Cheap Red Sunglasses Activity

Aims. To teach cognitive distancing with respect to troubling externals. This is a very effective method for dealing with and lessening anxiety both in the classroom and outside.

Time. About 20 mins

Level. Any. Language can be adapted to level.

Preparation. None

Procedure. This is taken from Donald Robertson (2021), the cognitive- -behavioural psychologist and Stoic writer. Write this statement on the board: *It’s not things that upset us but rather our opinions about them* - (Epictetus *Handb*ook, *5).* Give students time to think about the statement and elicit questions and comments. Explain that this is a very effective method for dealing with anxiety both in the classroom and outside (it’s good for teachers too!). Depending on the class you can explain the details in many ways. It’s summer. You’re wearing the cheap red sunglasses you bought, (red frames, red lenses) and you’re happy with the style. However, everything you see, trees, flowers, cars, people, are coloured red. Your cheap red sunglasses suddenly break (they’re cheap) and with them off you see things how they really are. The world isn’t actually red.

Discussion. As Robertson (ibid.) explains, ‘our emotions are largely (if not exclusively) shaped by our underlying beliefs, especially certain value judgments’. Cognitive distancing is the difference between looking at the world *through* the glasses and looking *at* the red lensed glasses (You might want to demonstrate wearing the glasses and looking at the glasses). You’re looking at the world and seeing red but others, without the glasses, are viewing it very differently. Similarly, other people without the cheap red sunglasses might be viewing a problem differently, more constructively? Cognitive distancing is a way of separating or creating a distance between our judgments or opinions and problems. You’re worried about the test, or how people might respond to something you say in the class discussion, something bad is going to happen! (this is you looking at the world, wearing the cheap red sunglasses). You are possibly making more out of the event than necessary - *everything is red!* You take off the glasses, it’s not red, it’s our judgement (our red sunglasses) that made it red. Repeat the Epictetus phrase. It's *not things that upset us but rather our opinions about them* AND MAKE IT A HABIT!

Tell yourself that how you are looking at the test or thinking about the upcoming discussion isn't the *only* way to look at these things - take off the cheap red sunglasses! As Robertson notes: in stressful situations you can train yourself to gain cognitive distance and build emotional resilience by employing simple mnemonics like Epictetus’ phrase above. By getting into the habit of repeating these expressions and reminding ourselves, ‘it’s not external events that upset us but rather our own judgements about them being good or bad’ we can lessen our fears (Robertson, ibid).