SORT IT
A PSYCHOLOGY PROGRAMME TO SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE TO PROBLEM SOLVE AND LEARN TO LEARN

Youth Work Ireland
Cork

cetb
Bord Oideachais agus
Oiliúna Chorcaí
Cork Education and
Training Board

An Roinn Leanaí
agus Gnóthaí Óige
Department of
Children and Youth Affairs

INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER CONTENTS

Quality Matters
supporting improvement in social services

01 FOREWORD BY ELEANOR O'SULLIVAN, YOUTH WORK IRELAND CORK

The National Occupational Standards for Youth Work note that the key purpose of youth work is to enable young people to develop holistically, working with them to facilitate their personal, social and educational development, to enable them to develop their voice, influence and place in society and to reach their full potential.

The SORT It programme is another tool that can be used to assist young people to achieve in their learning, addressing through the programme, the cause and effect of poor educational attainment. Hopefully the programme will also be a contributory factor in helping to illustrate the value and impact of a youth work approach to engaging and supporting young people to achieve a recognized qualification through the LTI programme, that will make a positive difference towards breaking the cycle of unemployment, lighting a spark in them to go on to further education which will lead to gainful employment.

We are happy to present the SORT It programme, which aims to support young people to understand their own experiences of learning and work, to learn how to better managing challenging or high stress situations, and apply a 4-step process for managing difficulties that could stop them from achieving their goals. We are grateful to the group of committed young people and our staff team who piloted this programme in its first draft, and to the programme developers Quality Matters and University College Cork.

02 PROGRAMME OVERVIEW

The SORT It programme was designed for youth services to support young people to problem solve and learn to learn. This programme is delivered over 9 sessions, each lasting 2 hours. Over the nine sessions, young people take part in an interactive, engaging and vibrant programme where they explore basic concepts in psychology relating to stress, negative automatic thoughts, strategizing and reviewing, and how all of these relate to workplace and classroom problem solving. Participants in the programme practice a range of skills to help them apply this knowledge in work and classroom environments.

03 THE SORT IT MODEL

The SORT It model was developed by a team of researchers, educators and psychologists for youth services working with young people who had previously disengaged from, or had negative experiences with the education system. Based on the knowledge that previous negative difficulties can cause future problems in education and work, this programme supports young people to develop skills to address a range of problems from interpersonal (such as a fight with a tutor) to task based (such as reading difficult instructions). The approach that was developed draws on multiple educational theories as well as the cognitive models such as 'metacognitive skills', which is the set of skills we develop over time that help us 'learn to learn'. The SORT It model can be used by a young person each time they encounter a problem. It involves four simple steps, each of which begins with a letter from the word SORT. The model is illustrated here, and each step is explained below.

SHIFT BRAIN OLD TO NEW

OBJECTIVE

READ THE LIGHTS
I CAN CHANGE
MAYBE I CAN CHANGE
I CAN'T CHANGE

TAKEAWAY KNOWLEDGE

03.1 STEP 1: SHIFT FROM OLD BRAIN TO NEW BRAIN

In its most basic form, the brain can be divided into both an 'old' brain and a 'new' brain. In terms of human evolution, the old brain was the first brain to develop in humans. As humans evolved over many millions of years, developing language and other more complex skills, the new brain developed to take over these functions. Today, we still have both of these brains in our head, working together.

As it was the first to develop, the main functions of the old brain tend to be those skills or behaviours that are seen as more 'primitive'. When a person first encounters a problem or difficulty, their stress increases and in many cases they will go into 'fight or flight' mode[1]. 'Fight or flight,' a function of our old brain, was very helpful to us in primitive times when we were regularly meeting life-threatening situations (like encountering a tiger!), but it's not so useful in the face of everyday difficulties that might arise in work or in school.

New Brain
PROBLEM SOLVING
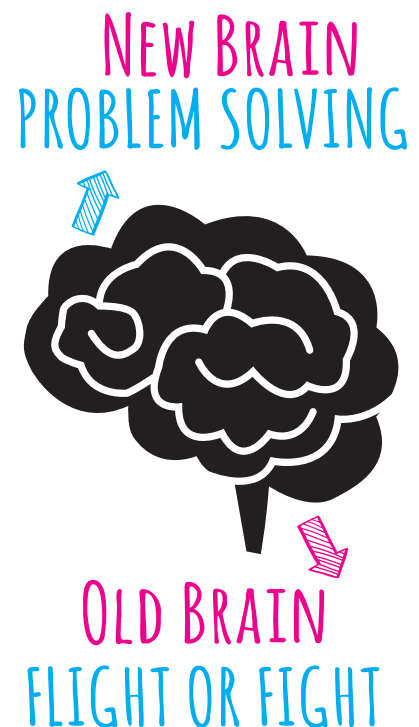
Old Brain
FLIGHT OR FIGHT

Unfortunately, our 'old brain' cannot distinguish well between different stressful situations and basically thinks that all problems are tigers. An example of this is when the old brain interprets a non-dangerous situation as dangerous, and might provoke a panic attack. Thankfully, our new brain can see that there are other ways to deal with threats other than fighting or fleeing. Our old brain works automatically and is very fast, but our new brain is slower, clearer thinking and can step in and help us to make a better plan to deal with a problem than fighting or fleeing. In this sense, the new brain can be seen as the more rational of the two. When we become stressed, our old brain takes over so we have to do some work to let our new brain be in charge. Teaching young people some simple steps for shifting from old brain to new brain is the first step in the programme. It is explored fully in session 2, and 'grounding' exercises are included at the beginning and the end of each session to give young people the opportunity to regularly practice techniques as part of the programme.

03.2 STEP TWO: OBJECTIVE

After the young person has shifted from their old brain and moved out of fight or flight mode, the next step is for them to identify their objectives or goals. Identifying a goal helps the young person to focus on finding the best way to manage the problem. The goal may be short, medium or long term. For example, in a particular moment when a young person is confused about instructions they have just received from a teacher:

▷ A short term goal would be to find out how to do the task

▷ A medium term goal might be to stay in school

▷ A long term goal might be to get into college

Once they have identified what it is they are trying to get from the situation, the young person can figure out the best strategy for managing it.

03.3 STEP THREE: READ THE LIGHTS

The young person has shifted from old brain to new brain, identified their goal in that particular situation, and now they must decide the best way to deal with this situation. This is the part of the programme where they assess a situation with a calm mind and a clear goal, and decide on a strategy for dealing with the situation.

In this programme, the young people are taught that problem situations will generally fall into one of three categories, reflecting their ability to manage it or impact change in it. For each colour, there are a number of skills and approaches to inform their strategy to deal with the problem. They will practice, and can then draw on these skills to manage problem situations:

Problem colour	In relation to the problem this means...	Metacognitive and Related Skills required to Manage
Red	I can't change it	Grit, resilience, perseverance and focus on goals
Orange	I might change it	Negotiation, resilience, focus on goals, reviewing strategies
Green	I can change it	Planning, trialling a strategy and reviewing it

KEY RESOURCE

Key resources for this part of the programme are vignette videos, depicting a scenario from each category of red, orange or green. There are two vignette videos developed for each colour, but the two videos depict the same scenario, once played out **without** a helpful strategy, and the second played out **with** a good, helpful 'new brain' strategy. These videos are used throughout the programme to teach strategizing.

03.4 STEP 4: TAKEAWAY LESSON

The final step in the model is the 'takeaway'. This refers to the lesson the young person can learn from how they approached the situation, i.e. the strategy they used. This is done through reflection after the fact, and allows the young person to think about what they did well, whether or not it worked for them and also what they could do better the next time. Critical reflection on strategy use, feedback and evaluation is a core factor in meta-cognitive learning and problem solving.

04 OTHER KEY CONCEPTS INFORMING THE PROGRAMME

NEGATIVE AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS

Part of the programme involves helping young people to think about their thinking. Many of our thoughts occur automatically which is very useful in many instances, but in some instances these thoughts can have a negative impact on us. Importantly for this course, if we encounter a problem situation we can have thoughts that are negative and unhelpful such as: 'I'll never be able to do this' 'I failed because I'm stupid' ' he hates me and that's why he's challenging me'. Key here is that we may not even be aware we are having these negative thoughts (hence they are automatic) and so even bringing these to the attention of a young person is beneficial. Challenging these thoughts means we can see ways to solve the problem or see more clearly our own ability or capacity to manage a challenge to our advantage.

WHEN A PROBLEM COMES ALONG
OLD BRAIN OR NEW BRAIN

Trigger → Thoughts → Feelings → Response

KEY
NEW BRAIN   OLD BRAIN
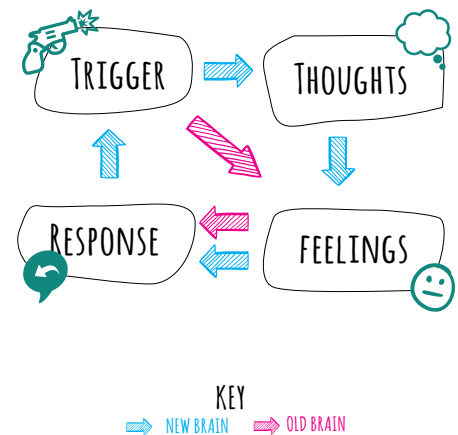
One of the strategies that young people learn through this programme is to think about their thinking when they face a problem. The problem is known as a 'trigger' (this could be a person saying something or a difficult task, for example). When we are working in our old brain, we encounter a trigger, we have automatic thought which causes an emotional response, and we react to this. However, if we draw on our rational, new, problem solving brain, we can slow down our thinking when we are triggered or in a challenging situation, to see if we are having any negative automatic thoughts that might be holding us back from using the best strategy to solve the problem. This is illustrated in the diagram below.

FIXED VS. GROWTH MIND-SET IN INTELLIGENCE

An important concept in working with people who may have beliefs that hold back their ability to learn and engage in education is challenging some ideas that they may have about their own intelligence. The theory of fixed vs. growth mind-set in intelligence refers to the ideas that people have about whether intelligence is something you are born with and is fixed for life, or something that can grow and develop, like our muscles, through exercise and work. What is very important about the different perspectives is that those who believe intelligence is fixed typically feel that if they encounter a problem that they cannot immediately master, that they are not capable of overcoming it. Those with a growth mind-set are more likely to problem solve and try to find a way around it.

Carol Dweck, a Stanford University professor who has conducted 30 years of research into self-beliefs and mindsets says the following about fixed and growth mindsets[2]:

"In the fixed mindset, people believe that their talents and abilities are fixed traits. They have a certain amount and that's that; nothing can be done to change it. Many years of research have now shown that when people adopt the fixed mindset, it can limit their success. They become over-concerned with proving their talents and abilities, hiding deficiencies, and reacting defensively to mistakes or setbacks-because deficiencies and mistakes imply a (permanent) lack of talent or ability. People in this mindset will actually pass up important opportunities to learn and grow if there is a risk of unmasking weaknesses. In the growth mindset, people believe that their talents and abilities can be developed through passion, education, and persistence. For them, it's not about looking smart or grooming their image. It's about a commitment to learning–taking informed risks and learning from the results, surrounding yourself with people who will challenge you to grow, looking frankly at your deficiencies and seeking to remedy them. Most great business leaders have had this mindset, because building and maintaining excellent organizations in the face of constant change requires it."

Early in the programme, in session one, the idea of fixed versus growth mind-sets is introduced to support young people to be open to the idea that even though they may have previous negative experiences in learning, that through developing their problem solving skills, they can grow their intelligence in various ways. There is a video listed in the Tutors Resources where you can watch and learn more about this.

05 WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE GET FROM THE PROGRAMME

Young people who take part in this programme will:

▷ Have a better understanding of their own experiences of learning, through reflection and discussion

▷ Have a better understanding of the role of 'fight or flight' in preventing learning

▷ Be able to apply some simple techniques to shift from 'fight or flight' into problem solving mode, to help them overcome problems in the classroom or workplace

▷ Learn a simple four-step strategy for approaching problems they encounter in the workplace or classroom

▷ Apply the four-step SORT It strategy to a range of work or learning-based scenarios and tasks.

06 VALUES AND PRINCIPALS: CONSISTENTLY APPLIED IN DELIVERING THE PROGRAMME

▷ **Strengths Based:** all young people can learn, all young people can grow their skills and intelligences and all young people can improve their ability to problem solve and learn. The tutor should seek to find the strength and positive angle in all discussions and conversations in the class, highlighting existing skills that the young people have in the stories they tell, even if they tell them from a negative perspective.

▷ **Focus on Psychology:** This is, at its most basic, a psychology programme for young people. They learn about the brain and their thinking and how to apply new skills in their lives. They should be reminded of this at regular intervals to keep their interest piqued and keen.

▷ **Dynamic:** Each class will be dynamic, involving a variety of teaching methods including video and movement where possible. Each session involves at least one exercise requiring movement and one video.

2   http://learningandtheadolescentmind.org/people_01.html

▷ **Accepting:** The tutor should ensure in all of their interactions that they are accepting the young people as they are. Where there are behaviours that hurt others, of course this should be challenged in a kind, caring and respectful way, acknowledging where the young person is coming from.

▷ **Warm, Kind and Funny:** the tutor should seek to facilitate an atmosphere that is also warm, kind and funny and encourage participants to treat one another in this way

▷ **Realistic:** all scenarios and examples provided in this programme come from real life situations provided by local young people. Participants are encouraged to bring their own life experiences into the classroom to inform learning among their peers. This is a key value for the credibility of the programme among the participants.

▷ **Collaborative:** everyone in the classroom, including the tutor and all of the participants, are experts by experience and have the capacity to support one another to problem solve. Collaborative approaches including feedback, discussions and respectful challenging should be engaged at all points.

▷ **Clear and Accessible:** the model, the language around it and the programme content is clear and accessible to all young people. Any term or concept that is unclear should be discussed and clarified.

▷ **Complete:** If a participant misses a session s/he should be given the option of completing it 1-2-1 with the tutor before the next session

07 LIST OF THINGS YOU WILL NEED TO DELIVER THE PROGRAMME

You will need some or all of the following most weeks to deliver the programme:

▷ A tablet or mobile device (note a laptop will not work for the dragon-racing game, only a mobile phone or tablet)

▷ A laptop or computer for showing powerpoint presentations and videos

▷ An internet connection

▷ A projector with an appropriate connection to project from the tablet or mobile device (see module two appendix for help in identifying what you need here)

▷ Speakers to project videos

▷ Videos loaded and ready to go from the internet

▷ Flip charts, markers, coloured paper etc.

▷ Print outs of the appropriate Hand-outs each week

▷ Folders for young people to store their Hand-outs

▷ The dragon-racing score card

▷ Other materials as indicated in the first page of each module

08 TRAUMA INFORMED CLASSROOMS: ANTICIPATING AND MANAGING CHALLENGES

08.1 CHALLENGES

The SORT It programme is one which encourages self-reflection and self-examination and can create a culture where participants are actively thinking about their difficulties, and where people are open about the challenges they are having. This can cause people to experience feelings and act in ways that may require additional support than might usually be expected in a classroom environment. In addition to this, the SORT It programme is a trauma-informed programme. This means that the programme is delivered with the assumption that some, many or all of the young people taking part are survivors of childhood or on-going trauma. Trauma impacts on a young person's capacity to be in a classroom environment, both in terms of learning and relationships and can have consequences such as:

Impacts on academic performance	Impacts on social relationships
Reduced Cognitive capacity	Need for control (causing conflict with teachers and other students)
Sleep disturbance (causing poor concentration)	Attachment difficulties (making attachment to school problematic)
Difficulties with memory (making learning harder)	Poor peer relationships (making school an unpleasant experience)
Language delays (reducing capacity for listening, understanding and expressing)	Unstable living situation (reducing learning, and capacity to engage with a new school)

Taken from 'Calmer Classrooms: A Guide to Working with Traumatised Children' by the Victorian Commission for Children and Young People, Australia

The tutor will be best placed to respond to participants with difficult feelings or behaviours that are challenging to the tutor or others if time is taken to anticipate these situations, and devise strategies to respond to them if they arise. A key facet of this programme

08.2 ESTABLISHING A TRAUMA-INFORMED CLASSROOM

This section is adapted from 'Calmer Classrooms: A Guide to Working with Traumatised Children' by the Victorian Commission for Children and Young People, Australia, and Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction's Compassionate Schools Initiative.

Understand the Young Person: As a trauma-informed programme, the tutor can increase their empathy with young people by being aware that trauma can result in a person behaving younger than they are and that this should guide teaching practices, responses and relationships.

Provide Unconditional Positive Regard: Providing consistent care can help young people to build trust and form relationships with you. Unconditional positive regard means that you communicate acceptance, regardless of what the young person says or does. This means for example that if a young person says, "I hate this class, it's stupid", you can show acceptance by saying "I'm sorry to hear you feel that way, I'd like you to have a good time here and get your work done" or something to that effect.

Manage Your Own Reactions: Know that young people can have difficulties, and that this can bring stress into the classroom; focus yourself and ensure that you can remain calm. This will help young people to become or remain calm themselves.

"Can I Help You With": If a young person isn't taking part in an exercise or doing a required activity, offering help (can I help you to fill the sheet... etc.) rather than giving warnings or asking why they are not doing something may be a more effective engagement technique.

Structure and Consistency: Young people who are survivors of trauma can particularly benefit from safe, clear, consistent, fair and firm boundaries applied calmly and sensitively.

Time In Not Time Out: If a young person is being disruptive or disengaged, rather than send them out, invite them to come and work with you to complete the task if this is feasible. Time out reinforces the notion that the young person is un-loveable or unacceptable.

Connect: Young people who have been traumatised may present as withdrawn or may be hyper-aroused or aggressive. Very often, those who are very withdrawn may be dealing with a lot of internal anxiety that is not evident on the surface. Young people in either state may have difficulty engaging or learning. Making gentle and consistent attempts to connect with the young person to bring them back to the room and to themselves can help them to engage. This might be a direct communication (eye communication or directly addressing them) or a light touch if appropriate. Young people who are regularly dissociated (either withdrawn or hyper) may need help to catch up with things, as they are often inattentive.

Offer Choices and Stay in Control: Young people may often become oppositional, and refuse to comply with a request, or do the opposite of what is requested. Where this happens, use humour and offer choices wherever possible. Offering choices and staying in control of the dialogue in these situations helps to reinforce consistent boundaries and structure. Do not allow frustration to get the better of you and use structure without threat.

Acknowledge Good Decisions and Choices: Young trauma survivors may not react well to praise, but commenting on a particular task or job well done (rather than intrinsic characteristics) can provide needed and meaningful positive reinforcement.

Know Your Role and Your Limits: While establishing a positive relationship is essential to creating a good learning environment for young people and in particular trauma survivors, be aware of the limits of your role. You are a tutor for this programme, and while personal challenges and difficulties may be discussed, you should ensure that the young person accesses professional or specialised support where it is needed. Use the structures within your organisation – if there is a counsellor, refer them there. If there is a key working or youth working system, ensure you encourage them to speak to their worker about difficulties or challenges.

08.3 PRIOR TO EACH SESSION

▷ Have an **appropriate support system** in place within your organisation. This may mean having an allocated supervisor/mentor to help prepare you in advance and provide you with debriefing and on-going support.

▷ Ensure you have **good working knowledge of your organisations policies** that may be relevant including:

→ Child protection

→ Responding to disclosures of self-harm / suicidal thoughts

→ Responding to disclosures of substance use

→ Managing challenging behaviour

→ Making referrals for personal, health and social issues

▷ Ensure you are **adequately prepared for the session**; use your checklist to ensure you have all materials and teaching supports ready, and be confident with the theory and exercises. Having undertaken enough preparation with the content will reduce any anxiety you may have in this regard and allow you to be more attentive and responsive to the needs of participants

▷ Remind yourself that teaching and facilitation can be a stressful job; take some time prior to the session to ground yourself, using some of the exercises in the programme. Take time to ground yourself, reduce your adrenaline and increase your confidence.

▷ Accept that there may be challenges. Think about how they will manifest and how you might manage them using the trauma-informed principles

08.4 AFTER THE SESSION

▷ Have a debrief with your manager or allocated person, focussing on what you feel you did well, what concerned you and what you could have done better.

▷ Promptly follow up on any concerns relating to referrals, child protection or other issues arising, in line with your organisation's policies

09 CONSIDERATIONS FOR TIMING - FLEXIBILITY

To ensure young people can benefit from all of the core learning in this programme, it is important that all material is covered. The programme has been designed to allow for flexibility – there is a 10 minute 'trickle in' period and a ten minute 'close' at the beginning and end of each session, and there is only 1 hour and 20 minutes of content between the trickle-in and close scheduled for each session.

This means that where 2 hours are scheduled for classes, there is 20 minutes unscheduled, and 20 minutes focussed on either warming up or winding down. The following guidelines will help the tutor to ensure that they can move the content at a pace that suits their group best:

▷ All material should be covered

▷ Additional weeks can be added with some material spread over additional sessions

▷ The dragon-racing game can be added to other weeks; it is only scheduled for use in 3 – 4 sessions as detailed in the modules

▷ Any other exercises that teach mindfulness or Cognitive Behaviour Therapeutic skills can be added to increase this important facet of the learning but these should be based in evidence and come from a reputed source

▷ Additional time for dialogue may be added etc. if deemed suitable, as long as all material is covered over the course of the programme

10 KEY LESSONS FROM THE LITERATURE

A detailed and comprehensive literature review informs this programme. This section presents 9 key lessons from the literature that informs the programme, as a reminder or refresher for tutors. Tutors should read the full literature review in preparation for the programme and may use this to remind themselves of some of the important findings informing the programme

10.1 KEY LESSONS: PROGRAMME CONTENT

1. There are many factors that contribute to early school leaving in adolescence, which in turn can contribute to poor workplace performance in later life. These include coming from lower socioeconomic background, coming from lone parent families, coming from families with low levels of parental education as well as previous negative experiences with teachers and schools. In order to become a fully engaged young adult within society, adolescents must move through certain developmental stages. There are many potential threats to the adolescent brain, which can slow down or stop this development, including poor physical health and nutrition, mental illness, substance abuse, early childhood trauma and toxic stress. Despite these threats, the adolescent brain shows considerable resilience and given certain conditions, adolescents can overcome these challenges. *The aim of this programme is to re-engage young people who have become disaffected by traditional education. No matter what an individual's past experiences has been, all young people have the ability to benefit from this programme and from education in the future.*

2. Toxic stress is one of the many key inhibitors of learning, and developing techniques to manage this can support young people to engage in learning. *A key element of this programme is learning to use simple techniques to manage stress, to help young people effectively manage difficult situations arising in learning or workplace environments*

3. A large amount of literature has suggested that metacognition, the process of "thinking about thinking", can be used to re-engage young adults as effective, independent learners. In practice this means learning how to plan, implement and review problem solving and learning skills. *This programme aims to put these skills into practice by learning to set goals and objectives for learning and problem solving, to plan an approach to a problem and to review whether this approach was successful. Along with learning to manage stress reactions, this is the basis of the SORT It model.*

4. The literature tells us that learning meta-cognitive skills is most successful when it's applied to a range of scenarios, and best taught in a way that is collaborative and cooperative. *Videos developed specifically for this programme show the application of metacognitive and problem solving strategies, using real-life scenarios from the lives of young people. The programme also relies on encouraging young people to colloboaratively and cooperatively reflect and apply learning to scenarios from their own lives, and look at developing alternative constructive strategies in the future.*

10.2 KEY LESSONS: APPROACH TO DELIVERING THE PROGRAMME

1. Trauma informed care is a model for providing services and education that accounts for the fact that most people will have experienced some form of trauma, and will often be in states of heightened stress. Key principals of trauma informed care include: safety, trustworthiness and transparency, peer support, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment as well as cultural, historical, and gender sensitivity. _This programme aims to be trauma informed at all times in its delivery to participants; this means that at all times the tutor will aim to ensure young people while on this programme feel safe, trusted, not judged and accepted._

2. The most successful educational settings are those in which there are positive teacher-student relationships, contributing to an overall positive learning environment. _It is a fundamental aim of this programme that there is mutual respect shown between both instructors and participants, but also between participants themselves._

3. As part of the 'visible learning' framework, learning programmes should contain specific learning intentions and success criteria. As well as this, learning strategies which provide both teachers and students with feedback tend to be most effective. _The current programme will contain specific learning objectives for each session and exercise. Both students and the instructor will have the opportunity to give and receive feedback as the programme develops._

4. Looking to other programmes and modules which have incorporated elements of metacognition, it is of crucial importance that facilitators understand the concept of metacognition in order to engage participants on this topic. _Following the reading of the literature review, facilitators should have a clear understanding of metacognition and related concepts mentioned in the review._

5. The aims of this programme are in line with national strategy in Ireland for youth work, Youth Work centres are appropriate settings for the delivery of psycho-social education for young people. Youth Work can promote pro-social behaviour and support young people with the practical skills to navigate education and employment environments. _The SORT It model can be successfully delivered as part of a broader Youth Work curriculum._

11 SORT IT: TUTOR'S ESSENTIAL RESOURCES

Before you begin the programme, it's important that you spend some time studying, up-skilling and becoming familiar with the models and theories informing the programme. Below are a number of interesting resources including reading, listening and video resources to help you prepare for the programme;

11.1 ESSENTIAL

1. Read the Full SORT It Literature Review on www.qualitymatters.ie/SORTIt
2. Watch SORT It Expert Adviser Dr Sharon Lambert on Stress and Learning: https://youtu.be/QAQ9tPP79jE

11.2 ADDITIONAL

1. Watch a Video About Fixed v Growth Mindsets and Their Impact on Learning Outcomes Here: https://vimeo.com/95297241
2. Read About Fight or Flight and its Impact on Learning Here: http://www.edudemic.com/stress-affects-brain-learning/
3. Listen to This American Life Podcast Episode 'Back to School' to learn about new approaches to education, stress, cognition and supporting learning: http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/474/back-to-school