

Understand My Inner Life

The Emotional First Aid Kit

Five evidence-based tools you can use right now — the next time an emotion feels too big, too fast, or too familiar.

Free, yours to keep — print it or keep it on your phone. Five tools that take under two minutes each, each with a peer-reviewed foundation. Built on 8+ years in mental health and 4,500+ clinical hours in acute psychiatry.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

A couple of things to know first

This file is for you. The notice below sets out your licence to use it, and there is an important word on what this is — and what it isn't.

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This is psychoeducation and self-help — not therapy, diagnosis, or crisis care. If you are struggling significantly or thinking about harming yourself, please reach out now:
Emergency — your local number · Norway: Mental Helse 116 123 · UK/IE: Samaritans 116 123 · US: 988 · AU: 13 11 14 · findahelpline.com

How to use this file

Read it once when you are calm, so the tools are already familiar when you need them. Keep it on your phone. There is no right order and no need to finish in one sitting — open straight to the tool you need today. Take what helps, leave what doesn't, and be as patient with yourself here as you would be with someone you love.

START HERE

First aid is not the whole treatment — and it isn't meant to be.

Most advice tells you about your emotions. You can probably already name your patterns and explain your triggers. And still, in the actual moment — when the feeling floods in — the understanding evaporates and you react the way you always have. This kit is for that moment. It does not ask you to feel less or think harder. Each tool gives your nervous system a different experience, in under two minutes, with nothing you don't already have.

Why these five — not fifty

When your brain is already hijacked, a list of twenty techniques is one more thing to manage. These five were chosen on three criteria: under two minutes to do, a peer-reviewed foundation, and no preparation. Together they cover the five moments people most often get stuck in.

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A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Why this exists

Why I made this — and who it's for.

For eight years I have worked in mental health, most of them in acute psychiatry — the ward people come to on the hardest nights of their lives. I started young; at nineteen I was the youngest person ever hired onto my unit. I say that so you know this did not come from a textbook — it came from the room, from years of sitting beside people while they found their way through.

And I kept seeing the same thing. People were seen by the system, given a diagnosis, and sent home without the tools to actually live with it. The waitlist that never moved. The therapy that didn't quite land. The lonely sense that something is wrong, and no words for what. I have stood in that gap with hundreds of patients. I have also stood in it myself.

So this is not here to sell you a transformation or a quick fix. It is here to give you language for what you feel, and a way to meet it that doesn't ask you to have it all together first.

I have never wanted to stand above the people I work with. There is far less distance between the person who asks for help and the person who offers it than we like to pretend — a different year, a different loss, and any of us could be the one on the other side. The thing I believe most, I learned from Irvin Yalom: that the real change happens in the encounter itself, two people being honest in the same room. A kit like this can't be that room. But it can be honest with you, and it can put something real in your hands to do.

That is what this is. Take what helps. Leave what doesn't. And be as patient with yourself as you would be with someone you love.

> *"You don't need to be ready. You don't need to have it together. You just need to be willing to try."*
>
> — from the person who built Understand My Inner Life

THE SCIENCE

Why feelings hijack you

Three facts that make all five tools make sense. Read once.

The thinking brain goes partly offline

When a strong emotion fires, the brain's alarm centre (the amygdala) can override the slower, wiser prefrontal cortex — the "amygdala hijack". This is why "just think it through" fails mid-flood: the part that thinks is exactly the part that has been turned down. You have to work with the body, not against the wiring.

Naming calms the alarm

Brain-imaging studies (Lieberman et al., 2007) show that putting a feeling into words — "this is fear", "this is anger" — measurably lowers activity in the amygdala. One accurate word brings the thinking brain back online. This is why most tools here start with naming.

An emotion is a wave, not a permanent state

The acute surge of an emotion rises, crests and falls far faster than it feels like it will — roughly ninety seconds (Bolte Taylor, 2006). What keeps a feeling going long past the surge is the story we tell on top of it, and the fighting against it. Knowing the wave passes changes how you ride it — you can stay, instead of flee.

> *The thread through all five tools: notice the signal in the body → name it in a word → choose your response instead of being run by it. Notice, name, choose.*

TOOL 1 · ABOUT 90 SECONDS

The 90-Second Reset

An emotion is a wave in the body: a surge of chemistry that rises, crests and — if you let it — passes. Neuroanatomist Jill Bolte Taylor describes this as roughly a ninety-second cycle. What keeps a feeling alive for hours is not the wave itself; it is the story we start telling about it, and the fight we pick with it.

1. **Name it, quietly.** "This is anger." "This is a wave of shame." Naming activates the part of the brain that regulates emotion (Lieberman et al., 2007).

2. **Find it in the body.** Chest, throat, stomach, jaw. Put your attention there — not on the situation, on the sensation.

3. **Let it crest.** Count slowly to ninety while you breathe out longer than you breathe in. Do not solve anything. Do not reply to anything. Your only job is to stay with the sensation while it moves.

4. **Notice the turn.** Somewhere around the top of the count the intensity changes. That is the wave passing. If it rises again, it is usually a thought that re-fed it — go back to step 1.

> *Evidence: Bolte Taylor (2006), the ~90-second neurochemical cycle; Lieberman et al. (2007), affect labelling reduces amygdala activity.*

TOOL 2 · UNDER 30 SECONDS

The Physiological Sigh

When the body is activated, thinking your way down rarely works — the body is not listening to arguments. But it does listen to the breath. A double inhale followed by a long exhale is the fastest known way to lower physiological arousal in real time; it re-inflates the small air sacs in the lungs and tells the vagus nerve that the danger has passed.

1. **Inhale through the nose** — a normal breath in.
2. **Then a second, shorter sip of air on top**, also through the nose, filling the lungs fully.
3. **Exhale slowly through the mouth**, as long as you comfortably can — longer than both inhales together.
4. **Repeat two or three times.** Then breathe normally and notice the shoulders, jaw and heart rate.

Use it before a difficult conversation, after a message that landed badly, in a meeting, in a queue. Nobody can see you doing it.

> *Evidence: Balban et al. (2023, Cell Reports Medicine) — cyclic sighing outperformed other breathing patterns and mindfulness for reducing anxiety and improving mood; Huberman lab.*

TOOL 3 · ABOUT 2 MINUTES

The Scar & Sun Framework

Most of us carry two inner voices. **Scar** is the critical one — harsh, absolute, certain: "You always ruin this." "You should be over this by now." Scar learned long ago that keeping you in line through fear was the safest way to protect you. **Sun** is the steady, kind voice — the one you use with someone you love. Sun does not lie or minimise; it tells the truth gently and stays.

You do not silence Scar. You learn to answer it.

1. **Catch the sentence.** Write down, word for word, what the critic just said.
2. **Name the voice.** "That is Scar." Not "that is me", not "that is the truth" — a voice, with a history and a job.
3. **Ask what Scar is afraid of.** Under almost every harsh sentence is a fear: of failing, of being left, of not being enough.
4. **Let Sun answer — out loud if you can.** What would you say to a close friend who said this to themselves right now? Say exactly that, to yourself, in the second person: "You are human, and this was hard. What do you need?"

> *Evidence: Neff (2003) — self-compassion predicts more resilience and follow-through than self-criticism; Gilbert (2009), compassion-focused therapy; Hayes et al. (1999), defusion from thoughts.*

TOOL 4 · 4 SECONDS

The 4-Second Pause

Between what happens and what you do there is a space. Under pressure it shrinks to nothing — the reply is sent, the door slams, the withdrawal happens before you have decided anything. This tool widens the space by four seconds. That is enough for a choice.

1. **Feel your feet.** Press them into the floor. This pulls attention out of the head and into the body.
2. **One slow exhale** — longer than the inhale.
3. **Ask one question:** "What do I actually want here?" Not what would win. Not what would punish. What you want when this moment is over.
4. **Then act — or wait.** Waiting is a full answer. "I'll come back to this" is a complete sentence.

Make it automatic: your if–then

Decide in advance where you will use it. Write it once, so the plan fires before the reaction does:

If _____ (the moment) *, then* I feel my feet, exhale, and ask what I actually want.

> *Evidence: Gollwitzer (1999) — implementation intentions ("if X, then I will Y") reliably turn intentions into behaviour under pressure.*

TOOL 5 · ABOUT 60 SECONDS

The Body Check-In

You cannot regulate what you cannot locate. Many people who "feel too much" have in fact lost contact with the body's signals — the tension, the hollowness, the racing — and only notice the emotion once it has already taken over. Interoception, the sense of the inside of the body, can be trained. This is the sixty-second version.

1. **Place a hand on your chest.** Feel the warmth and the weight of it. This alone tends to slow the breath.

2. **Ask: am I activated, or shut down?** Activated feels fast, tight, hot, restless. Shut down feels heavy, flat, far away, numb. Neither is wrong; they need different things.

3. **Ask: where is the tension?** Scan from jaw to belly. Just notice — do not fix.

4. **Ask: what do I need right now?** Activated usually needs slowing (a long exhale, cool water, a walk). Shut down usually needs gentle waking (movement, warmth, light, a person). Give the body one small version of that.

> *Evidence: Craig (2009) — interoceptive awareness and emotional regulation; Porges (2011) — the two directions of nervous-system defence; Levine (2010) — completing the stress cycle.*

CLOSING

When first aid isn't enough

These five tools are for the moment. They are not the whole work — and they are not meant to be. If you notice that the same wave keeps coming, that the critic wins most days, or that low mood has stayed for weeks, that is not failure. It is information: the pattern underneath deserves more than first aid.

Signs it is time for more help: your functioning is slipping (sleep, work, relationships), you are leaning on substances to get through, or you have thoughts of harming yourself. Please reach out to your GP or a licensed professional today; and if it is urgent, use the crisis lines on page 2. Asking for more help is the same move you just made here — only larger.

"You don't need to be ready. You don't need to have it together. You just need to be willing to try."

— Kristina, who built Understand My Inner Life

Want the whole method — how emotions work, why they hijack you, and how to change the pattern rather than just survive the moment? Start with the free preview of the Emotion Regulation Course, or the eleven free workbooks, at **understandmyinnerlife.com**.

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