



## Exploring Blue Elephants

### Learning Experience Theme & Intention/Summary:

This activity is designed to be **facilitated to adults** (i.e. parents, teachers, guardians, teen parents, school staff) from the greater school community. However, this activity could also be facilitated to older youth. This activity offers an opportunity for the adults to connect with each other in an approachable, safe, calm and non-judgmental environment. This activity is designed to build peer support amongst the adults while discussing how mental health might impact family members and how they can best support themselves and their family members.

### Materials:

- ☐ *Optional:* ball, ball of yarn or something that can be thrown between people.
- ☐ *Optional:* chart paper & marker/whiteboard & marker.
- ☐ The picture book: *My Elephant is Blue: A Book About Big, Heavy Feelings* by [Melinda Szymanik](#) (Author) and [Vasanti Unka](#) (Illustrator).  
Note: there is [a video recording on YouTube](#) if you cannot get a hold of the physical book.
- ☐ Coloured markers – one per person in a variety of colours. Or paint, pencil crayons, coloured paper for a mosaic.
- ☐ Paper – one sheet per person.
- ☐ Printed handout “Patchwork Elephant” – one for each participant.

### Things to consider:

You may want to set a group size limit depending on how comfortable you are facilitating with adults. Although this activity can be facilitated for any group size, it could be advantageous to have a group smaller than 30 people to best ensure a comfortable sharing environment.

*My Elephant is Blue* discusses themes of depression. It is advisable to offer a content warning when inviting adults to attend this activity.

This is a particularly good experience post-crisis for parents and adults in the school community. However, it can also be facilitated at any time to explore on-going mental well-being.



The key aspect of this activity is to foster peer support between the adult participants. The creative avenues in which to engage the adults are there as supports, but we encourage you to adapt them based on your knowledge of the adults.

The visual art aspect of this activity can be facilitated in a variety of ways. The instructions are written for small groups to work on their own chart paper, but it could also be facilitated as the whole group creating one large mural with multiple drawings of elephants. Alternatively, each individual can create their own drawings on one piece of paper or in a booklet. This option can be helpful if you'd like the parents to share the booklet with their children at home.

### Instructions:

1. Gather participants in a circle if your space allows.
2. Share with participants that we want to create an environment where everyone feels comfortable to fully participate. Explain to the group that we are going to begin by creating **Group Expectations**. These Expectations are the ways in which we agree to interact with each other. If you have a ball, you can populate a list of Group Expectations by throwing a ball around the circle. When someone has an expectation they want to contribute, they signal the person with the ball. When someone receives the ball they can share their expectation. Let the group know that not everyone has to share an expectation. You may want to note down on chart paper or a whiteboard what the expectations are.
3. **As an opening activity, ask participants to go around the circle and share their name, how old their child(ren) are (if they are comfortable sharing), and any kind of book or activity that has helped them make sense of the world.** Ask participants to keep track of others who have similar interests.
4. Share with participants: **Today we are also going to use a children's picture book called *My Elephant is Blue*** to help make a little more sense of the world.
5. **Disclose to participants:** This book discusses "big, heavy feelings" that relate to themes of depression. Although we are going to explore how this book might relate to people's lives, this is not the best environment to delve into our own personal experiences with depression.
6. Share with participants: You can also use this book and some of these activities with your own children and youth.
7. **Read** or show the YouTube video reading of *My Elephant is Blue*.
8. **Ask participants to find a partner.** Ask the partners a series of reflective questions:
  - What are your initial impressions and reactions to that story?
  - What questions do you have?



- If you were going to use this book with your kids, what do you think the key messages are?
- What seemed to be a turning point in the story?
- Where did you see yourself in the story?

*Optional: for a more experiential activity, you could ask the group to walk around the meeting space and at random ask them to find a partner. They can answer one question with that person, then invite them to start walking around the space again and repeat.*

9. Invite the participants to make a group of three. Give each small group a large piece of paper.

*Optional: depending on your group dynamics, you may want to have participants have their own paper and draw their own elephants.*

10. Share with the small groups: “We are going to **create a visual depiction of our understandings and reflections on the book**. The first thing we will draw is the outline of the blue elephant. The **outline of the elephant** represents **what the blue elephant might represent for our children**. Participants can add keywords and/ or symbols on or around the outline of the elephant to note their reflections.

11. **Share with participants that our nervous system and our bodies can be impacted after we experience a distressing event and this is completely normal.**

*Optional: Depending on the situation in your community, there are a variety of different videos you can share if deemed appropriate. For examples:*

- [Fight, Flight & Freeze](#)
- [Grief](#) (scroll to “Death, Dying And Grief” section of the page)
- [Trauma & the Body](#)
- [Depression](#)

12. Invite the participant to draw the **eyes** of the elephant and explore ways we can **be prepared if someone wakes up with a blue elephant**.

13. Ask participants to add **colour to the body** of their elephant while they discuss **how we can look for traces of the blue elephant in ourselves and others**.

14. Encourage participants to reflect on the **role they often take** in a challenging situation. For example, are they the mom offering food and chocolate, are they the researcher, are they the pusher? Let participants know that we are not reflecting on these roles out of judgement. Rather the goal is for us to garner more self awareness so that we can be supportive to ourselves and others. Ask participants to discuss what they have learned by taking this role in the past. What has worked well and what has not. Ask participants to draw a visual depiction (i.e. symbols, metaphors or words) of the roles they play around their elephant.



15. Share with participants that there is no shame or judgement for anyone having a blue elephant.
16. Invite participants to draw a **pink elephant** beside their blue elephant. Ask participants, what are the ways we are **turning the elephant pink and keeping it pink** for as many days as possible. They can write down or draw these activities or actions. Encourage participants to dive deep into this question. You may want to ask them:
  - What happens when walking around the block does not help?
  - Who is your “elephant specialist”? Are there services, supports or resources you trust to support you and your family?
  - How might you navigate supporting your whole family when one person has a blue elephant?
17. Encourage participants to draw some sort of **connection between the blue and pink elephant**. We understand blue might still live with ourselves or others, i.e. this flood will live with us for a long time. Ask participants, how might you **live with remnants of a blue elephant**? They can write or draw these ideas on paper.
18. Ask the participants, **what questions might your children have after reading this book**? The participants can write these questions in **thought bubbles** on their page.
19. Share with participants that they can read this book to their children and discuss the themes we have talked about today. Give them a printed **“Patchwork Pink Elephant”** that they and their children can fill in to show ways to turn or keep an elephant pink.
20. Share with participants the Te Rito Toi online resource and how they can explore it to use with their children. In particular, show them the settling activities and encourage them to use these activities with themselves and their children on a regular basis. As a closing activity, choose one of the settling activities to facilitate with the participants, for example this [Breath Regulation Practice](#).



## Patchwork Elephant

