Some feelings may have been very big right when the situation started, but have gotten easier to deal with over time, while some feelings might have not been around when the situation began but have come up in the time since.

Sometimes, our feelings can change over time. When something difficult is happening, we might have certain feelings in the moment. But once some time has passed and we can think about it later on, we might feel differently about it.

Have you felt some emotions that have changed since your difficult situation started? Use the space below to draw or write about these emotions and how they have changed.

## Creative Expression

Additional activities for this page can include exploration of how a child's thoughts may have changed, in addition to their emotions. This may be especially helpful for older children and adolescents who have the ability to think about their thinking.



In a group setting, encourage children to share some of the emotions that they identified as having soon after a distressing situation and how they changed in the days and weeks following. Keep an eye out for common themes that emerge and encourage children to think about how their emotional journey can be similar to others. This can also serve to highlight the emotions that are unique to them and their pathway toward healing. Reference back to page 5 about emotions that the children do and don't share with Milo. Are these emotions similar to the emotions that their peers shared?

**Page 7** digs a little deeper from identifying emotions by asking children to separate the emotions that they previously identified into ones that they like to feel, and emotions that they do not like to feel. We do want to make sure that we emphasize that all emotions are okay to feel, and that children should not feel bad about themselves for simply having a particular emotion. What we do want to do is make sure that children are able to identify how they feel about their emotions. Certain emotions may make children feel good, such as being happy or excited, while others may make them feel badly such as being scared or angry. By having children identify which emotions make them feel good, we work with them on ways to increase those positive feelings and reduce or cope with the negative feelings that are causing distress. By knowing which emotions are causing distress, we can create better plans for how to help the child to cope with those specific negative emotions.

Instruct youth who are completing this activity to look back on the emotions that they identified on pages 3 and 4, and the emotions that have changed identified on page 6. Using these emotions, as well as any others that the youth may want to add, place them into the “I like to feel” and “I do not like to feel” columns accordingly. This activity can be done with words or pictures depending on the developmental level of the child.



## Emotion Identification

Now that we spoke about your emotions that you felt during your unusual situation, let's think about some that you liked to feel and the ones that you didn't like to feel.

All emotions are okay as they are what we feel. We shouldn't feel ashamed because of them.

Emotions I like to feel

Emotions I don't like to feel



An additional activity for this page can include having children list certain behaviors associated with their emotions (i.e., “laughing” or “running around” next to the happy emotion, and “crying” or “hiding” next to the scared emotion). This can help us to link certain behaviors we may be witnessing with the child’s identified emotions.

In group settings, this activity can be used to facilitate a discussion around the emotions that participants are experiencing, and how their emotions tend to make them feel. Groups can also discuss the behaviors that result in these different feelings, and how those behaviors can help youth to express positive emotions while reducing the impact of the negative emotions. Participants can use the group space to explore their emotions with others and see how others deal with their emotions, and how those emotions make their peers feel. This can help to de-stigmatize emotional distress, as the youth are more aware that it is impacting people other than themselves.

**Page 8** begins the discussion around healthy ways to cope with the emotions that children have already identified on previous pages. With this activity we want children to start thinking about how the current moment will not last forever, and that their emotions will change in the future. This will help to set children's mindsets on the path towards healing and can help to break the rumination, or the constant, repetitive thinking about problems. Our brains naturally tend to remember negative memories more than positive ones, so we often need to purposefully set the intention towards healing for youth.

Instruct youth who are completing this activity to creatively express some of the things that they do to help them regulate their own emotions in their daily lives. This will mainly include activities that children engage in when they are feeling distressed and want to make themselves feel better. We want to try and make sure to highlight activities that help youth to feel better as well as function better. Activities that make one feel good in the short term but make it more difficult in the long term to deal with issues effectively are not as useful and should generally be avoided. Activities that include their trusted adults identified on page 2 can be especially helpful, as these also build on social support systems that are available.

The good news is that all emotions pass at some point, including the ones that you don't like to feel. So you can be reassured, even the worst feelings won't last forever. But maybe you noticed that sometimes you can do things that help to make them pass even faster. Maybe for you, it could be playing with your friends or your family members, or maybe when you draw you don't feel so sad or angry anymore.

Draw or write about some things you can do to make yourself not feel so bad!



## Coping Strategies

Additional activities for this page can include ranking some of their identified activities by how effective they are in helping the child cope. This way, they will have a list of coping strategies that they can go to when they are feeling overwhelmed.

In a group setting, encourage children to share some of the activities that help them to regulate their emotions. This can help other children in the group to hear about strategies that work for their peers which they may have not thought about doing before. This has the added benefit of also encouraging children that they are not the only ones who engage in certain activities in order to cope with their negative emotions.

**Page 9** closes out the Workbook by asking children to identify concrete things that they can do to make themselves feel better. This sheet can also be used as a reference sheet for the future, so that children can look back on coping strategies that they came up with in the moment when they are feeling strong emotions and might have trouble remembering their coping skills. When we are in an aroused psychological state, also known as “fight or flight”, it is impossible to learn new skills. During these times, we need to rely on skills that we have already developed before getting into that heightened state to help us re-regulate ourselves. This activity has children list coping skills so that during moments when they are in a heightened psychological states they can refer to the skills listed here instead of having to remember them.

Instruct youth who are completing this activity to refer to the items they listed on page 8 and list some potential strategies to help them regulate their emotions when they are feeling bad. Although this was created to have children add writing, they can also use the space above each line to include a drawing if that is more developmentally appropriate. These strategies should be things that remind the youth to engage in an emotion regulation activity. Encourage children to engage in these strategies before they are feeling bad, so that they know what to do and have some experience when they do feel bad and need to use the strategies.

Now let's try to write down all the things that help you feel better. Maybe you only remember a few for the moment, but you will always be able to add new strategies later.



Milo's Tip: Each time you feel an emotion that you don't like, you can come back here to remind you all the good strategies that work for you to help you feel better!!

Something that makes me feel better is \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Something that makes me feel better is \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Something that makes me feel better is \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Something that makes me feel better is \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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Addition activities can include having children list things that make them feel better in regards to specific emotions. For instance, children can list coping strategies for when they feel sad, and then list strategies for when they are feeling mad, and compare to see which strategies may be useful for different emotions. There may be some strategies that are better for certain negative emotions, while others can prove universally effective.

This activity goes very well following a group discussion about page 8. This way children are able to incorporate coping strategies from their peers which they might not have otherwise thought of onto their list of strategies. This is especially helpful if children had trouble coming up with coping strategies on page 8.