



IASLT

The Irish Association of
Speech + Language Therapists

*Attention Deficit
Hyperactivity Disorder
(ADHD) and
Communication*

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1.0 Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and communication

According to research, ADHD is estimated to occur in 3-10% of children, (1).

Within the adult population this is approximately 2.8% worldwide, (2). Children with ADHD can often present with difficulties in the areas of:

- Inattention
- Hyperactivity
- Impulsivity

These difficulties can impact on a child's learning, behaviour and social relationships.

Studies have found that a significant percentage of children with a diagnosis of ADHD present with communication difficulties, (3). According to various studies 45 – 90% of children with a confirmed diagnosis of ADHD were found to have a language disorder, (4) (5) (6). These difficulties may occur in the areas of receptive language, expressive language, voice and social communication. The repercussions of these can impact academic achievements, self-esteem, mental health and daily functioning, (7) (8) (9). Speech and language therapists (SLTs) have an essential role in supporting the speech, language and communication needs of children who present with ADHD. SLTs provide advice, guidance and strategies in the areas of speech, language and communication to adults who meet, live and work with children who have ADHD and also adults who would like support with living with ADHD. This document is written to give information to those involved in supporting children with ADHD. It also outlines strategies for adults who would like information regarding communication supports for themselves.

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2.0 Supporting Comprehension for Children and Adults with ADHD

Comprehension describes a person's ability to understand or comprehend language. This may also be called "receptive language" and includes listening skills, following instructions and understanding words and sentences. Some people with ADHD describe the experience of being able to switch easily and quickly between tasks. On the other hand, distractions from the environment and difficulties tuning into what others are saying can lead to a breakdown in comprehension.

3.0 For Children and ADHD

Children with ADHD often need additional support to listen and follow instructions at home and at school. As a result, children with ADHD may miss out on spoken information in the classroom and at home and when trying to keep up with conversations with peers. Therefore, adults working with children and young people with ADHD have an important role in using strategies to support their comprehension across settings at home, school and in the community. Here are some strategies you can use to support the comprehension of a child or young person with ADHD:

- **Less is more.** Generally, when you're talking to a young person with ADHD it is best not to talk too much, stick to the point and be brief – that way, it is easier for them to stay focussed.
- **Get face-to-face.** Try to be face-to-face when you expect your child to listen.
- **Limit distractions.** Try to reduce noise and interruptions in the environment when you are talking – turn off the TV/ radio/ computer etc.
- **Give a prompt.** Give your child a prompt before you start an instruction. For example, say their name and wait for them to look at you, at the beginning. Then tell them clearly, "I need you to listen". This way you have their attention before you give the instruction.
- **Break it down.** If you have to give a longer instruction, try breaking it into shorter parts to help your child follow it through (for example "pick



up your socks and jeans, [pause], bring them in to the bathroom, [pause], and put them in the pile with the other dark clothes.""). Then check back that they got it! Sometimes it's easier to remember the whole instruction by repeating it in your head over and over while you complete it – encourage your child to do this.

- **Give time.** Provide extra time for the young person to process what you have said. This may also give them time to ask you to repeat what you said, if needed.
- **Check-in with understanding.** Check the child has understood what you have said by asking them to repeat back the message.
- **Repeat and encourage requests for repetition.** If the child has not understood your message, do not criticise or respond negatively. Instead, repeat the message slowly and calmly and encourage the child to request a repetition. If the child spontaneously requests a repetition, praise them for doing so.
- **Use visuals.** Providing visual information to children with ADHD alongside verbal information can help them to focus their attention and to provide a reminder if they forget what you have said. There are many resources available online that can be used to create visual supports. Some types and examples are outlined in the table below:

Type of Visual	Can be useful for...	Examples
Visual Schedules	Can be used at home, in school or in community clubs to support understanding of a sequence of upcoming steps or events.	- At home you could use a sequence of pictures indicating a daily routine step-by-step, for example getting ready for school, getting ready for bed



		<p>- At school you could have a sequence of pictures indicating the sequence of morning activities, for example circle time, reading, maths, small-break</p> <p>- At sports practice it could be helpful to have a sequence of pictures indicating the plan for practice that evening, for example warm-up, drills, match etc.</p> <p>An example of a visual schedule template can be found in the appendix.</p>
<p>First - Then board</p> <p>You may also come across these as a 'Now – Next board.</p>	<p>These two-step boards can be used to motivate children to attend to a "less preferred task" when a motivator is used as the second task, or as reassurance that they will be able to complete their preferred activity.</p>	<p>For example, "First homework then trampoline". You can start by keeping the first task very short and building this up over time. An example of a "First - Then" board can be found in the appendix.</p>



4.0 As a Young Person or Adult with ADHD

Young people and adults with ADHD may also benefit from using strategies to support their comprehension in educational settings, with friends or in the workplace. If you are a young person or adult with ADHD it may be useful to consider the following strategies for supporting your understanding:

- **Consider the environment.** Be mindful about where you have important conversations or meetings with others. Limit the amount of background distractions as much as possible to help focus your attention on what is being said.
- **Check in.** Don't be afraid to check-in with your communication partner to make sure you have understood their message. You could do this by saying, "Can I check I've got this right...?", "Can I check this is what you are saying...?"
- **Request repetition.** If you feel like you have lost track of what has been said, it's ok to ask your communication partner to repeat what they have said. Asking for repetition rather than pretending you know what they said, shows that you are interested in what they are saying.
- **Take notes.** If you are someone that finds it helpful to keep written notes to remind them of the content of a conversation or meeting, it might be useful to jot down the key points of what has been said.
- **Reflection.** Take time after communicating with others to reflect on what was said and what you understood from the interaction. It may be that you need time to process the information you have received. Don't be afraid to go back to the person if something is not clear or you feel like you need further clarification or explanation.

5.0 Supporting Expressive Language for Children and Adults with ADHD

Expressive language is how we use language to express ourselves. People with ADHD can often be skilled and animated story-tellers. At other times they



may find it difficult to be understood by others and to get their intended meaning across.

6.0 For Children with ADHD

Here are some ways that you can support your young person to be understood by others

- **Model the sentence.** If you notice your young person having difficulties in using sentences, you can use the strategy of *modelling*. *Modelling* means to model back the version that you believe your young person intended.

For example:

if your young person says "in table" you can answer "yes, on the table"

if your young person says "him is always annoying me!" you can answer "so he is always annoying you!"

This allows your young person to hear the target version in a natural way, while you still keep the focus on the content of what they are saying.

- **Model unfamiliar words.** You can also use the strategy of *modelling* to support your young person in learning more words to help them express themselves in the way that they mean.

For example:

if your young person says "I need one of those bendy thingys for my bike saddle" you can answer "oh yeah, you need an allen key for your saddle!"

- **Use questions to help your young person get their meaning across.**

Some young people with ADHD may sometimes find it difficult to find the word that they want to use during conversation. When this happens we can use word-finding strategies to help them to get their meaning across,



and perhaps even access the word that they need. For example, you could ask:

- What is it used for? (for example, eating, wearing, driving, cutting with)
- What does it look like? (for example, big/ small/ shape)
- What is it made out of? (for example, plastic/ paper/ wood)
- What parts does it have? (for example, wheels/ handles/ a lid)
- Where do you find it (for example at home/ in school/ in the park)

An example of a word map is found in the appendix, feel free to create your own.

- **Help your young person to add structure to their stories.** Young people with ADHD can often create exciting stories that are enjoyable to listen to. If you find that you get lost when listening to your young person's stories, then they may benefit from some support in how to structure their narratives. Make sure your young person knows that you are listening and interested in the content of what they have to say, but ask questions to help them add some structure

For example, who/ where/ when/ what happened?

Some examples of these questions are included in the appendix. Make sure to summarise what you have understood and check in with your young person to see if this is what they meant.

As a Young Person or Adult with ADHD

As an adult with ADHD you may find that your expressive language is an area of strength for you. At other times you may notice that people are finding it hard to understand what you mean. Here are some strategies that might be helpful.



- **Check in with your listener.** It might help to ask your listener if they are understanding, for example “do you get me?” You can do this every so often, or if you notice clues that they might be confused, for example by their facial expression, body language, or the comments that they make. If they are not understanding then you can repeat the important parts, or use other ways of getting your meaning across, for example draw something out that you are describing or show them a picture on your phone. If you have a long story to tell then you might decide to let your listener know that it's ok to say if they get confused, for example “let me know if you lose me!”

- **Use structure in your stories.** Having a basic story structure in your head can help other people follow your train of thought. You might find that if you get caught up in the details of the story then your listener might miss some of the information which helps them understand the bigger picture of the story. Questions to structure (like who/ where/ when/ what happened) help our listener to anchor themselves to the important parts of the story and understand your overall meaning. An example of a word map is found in the appendix, feel free to create your own.

- **Find ways to talk around things.** Some adults with ADHD report that they sometimes find it difficult to find the word that they want to use during conversation. When this happens you can use word-finding strategies to help get your meaning across, and perhaps even access the word that you need. For example, you could tell your listener:

- What is it used for? (for example, writing with, attaching things together, keeping things safe)
- What does it look like? (for example, its size or shape)
- What is it made out of? (for example, plastic/ paper/ wood)



- What parts does it have? (for example, wheels/ handles/ a lid)
- Where do you find it (for example at home/ in the workplace/ in the airport)

An example of a word map is found in the appendix, feel free to create your own.

7.0 Taking Care of Voice for Children and Adults with ADHD

Vocal hyperfunction has been defined as the overuse of the voice box, (laryngeal muscles) and where the muscles of the larynx have to work too hard. This can be due to excessive talkativeness, stress, reflux or other conditions. Over time, constant misuse can cause structural changes resulting in vocal nodules. This can result in soreness, being hoarse and a decrease in power when speaking. Interventions include education about learning to use your voice safely, identifying situations where you may be misusing your voice as well as promoting good vocal habits.

One of the possible symptoms of ADHD is excessive talkativeness. Studies have shown that children with ADHD have a higher incidence of developing voice disorders than children without ADHD. Here are some strategies that might be helpful in protecting your or your young person's voice.

- **Try not to shout when speaking.** Instead move closer to the person or go into the same room as the person you are talking to.
- **Try to avoid speaking over other people or appliances in the house,** for example TV, radio, phones.
- **Use a natural voice when speaking.** Some children like to imitate characters they have seen on TV and this can cause hoarseness and vocal difficulties.
- **Avoid screaming,** for example at sports matches.



- **Rest your voice.** Try to have periods during the day where you can take a break from using your voice
- **Drink plenty of fluids.**
- **Be aware of throat clearing and excessive coughing.** This can lead to hoarseness.
- **Lead by example.** If you are an adult who is concerned for your young person's voice, remember to try to demonstrate good vocal care, (as per the advice above).

If you or a member of your family has persistent hoarseness, pain, or struggle with vocal issues then consult with a medical practitioner for further assessment.

8.0 Supporting Social Communication for Children and Adults with ADHD

Social communication is about how we navigate social situations. This can often be an area of strength for people with ADHD. At other times people may find that their symptoms of ADHD result in difficulties picking up on social cues or managing difficulties in social interactions.

For Children with ADHD

Young people with ADHD can often get on well with peers and manage well socially. At other times their symptoms of ADHD may impact on how they get along with others. Here are some ways that you can support your young person in managing social interactions:

- **Work on problem-solving together.** If your young person has difficulties with social interaction, it can often be helpful to support them to problem-solve and consider how they might manage that situation going forward, or to manage it differently the next time. You may find it more helpful to work through the scenario afterwards, when things may be less emotionally-charged.



When problem-solving it can help to encourage your young person to consider things from others' perspectives, while still allowing them to feel that their perspective is being heard. The following is a structure for problem-solving that you might find helpful

- Set the scene. Who was there? Where were they?
- What happened?
- How did your young person feel? What did they think?
- Consider the options. Allow your young person to include all possibilities when brainstorming options, even if they suggest something that you feel may not be realistic
- Consider the possible consequences for each
- Decide on which solution is most likely to work best for all involved

An example template of this problem-solving structure is found in the appendix. Feel free to create your own. You might decide to try some role-play to practise the option you decide upon in a supportive environment.

- **Help them to reflect on communication styles.** Young people with ADHD can sometimes have lots of interesting things to say, and be eager to share their interests with others. It is important that we focus on the content of what they are saying, not how it is being said. If you notice that there can sometimes be breakdowns in communication due to communication differences, then it may be helpful to learn about differing communication styles (for example how some people have a preference for making eye-contact, while others prefer not to make direct eye-contact). Teaching all children (not just those with ADHD) about various communication styles helps them identify and advocate their preferred style of communicating and accept styles that are different from theirs.



- **Support them to pick-up on social cues.** People make decisions on how to manage social interactions based on the information that is available to them. Young people with difficulties in the areas of attention or those that are very active or impulsive may sometimes miss some of the more subtle social cues. It can sometimes be helpful to name what you see, and allow your young person to use their problem-solving skills to decide how to respond.

For example "I can hear Max laughing. I think he's happy about that!"

"I heard Alice say something"

As a Young Person or Adult with ADHD

You might notice that social interactions are an area of strength for you. At other times you might notice that your symptoms of ADHD impact on how you get along with others socially. Here are some strategies that you might find helpful:

- **Advocate for your preferred style of communication.** Everyone has their own style of communication. For example, some people have a preference for talking around things, whereas others prefer to communicate in a more direct way. All styles of communication are valid, and there is no one 'better' way to communicate. It can be helpful to know how you prefer to communicate, and how you prefer others communicate with you. Having a conversation about this with your communication partner (and understanding their preferred communication style also) can help to clear up any possible misunderstandings .
- **Let others know if they need to name things more overtly for you.** Some social cues that others give us can be very subtle. You might notice that if your attention is elsewhere or if you are very active that you



might easily miss some of these more subtle social cues. It can be tricky if we do not have this information as people make decisions on how to manage social interactions based on the information that is available to them. If you notice this happens for you, then it can be helpful to tell your communication partner so that they know that they need to be clear in how they communicate. For example, "I sometimes might miss if you're checking your watch or something, so just let me know when you need to leave".

- **Take time to reflect and problem-solve**

We have all experienced times where a social interaction has not gone the way that we expected it to. If you have difficulty with a social interaction, it can often be helpful to problem-solve and consider how you might manage that situation going forward, or to manage it differently the next time. You may find it more helpful to work through the scenario afterwards, when things may be less emotionally-charged.

Problem-solving can help to consider things from others' perspectives, as well as your own. The following is a structure for problem-solving that you might find helpful

- Set the scene. Who was there? Where were they?
- What happened?
- How did you feel? What did you think? How did others feel? What did they think?
- Consider the options. Include all possibilities when brainstorming options, even things you feel may not be realistic
- Consider the possible consequences for each
- Decide on which solution is most likely to work best for all involved



An example template of this problem-solving structure is found in the appendix. Feel free to create your own.

9.0 Supporting Emotional Literacy for Children and Adults with ADHD

Emotional literacy is our ability to recognise, name and express feelings. It is one of the skills involved in emotional regulation (learning to manage our emotions). Some people with ADHD may find it difficult to notice, understand and put words on how they are feeling, while others may be able to recognise and express their emotions more easily.

For Children with ADHD

- **Label how other people might be feeling.** Use opportunities to talk about emotions. For example, when watching a film, reading a book together, or when talking about social situations. Use open ended questions. For example, “and how do you think he was feeling?” If they are not sure you can label the emotion for them and support them to understand why someone might be feeling that way.
- **Label your own emotions.** Name your own emotions in the moment so that your young person can link the situation and what they see with the emotion. For example, “the traffic is terrible this morning so I'm feeling so frustrated right now”. When telling stories from your day or when you were younger name how you were feeling then also, for example a time when you felt really excited.
- **Help them label their emotions.** As parents we help our children learn language by naming objects and actions and so on. Likewise we can help support our children to name their feelings so that they can put a name to their experience. It can be helpful to name the emotion tentatively, because you are only guessing at what they might be feeling. For example, “I wonder if you're feeling sad right now” rather than “you're feeling sad”



- **Build on their emotional vocabulary.** Having a wider range of ways to describe emotions helps children identify and communicate different types of feelings. This, in turn, helps them manage emotions in more productive ways, for example instead of 'surprised' you might say shocked, perplexed or astonished. You can use these more specific terms during conversation, or you might find that a visual such as an emotions wheel might help. An example of an emotions wheel is found in the appendix.

As a Young Person or Adult with ADHD

- Try to develop self-awareness. This could involve taking the time to examine your own thoughts, emotions, behaviours and responses to yourself and others. Name them and be curious about them.
- Regularly check in with yourself. What is my mood like right now? What am I feeling? Is there stress in my body? If so where can I notice this? Be interested in what is going on for you.
- If you are feeling misunderstood, ask for feedback from others. Have they understood what you are trying to say? Do they need to ask a question to clarify something?
- Try and be aware of other people's responses to you when interacting with them. Are they tuning out? Do you need to pause and listen for a while?
- Be aware of your own mood and mental health. Reach out for support from your GP or other mental health support workers if you are struggling.



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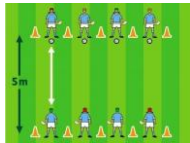
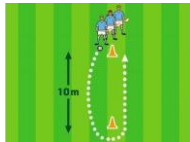

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Appendix 1: Visual Schedule

 <h3>Hurling Training</h3>	
18:00	 <p>Warm-up</p>
18:10	 <p>Running Mechanics</p>
18:15	 <p>Station 1</p>
18:25	 <p>Station 2</p>
18:35	 <p>Station 3</p>



18:45	 Small Match
19:00	 Finish



Appendix 2: First then Board

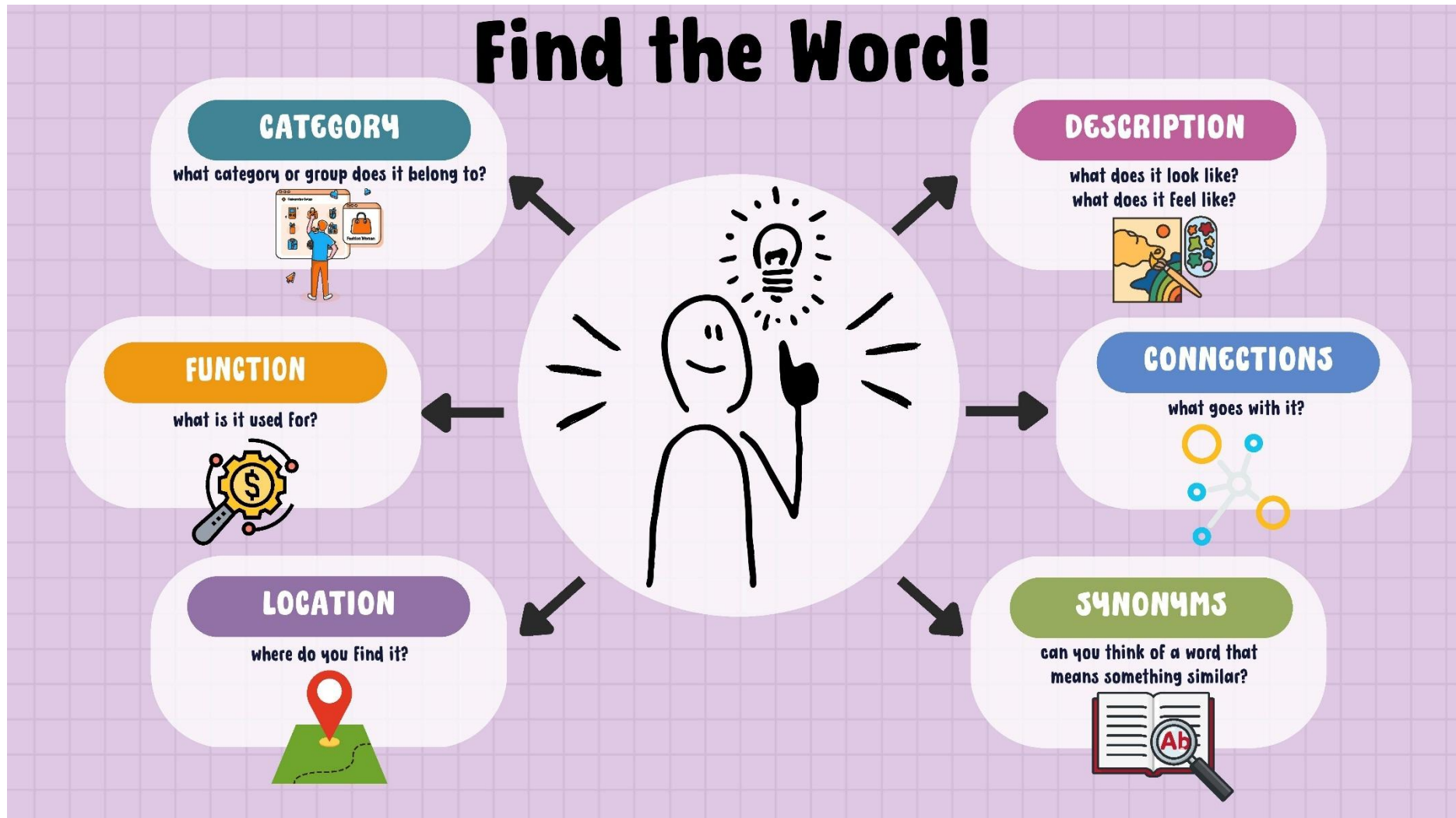
First



Then



Appendix 3: Word Finding Strategies




Appendix 4: Narrative Structure

TELLING MY STORY



WHO



WHERE



WHEN



WHAT HAPPENED FIRST?

1

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

2

WHAT HAPPENED LAST?

3

TELLING MY STORY



WHO

WHERE

WHEN

WHAT HAPPENED
FIRST?

WHAT HAPPENED
NEXT?

WHAT HAPPENED
LAST?



Appendix 5: Problem Solving Template

PROBLEM SOLVING

Set the Scene

WHO WAS THERE?

WHERE WERE YOU?

WHAT HAPPENED?

HOW DID YOU FEEL?

WHAT DID YOU THINK?

OPTION ONE

OPTION TWO

OPTION THREE

Consider the Options

what are the possible outcomes of each?

WHAT WILL I TRY FIRST?

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graph TD; SS([Set the Scene]) --> WWT[WHO WAS THERE?]; SS --> WRY[WHERE WERE YOU?]; SS --> WH[WHAT HAPPENED?]; WWT --> H[HOW DID YOU FEEL?]; WRY --> H; WRY --> T[WHAT DID YOU THINK?]; WH --> T; H --> O1[OPTION ONE]; T --> O2[OPTION TWO]; T --> O3[OPTION THREE]; O1 --> O1O[ ]; O2 --> O2O[ ]; O3 --> O3O[ ]; O1O --> W1[WHAT WILL I TRY FIRST?]; O2O --> W1; O3O --> W1;
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Appendix 6: Feelings Wheel with referred

Feelings Wheel 2.0

