# Chapter 12
# Clinical Applications of *Steven Universe* in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

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## 12.1 Introduction

*Steven Universe* is a Cartoon Network animated series about the coming-of-age of Steven Universe, a half-human, half-alien boy grappling with his mother's legacy while growing up in a small town on Earth. Steven lives with the Crystal Gems, aliens with female humanoid forms who fought alongside his mother to protect

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Earth from their own kind. With help from his friends and family, Steven discovers his gem powers and saves the planet.

Critically acclaimed for its diversity of characters and relationship dynamics, LGBTQ+ representation, and nuanced portrayal of mental health challenges, *Steven Universe* garnered a GLAAD Media Award, Peabody Award, and five Emmy Award nominations. The series gathered a huge following of youth and adults alike, which led to a feature-length film and *Steven Universe Future*, an epilogue limited series of Steven as an adolescent struggling with posttraumatic stress symptoms. The show affirms that differences are to be celebrated, everyone faces challenges, and each person is deserving of validation and acceptance.

The following chapter will outline why *Steven Universe* can serve as a uniquely useful adjunct to therapy for children who are fans of the show (particularly for children who are LGBTQ+ or otherwise minoritized). Several sample exercises will be provided, making use of themes from the show to facilitate the development of introspective, prosocial, and regulatory repertoires using techniques common to various modalities of child therapy.

### 12.1.1 LGBTQ+ Representation

*Steven Universe* pushed the boundaries of LGBTQ+ representation in the media and made history as one of the first children's shows to feature a same-gender marriage proposal. It is also the first major animated series created by a female-identified person, Rebecca Sugar, who has more recently come out as a bisexual and non-binary woman (Zane, 2018). According to Insider's database of LGBTQ+ characters, *Steven Universe* has more than 40 queer-coded characters, including several gender non-conforming and non-binary characters who make essential contributions to the storyline (White & Chik, 2021). This comes at a time when the depiction of queerness in children's media—particularly queer-coded pre-teen or young-teen characters—is extremely rare (Kelso, 2015). As Sugar said in an interview: "We absolutely must tell LGBTQ+ children that they belong in this world and they deserve to be loved" (Romano, 2018). *Steven Universe*'s broad appeal and critical acclaim is an indication of an appetite for more positive LGBTQ+ representation in popular media for children.

### 12.1.2 Mental Health Representation

*Steven Universe* depicts mental health challenges, including those clustered around PTSD and complex trauma, in a way that is both positive and conceptually sound. This is unusual in popular media, which commonly portrays characters suffering from generic, sometimes inaccurate, mental health symptoms that are not reasonably contextualized. These characters are labeled as "deviant" or "undesirable,"

until they receive hospitalization or medication, often in absence of cognitive/behavioral interventions (Henderson, 2018). A 2003 review of mental health representation in children's media found similarly problematic themes as those in the media at large (Wahl, 2003). By contrast, *Steven Universe's* characters face these struggles using solutions that are cognitive/behavioral in nature, such as developing their introspective repertoires, and practicing skills for emotional regulation and cognitive restructuring. During their respective journeys, they are provided social support that includes normalization and acceptance of their struggles. For the past two decades, children's shows with more responsible depictions of both mental health and LGBTQ+ issues have emerged alongside *Steven Universe*, such as *Adventure Time*, *Legend of Korra*, *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, and *Muppet Babies*.

Popular media is the layperson's primary source of information regarding mental health issues. Because of this, content creators increasingly report a sense of responsibility to provide useful and accurate mental health education for the common good (Henderson, 2018). In a video statement for the National Alliance on Mental Illness, Sugar said, "My team and I framed a story about mental illness and posttraumatic stress in a way that would be accessible for a young audience…I felt hopeful that this could spark conversations within families, and give kids an understanding that they could carry with them if they were ever to be in a traumatic event, or if they had experienced one already" (NAMI, 2021).

In the United States, 61.8% of youth have been exposed to at least one trauma by age 17 and there is a 4.7% lifetime prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in adolescents, with many who suffer from comorbid depression, anxiety, and substance abuse (McLaughlin, 2013). Almost two-thirds of adults report experiencing at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE), such as abuse or neglect of an emotional, physical, or sexual nature; substance abuse, mental illness, and intimate partner violence in the household (Merrick, 2018). The more ACEs a person experiences, the more they are at risk of injury, infectious disease, chronic disease, mental illness, substance abuse, and poor outcomes within maternal-fetal health, education, and occupation. For this population, access to useful and accurate mental health education can serve as a vital adjunct to clinical interventions, providing salient modeling and reinforcement of behavioral skills (Merrick, 2018).

To this end, *Steven Universe* uses a variety of stories and metaphors to demonstrate how Steven and his friends process difficult emotions and experiences. Character development arcs and musical-style songs are used to thoughtfully explore grief, anxiety, PTSD, and interpersonal relationships in a way relatable to both children and adults. Fans of the show have expressed how the realistic complexity of characters has given them insight into their own struggles with depression, trauma, and gender identity (Mellon, 2017). As the series progresses, characters fight in an intergalactic war, have multiple near-death experiences, and witness the deaths of loved ones. There is a recurring theme of Steven feeling pressure to live up to the legacy of his mother, who defended Earth as a rebel army leader, while figuring out his own identity and sense of self-worth. In *Steven Universe Future*, an older teenage Steven manages posttraumatic stress symptoms that originated from

his adverse childhood experiences. Across both series, characters demonstrate use of both adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms, which the show contextualizes using their individual life experiences and personalities.

In the following section, clinical applications of *Steven Universe* for mindfulness and cognitive behavioral therapy are presented. For young fans of the series, these applications may be especially useful as references to the show may have greater salience than more generic therapeutic content.

## 12.2   A Mindfulness Education

Mindfulness can be a first step in creating a safe space for children to explore their thoughts and feelings. Mindfulness-based interventions are increasingly common in a variety of therapeutic modalities (Simkin & Black, 2014), and have demonstrated clinical utility for a variety of mental illnesses (Goldberg et al., 2018). Fans of *Steven Universe* are primed to explore mindfulness, as it is depicted throughout the show.

### *12.2.1   The Mindful Self*

In *Steven Universe*, gems are superpowered aliens who appear with a gemstone—such as a garnet, amethyst, or pearl—embedded in their body. The small gem (a type of advanced computer) contains their consciousness, and is the only truly immutable part of their body; the rest of their physical form is a type of hard light projection from the gem, the appearance of which reflects various aspects of their conscious and unconscious, and personality traits and states. This parallels Jungian concepts: the gemstone is a Gem's *true self* while their projected humanoid form is the *persona* presented to the public (Wilde, 2011). As a mindful exploration of self, a therapist can ask the child about their gem—or their key attributes and strengths—and ask them to draw it. Refer to Table 12.1 for questions and guiding comments that can facilitate this process. Figures 12.1, 12.2, 12.3, and 12.4 include examples that you can use.

### *12.2.2   Mind-Body Awareness*

By establishing a connection with his gem, Steven is able to unlock his powers and weapon. As this mind-body awareness strengthens, he is able to control his healing powers and rose-colored shield with greater proficiency. Just like Steven, developing mind-body awareness can unlock a child's strengths (Perry-Parrish et al., 2016). Exercises that can facilitate this include:

- Body scan

  - Have the child settle into a comfortable position. Consider leading the child in a deep breathing, relaxation, or other grounding exercise first. Ask the child to share their current feelings and body sensations. Then, start a "body scan" by systematically asking the child to describe how each part of the body feels—head, fingers, chest, belly, legs, etc. Ask the child where they feel their stated emotion and ask what it feels like. Explain that feelings are connected to the body, and describe how awareness of this connection can strengthen the child's understanding of how they experience their feelings so they can use this valuable information to make good choices.

- Coloring your gem and feelings in the body

  - See Fig. 12.5 on the next page. Have the child draw their gem on a human analog like the one depicted and use the discussion of their gem as a starting point for localizing feelings on their body. Expand the conversation by having them talk about emotions they commonly feel, and choose colors and shapes to represent those emotions on parts of the body where they localize these feelings. Remind them that the localization of their feelings is unique to them, and therefore something they must explore on their own.

## 12.3    Here Comes a Thought, Feeling, and Behavior

Once the foundation of mindful self and mind-body awareness has been established, the therapeutic work shifts to the cognitive-behavioral triangle by exploring the relationship between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Cohen et al., 2012). In Season 4, Episode 4 "Mindful Education," Steven's best friend Connie Maheswaran is struggling with shame after accidentally harming another student (Cartoon Network, 2021). In a musical number "Here Comes a Thought," Garnet educates Connie on the importance of mindfulness and reflection, and shows Steven how to support his friend in processing this difficult event (Cartoon Network, 2021):

> Take a moment to think of just
> Flexibility, love, and trust…
> Take a moment, remind yourself
> Take a moment to find yourself…
> (Cartoon Network, 2021)

Garnet identifies initial thought problems, recognizes how thoughts caused alarm and harm, and finally suggests how to let them go. The musical segment uses butterflies as a visual metaphor to demonstrate how thoughts can be beautiful, overwhelming, natural, and capable of being freed (Cartoon Network, 2021).

Aaron T. Beck's Cognitive Behavioral Triangle (Cohen et al., 2012) can be adapted to *Steven Universe* by centering the gem—or the child's *true self* and values—in their pattern of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as in Fig. 12.6. The

**Table 12.1** Questions about a child's gem and other resources

| Questions | Comments |
|---|---|
| What kind of gem would you have (ruby, sapphire, diamond, etc.)? What shape and color is your gem? Why? | While the child's gem can be a purely artistic choice, it's important to ask them why they chose those features and understand how it relates to the child's self. See Fig. 12.1 |
| Where can others see your gem? | Gem location can indicate important character traits. For example, Pearl acts very logically and uses rationalization as a coping mechanism. Her gem— a pearl— – is located on her head. Steven is very empathic and bases his decisions on gut feelings. His rose-colored gem is located on his navel. Asking a child where their gem is located can help them consider where their thoughts, feelings, and actions come from. See Fig. 12.2 |
| What kind of body would your gem make? | A child may choose to draw or describe a body similar to theirs, or a body that is very different. Be sure to ask why the gem projects this body and how these aspects relate to the child's self. See Fig. 12.2 |
| How do you shapeshift? Does it depend on the situation? What makes it easier to shapeshift? What makes it more difficult to shapeshift? What does it feel like to shapeshift for fun, vs shapeshifting because others want you to? How do you imagine that makes others feel? | All gems have the power to temporarily shapeshift, and will eventually return to their default form—the true self—because it takes a lot of energy to shapeshift, or project a persona. Some gems are not as capable of shapeshifting and can only "stretch" a little. Other gems, like Amethyst, are skilled shapeshifters who can morph into other gems, humans, animals, cars, helicopters, and much more. The exertion required to shapeshift is potentially a useful metaphor for explaining the difficulty of being forced to alter one's persona to pass in different social circles |
| What other powers and weapons does your gem give you? | Gems have special powers and weapons that can be summoned from their gem. For example, Garnet has a literal third eye with the power of future vision. She can see many future outcomes and the probability that each will occur. Her weapon is a pair of gauntlets, or armored gloves, used to punch in battle. Asking a child about their powers or weapons is an invitation to understand their abilities and values. See Fig. 12.3 |
| What other coping tools would you pack into your cheeseburger backpack? | In Season 1, Episode 3 "Cheeseburger Backpack," Steven gets a new backpack in the mail and overpacks for a dangerous mission to the Lunar Sea Spire with the Crystal Gems. Though not all of Steven's ideas worked, the Crystal Gems were impressed by his creative solutions involving sweaters and bagels. See Fig. 12.4 |

therapist explains how the cognitive behavioral triangle works by providing examples of how thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can impact each other and lead to both desired and undesired outcomes. These exercises orient the child to external outcomes of their thoughts/feelings/behaviors. The therapist may then supplement this by using mindfulness exercises to orient the child to internal outcomes within their own body. The therapist should also encourage the child to come up with their own examples by applying this model to their own life with the exercise in Table 12.2.
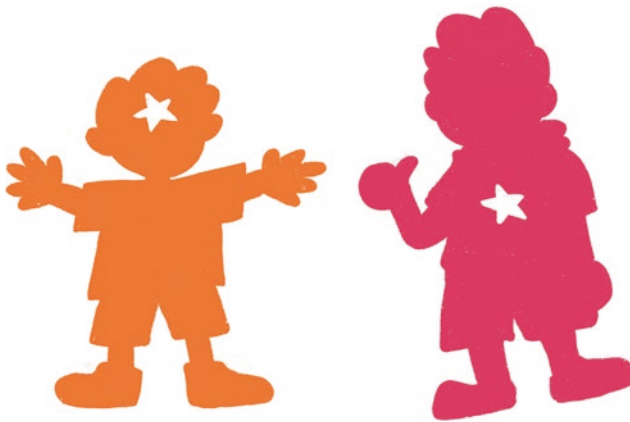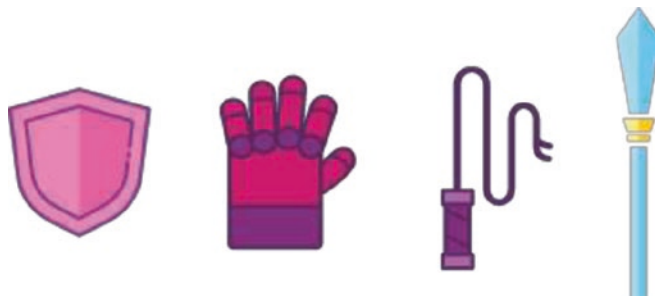
**Fig. 12.1**  Examples of gems



**Fig. 12.2**  Examples of gem location on a child's body



| CHARACTER | Steven | Garnet | Amethyst | Pearl |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| WEAPON | Shield | Gauntlets | Whip | Spear |
| REPRESENTATION | Safety, protection | Strength, power | Confidence, flexibility | Precision, skill |

**Fig. 12.3**  Examples of gem weapons and their representations

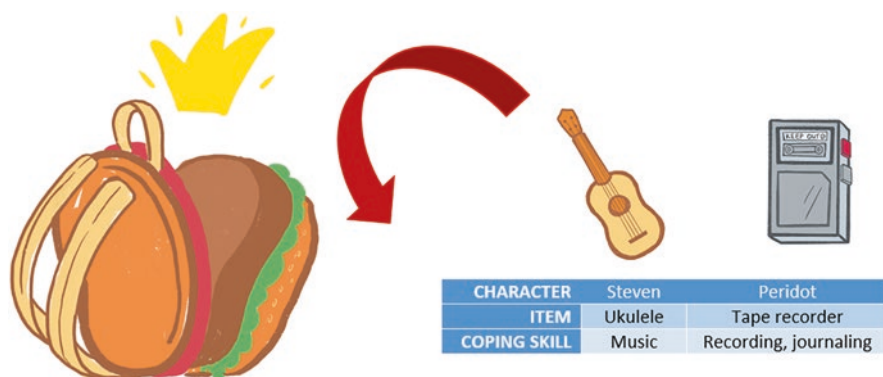| CHARACTER | Steven | Peridot |
|---|---|---|
| ITEM | Ukulele | Tape recorder |
| COPING SKILL | Music | Recording, journaling |

**Fig. 12.4** Examples of items and coping tools for a child's cheeseburger backpack

### 12.3.1 Cognitive Distortion Cactus

Throughout *Steven Universe Future*, Steven has difficulty expressing his thoughts for fear of burdening his family and friends. In Episode 10, "Prickly Pair," Steven accidentally creates a sentient cactus. At first, Steven finds relief by venting his insecurities to the cactus, including a fear that his friends do not need him anymore and are leaving him behind. As Steven continues to vent, the cactus grows more humanoid and learns how to speak. The cactus begins to resemble Steven in appearance and speech. Cactus Steven quickly becomes an external, physical representation of Steven's inner "prickly" thoughts. Before running away from home, Steven puts a box over Cactus Steven with the hope that no one will hear it repeating his innermost thoughts. As Steven continues to hide his feelings, Cactus Steven grows bigger and starts attacking the gems. Steven realizes that he is at fault for Cactus Steven's actions and that his cactus just needs love. In an act of self-love, Steven hugs the cactus. Though the hug is prickly and painful for Steven, Cactus Steven grows pink flowers and stops attacking everybody. While it's painful to face difficult emotions, doing so will bring peace and new growth. Therapists can use the story of Cactus Steven to identify cognitive distortions and corrections.

In Fig. 12.7, cactus names and thought bubble labels are related to psychological concepts that therapists commonly teach children. There are three different cacti which represent different types of self-awareness that one may experience when confronted with difficult emotions:

Automatic Cactus refers to one's automatic thoughts or "initial thoughts."

Curious Cactus signifies the child's "mindful thoughts." The Curious Cactus gazes at the initial thoughts of Automatic Cactus with an expression of detached curiosity that can be interpreted as appreciative and loving—as opposed to concerned, confused, or frustrated. The purpose of this facial expression is to model being a non-judgmental observer of oneself.

Wise Cactus refers to "wise mind," which expands on Mindful Cactus' observations by contextualizing them within other facts about the child's life. The "expanded

**COLORING YOUR GEM & FEELINGS IN THE BODY**

Draw and color your gem in the body below. Remember that gems are like feelings – they are both connected to your body! Feelings can be felt in the body. Feelings come and go, and don't last forever. Sometimes you can even have more than one feeling at the same time!

List as many feelings as you can on the lines below. Find a color that describes each feeling. Color in the squares next to the feelings you came up with.

Choose a feeling that you'd like to focus on. Imagine having that feeling right now. Find out where that feeling is in your body. Color in the places on the body where you have these feelings. Now, try the same thing with a few more different feelings.

Finally, draw and color your gem weapon and powers.

**COLORS        FEELINGS**

☐        Happy
☐        _____
☐        _____
☐        _____
☐        _____
☐        _____
☐        _____
☐        _____
☐        _____
☐        _____
☐        _____
☐        _____

**Fig. 12.5**  Worksheet for coloring your gem and feelings in the body

thoughts" label is also important to remove a sense of judgment or rejection of the automatic "initial thoughts" and reference an "expanded state" of enlightened thought.

It is important to convey that all three states self-awareness are equally valid and important (including the automatic thoughts), and that they are part of an interconnected system that helps the child respond to the world. The "expanded state" of Wise Cactus should be presented as useful, but not inherently superior to one's initial reactions or mindful observations. For this reason, it is important to avoid using
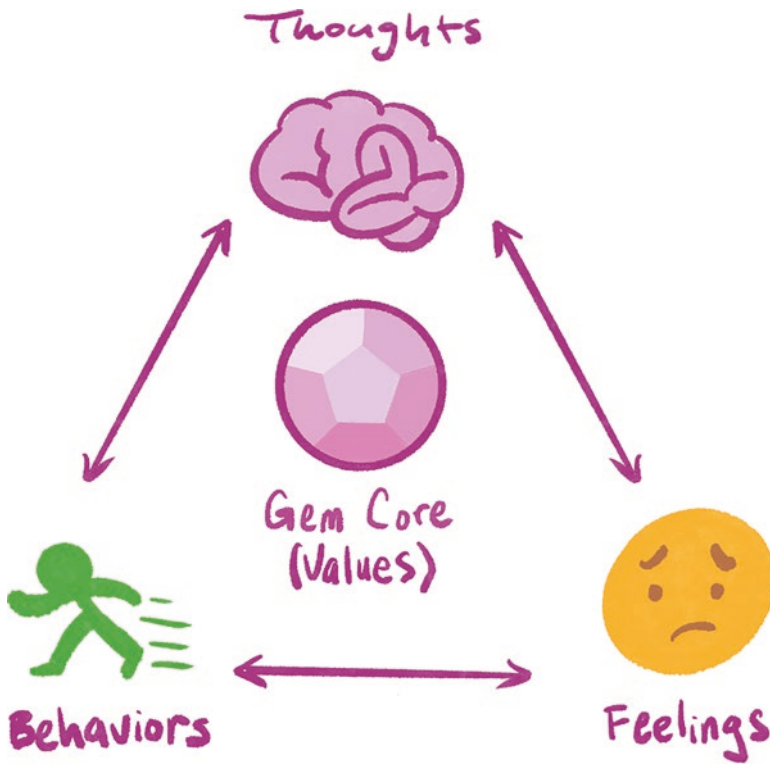
**Fig. 12.6** Cognitive Behavioral Triangle

**Table 12.2** Here comes a thought, feeling, and behavior exercise

| CBT concept | Relevant song lyric | Questions and suggestions |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Thought | "Here comes a thought" | • What initial thoughts came up in your mind?<br>• Were there any thinking errors or cognitive distortions in those automatic thoughts?<br>• Can you expand those thoughts and reframe the situation in a more helpful way? |
| Feeling | "How did it alarm you? How did it harm you?" | • How did those thoughts make you feel?<br>• Validate your feelings—it's okay to feel what you're feeling |
| Behavior | "Is this how we fall apart?" | • How did you react to those thoughts and feelings?<br>• What would acting differently have done? |
| Mindfulness | "Take a moment to find yourself" | • Take a step back from the situation<br>• Try a deep breathing, relaxation, or grounding exercise<br>• Re-center around your gem—your true self, values, and strengths |
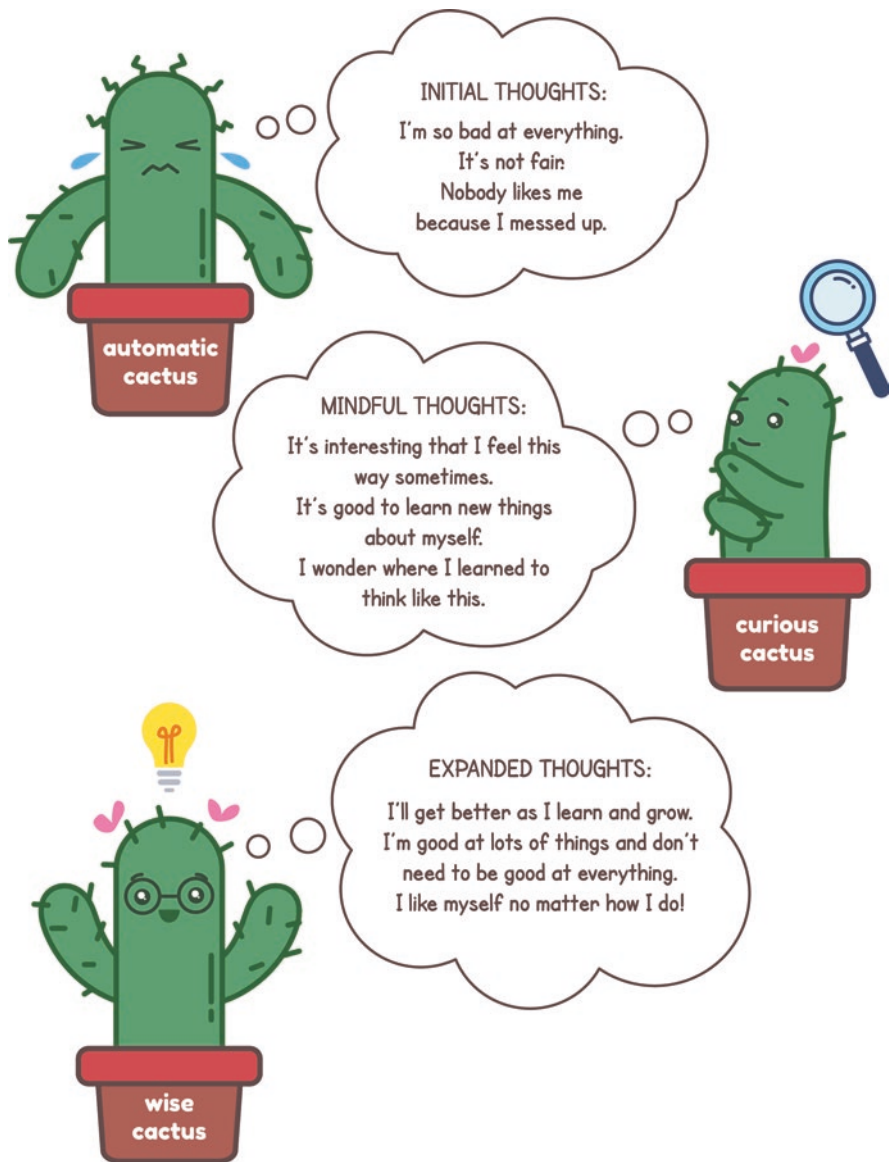
**Fig. 12.7** Example of cognitive distortion cactus exercise

labels like "negative" or "maladaptive" for the more difficult parts of the child's experience.

Figure 12.7 provides examples of thoughts that would be appropriate to put in the thought bubble of each cactus, which may be useful to reference while children fill out their own blank thought bubbles in Fig. 12.8. The language chosen for this

exercise overlaps with language used across multiple modalities of child therapy, including Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (Perepletchikova, 2018), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Turrell et al., 2016), Mentalization-Based Therapy (Midgley et al., 2017), and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (Purcell & Murphy, 2014).

Finally, the child can choose how they would like to acknowledge their cactus in Fig. 12.8. They can choose to hug their cactus like Steven, give the cactus a high-five or a thumbs up, or something totally different! It is important to present neutral models of saying "hi" to their cactus and to avoid suggesting that a particular reaction—like hugging or being emotionally or physically intimate—is a necessary progression of the child's experience. The child can pick their own version of a healthy outcome.

The exercise of filling out Fig. 12.8 can be expanded upon using Fig. 12.9. Using this worksheet, the therapist teaches the child how to identify how initial thoughts, feelings, and behaviors arise from situations, and how they may use a "cactus reframe" (referencing cognitive reframing) to adapt to those situations in a healthier way (Cohen et al., 2012).

## 12.4    Beach City—Identifying Networks of Safety and Support

Throughout *Steven Universe*, a common theme is empowerment through family, friends, and the Beach City community. Steven learns that he cannot take on the burden of saving Earth by himself and needs support in order to thrive. It can be helpful to have the child identify their network of safety and support in Fig. 12.10. Questions that can facilitate the activity include:
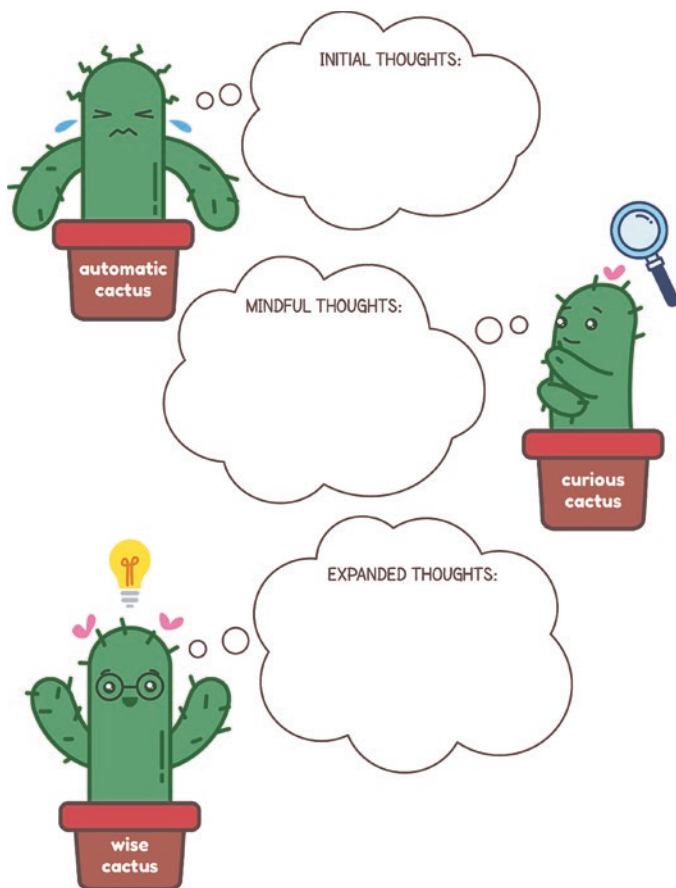
- What kinds of people do you find in different parts of the city (the boardwalk, the home/beach, in town)?
- If you were fighting an intergalactic war, which *Steven Universe* characters would you want on your team?
- Are these characters like anyone in your real life? How so?
- Where in your own community can you find the people you need to support you? Who are they?
- In what ways can these people support you? What are their strengths and limitations?

## 12.5    Determining Your Path

In *Steven Universe*, gems are manufactured for a specific purpose and face severe punishment if they diverge from that path. For example, Jaspers are created to be elite soldiers, Peridots are created to be engineers, and Lapis Lazulis are created to

**MY CACTUSES**

Cactuses can be prickly, just like some of our thoughts! What would your cactus say? What would your cactus do? Draw thorns on your cactus and label them with what your cactus would say or do.

INITIAL THOUGHTS:

automatic
cactus

MINDFUL THOUGHTS:

curious
cactus

EXPANDED THOUGHTS:

wise
cactus

How can you say "hi" to your cactus? Steven gave his cactus a hug, but you can do something totally different – like give your cactus a high-five or a thumbs up! The cool thing is that YOU get to decide!

**Fig. 12.8**   Worksheet for cognitive distortion cactus exercise

be terraformers. Steven's mother rebelled against that concept. For instance, she encouraged her Pearl to become a warrior, even though Pearls were created to be servants.

Individual differences among gems are also suppressed as much as possible. For example, Amethyst was created to be an elite soldier similar to the Jaspers, but an error in her creation led to her being smaller and weaker than others in her caste. She

**MY CACTUS JOURNAL**

| Situation | Initial Thoughts | Feelings | Behaviors | Cactus Reframe |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bad grade on a test | "I'm terrible." "Everything is ruined." | Anger Sadness Anxiety Fear | Give up on the class Avoid studying for the class | "If every pork chop were perfect, there would be no hot dogs!" - Greg Universe, Steven's Dad |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |



**Fig. 12.9** Thought record using cognitive distortion cactus

is seen within Gem Society as defective and fundamentally useless. Gem Society doesn't view her as being worthy of her intended path, doesn't allow her to choose a different path in life, and doesn't recognize that she can contribute as a warrior or as another role.

When Steven's mother insisted that gems be empowered to choose their own destiny and that individual differences be celebrated, an intergalactic war broke out. The concept of self-determination and celebration of diversity is a theme that LGBTQ+ youth commonly struggle with. A therapist may start discussion around these themes by asking:

**MY BEACH CITY**

Draw and describe who you'd want supporting you in your very own Beach City.
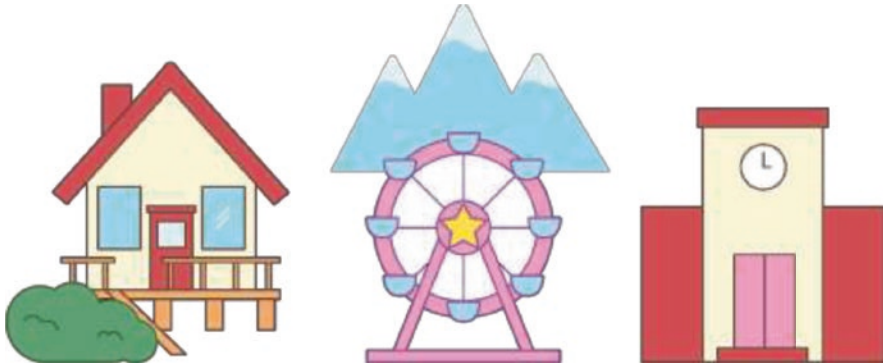


|  | HOME | FUNLAND | SCHOOL |
|---|---|---|---|
| Who can I find here? |  |  |  |
| Why are they here? |  |  |  |
| How do they support me? |  |  |  |

**Fig. 12.10** Worksheet for identifying networks of safety and support

- What do other people around you see you being the best at? The worst?
- What do you see yourself being the best at? The worst?
- In what ways do you see yourself the same way others see you? In what ways do you see yourself differently?
- How do people's expectations affect you? How do you imagine your expectations affect other children?
- Which people around you are best at seeing "the real you?" How do you identify these people? How can you also become good at seeing "the real" part of other children?

• How can you help other people understand "the real you" better? How can you take care of "the real you" and make sure it isn't pushed aside by the expectations of others? How can you support other children in this way?

## 12.6 Wrapping Up Therapy with a "Poof"

At the conclusion of therapy, the "Poofing" Exercise can create a space for children to reflect on their progress. In *Steven Universe*, when gems suffer great injuries in battle, they "poof." Their physical form disappears into their gem, and they undergo a recovery process in which they must reflect on their mistakes and growth. This process may take minutes or days, until the gem has reflected and is ready to reform themselves to show their new self. For this exercise, the child is encouraged to reflect on how they looked before and after the therapeutic intervention. At present, the challenges discussed in therapy as the cause of the child's "poofing," Have them imagine how they would look after they've reflected on these challenges in a therapeutic setting. Questions to ask include:

• What did you look like before "poofing" into therapy?
• How have you changed after "poofing" and reflecting during our therapy sessions?

  – Are there changes to the physical appearance of your gem?
  – Do you have any new powers?

By answering these questions, the child can reflect on how they and their perspectives have changed over the course of therapy.

## 12.7 Conclusion

The acclaimed series *Steven Universe* is a thoughtful and inclusive children's television show that highlights important themes of identity and mental health. Many episodes include direct and age-appropriate introductions to therapeutic concepts like mindfulness, understanding emotions, identity formation, and self-acceptance. In this chapter, we have outlined specific ways that therapists can use ideas from Steven Universe as a lens for exploring key CBT principles with clients. In particular, these strategies can be used to help children practice mindfulness exercises, reflect on their strengths, understand how their thoughts influence their mood and behavior, and learn cognitive restructuring skills to reduce their negative thought patterns. In turn, the fun and LGBTQ-affirming nature of this series may help increase children's comfort and level of engagement in CBT work with their therapists.

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