Understand My Inner Life

The Armour Audit

A psychoeducational worksheet from Understand My Inner Life — for the protective habits that kept you safe once, and quietly box you in now.

Free, yours to keep — print it or fill it in digitally. A complete, self-contained tool: the science, a worked example, the worksheet, and what to do in the moment.

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's 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: 113 (Norway) · 112 (EU) · 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

Print it, or fill it in on any device — it's yours to keep and return to as often as you need. There's no right pace, and no need to finish in one sitting. Work through it in order, or open straight to the part 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

Your defences aren't flaws. They're armour your mind built to survive.

When a feeling was once too big, too dangerous, or simply not allowed, the mind did something ingenious: it found a way to not fully feel it. It made you go numb, or busy, or analytical, or quick to blame, or quick to laugh it off. These are **defence mechanisms** — and they are not signs that something is wrong with you. They are signs that, at some point, you were protecting yourself with the only tools you had. The trouble is that armour built for one war gets worn into every room after, including the safe ones — and the same shield that keeps the pain out also keeps closeness, aliveness, and yourself out.

The aim of this worksheet is not to rip the armour off. That would just expose what it was guarding. The aim is gentler and more useful: to **see** it — to notice which piece you reach for, what feeling it's covering, and to begin choosing, in safe moments, to set a little of it down.

How to use this

Read the two science pages once — recognising your own armour in plain, non-shaming language does a surprising amount of the work. Then keep the worksheet nearby. When you notice yourself going cold, or busy, or suddenly "fine," work the steps: *notice, name, soften*.

Who it's for

The capable people who have a hard time letting a feeling all the way in — who intellectualise, deflect with humour, stay busy, minimise, or get critical the moment something tender approaches. If that's you, you are not closed or cold. You are well-defended — and defences, unlike wounds, can be gently updated.

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; I was nineteen when I began, the youngest person 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 through years of listening to people in mental health services. I have also stood in it myself.

A word on who I am: I am in clinical psychology training, not a licensed psychologist, and I work on the floor, in the room. What you are holding is psychoeducation — not treatment, and not a substitute for it.

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 meet. 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 workbook 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 · 1

The armour, named

You can only choose to lower what you can see. So first, learn the common pieces.



the armour kept you safe once — the work is simply seeing it

Defence mechanisms were first mapped by Anna Freud and have been studied ever since — including in a landmark decades-long Harvard study (George Vaillant) showing that the defences people rely on are strongly linked to how well their lives go. They aren't good or bad in themselves; they're more or less costly. Here are the ones most people meet.

Intellectualising / minimising — Moving a feeling up into the head where it's safer — analysing the breakup instead of grieving it, or shrinking it ("it's not a big deal") until it fits in a box you can carry. The understanding is real; the feeling stays unlived.

Denial & avoidance — Simply not letting the thing be true, or not going near it — the unopened letter, the symptom not mentioned, the topic always changed. It buys relief now and charges interest later.

Projection & displacement — Putting a feeling somewhere more bearable — sensing in others the anger you can't own (projection), or taking the work frustration out on the people at home (displacement). The feeling has to go *somewhere*; defences just redirect it.

Deflecting — humour, busyness, control — Sliding off the tender thing with a joke, a packed schedule, or a tightened grip on order. Each one works — that's why we keep them — and each one quietly keeps the soft feeling, and the closeness it invites, at arm's length.

Why this changes things: a defence is not a lie you're telling — it's a door the mind closes to manage a feeling. The question is never "what's wrong with me for doing this?" but "what feeling is this protecting me from — and do I still need the door shut *here, now*?"

Drawn from A. Freud, The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence (1936); and Vaillant's longitudinal work on adaptive vs maladaptive defences (e.g. Adaptation to Life, 1977).

THE SCIENCE · 2

Where it came from — and the inner dictator

The armour was issued by someone. Often it still speaks in their voice.

Most defences are installed in childhood, in a particular emotional climate — and they tend to come with a voice.

The feelings that were allowed — and the ones that weren't

Every family teaches, without words, which feelings are welcome and which get punished, ignored, or shamed. A child who learns that anger gets them rejected, or that sadness is "too much," builds a defence to keep that feeling out of sight — from others first, and eventually from themselves. The defence was once a perfectly intelligent adaptation to a real environment.

The inner dictator

Often the loudest enforcer is a harsh internal voice — what schema therapy calls the *punitive parent* or inner critic: a strict, contemptuous, internalised echo of a real critical voice, or of the standards you had to meet to feel safe. It says *don't be weak, don't make a fuss, keep it together*. It feels like the truth. It is actually a recording — and recordings can be answered.

The cost, and the way out

Armour is heavy. The same defences that keep pain out keep warmth, spontaneity, and your own inner life out too; that's why over-defended people often feel safe and strangely empty at once. The way out isn't force. It's *titration* — lowering the armour a little, in safe company, feeling a little of what's underneath, and discovering it doesn't destroy you. Each time, the door learns it can stay open a crack.

Mechanisms: Young's schema-therapy modes (punitive/critical parent; protector modes); Gilbert's compassion-focused therapy on the threat-based inner critic; Bowlby on attachment and the internalisation of caregivers.

WHY THIS IS SO HARD

Why the armour won't just come off

If you can't seem to let people in even when you want to — here's why.

If you go cold, busy, or ‘fine’ the moment something tender approaches — and can't seem to stop — that's not coldness. Here's why the armour holds.

It worked — Every defence kept you safe once — that's why it's still here. The mind keeps what protected it, long after the danger has passed.

It runs below awareness — Defences fire automatically, before you notice. By the time you catch the deflection, it's already done its job. You can't choose to drop what you don't see in time.

Underneath is the thing you armoured against — The armour guards a real wound. Lowering it means feeling what it was protecting you from — so of course the system resists, hard.

So if knowing hasn’t been enough: if you can't just ‘open up,’ that's not because you're closed or cold. It's protection that outlived its war, still doing its job on schedule.

And here’s the hope — this is the part that matters: armour can be set down where it's safe, an inch at a time. Each time you let a little show and nothing breaks, the system learns it's safe to relax — and the door stays open a bit longer. The experiment on the next pages is how you test it.

SEE IT DONE

A worked example

Before you fill it in, watch the audit work on a realistic, everyday defence.

Henrik, 42 (a composite, not a real person), is describing his divorce to a friend — fluently, almost cheerfully, full of analysis about "attachment incompatibility" and statistics on second marriages. The friend says, gently, "but how are *you?*" and Henrik feels a flicker of irritation and changes the subject. Here's the same audit you're about to learn.

1 · THE PIECE OF ARMOUR
Naming it without shame: **intellectualising**, with a side of humour to deflect. Henrik is up in his head, where it's analysable and safe, rather than down in the chest, where it hurts.

2 · THE FEELING UNDERNEATH
"If I weren't analysing it, what would I feel?" — grief, and a quiet shame that the marriage failed. The exact feelings the analysis is built to skip.

3 · WHERE IT CAME FROM
In Henrik's childhood, tears got him called 'dramatic' and competence got him praised. The armour made perfect sense then: *be impressive, don't be sad.*

4 · THE INNER DICTATOR
The voice behind the deflection: "Don't wallow. Pull yourself together. Nobody wants to hear it." Whose voice? His father's, almost word for word. A recording — not a fact.

5 · THE SOFTENING
Henrik doesn't have to break down on the spot. He just lets one true sentence through: "Honestly? I'm sadder about it than I let on." The armour lowers an inch. The friend moves closer. Nothing collapses.

Nothing about the divorce changed. What changed is that an automatic deflection became a *named defence, a named feeling, and a named voice* — and a person who can see his armour can choose, sometimes, to set it down.

THE WORKSHEET · 1

Audit the armour

Next time you notice yourself going cold, busy, or 'fine,' work down the steps.

1 · The piece of armour — which did I just reach for? (circle, no shame — this is reconnaissance, not judgement)

intellectualise · minimise · deny / avoid · deflect with humour · stay busy · control / tidy · project · displace onto someone safer · go numb

2 · The feeling underneath — "if I weren't doing that, what would I be feeling right now?"

3 · Where it came from — when did this armour first make sense? What feeling wasn't safe to show, and to whom?

4 · The protection — what is this defence still trying to keep me safe from? (it always has a kind intention, even when the cost is high)

Notice the relief. Naming a defence with curiosity instead of contempt is itself a small lowering of the armour. You can't shame yourself into openness — only understand your way there.

THE WORKSHEET · 2

Answer the inner dictator

The harsh voice isn't the truth. It's a recording — and it can be met with a steadier one.

5 · The dictator's line — what does the harsh inner voice say when the soft feeling approaches? (write it word for word)

Whose voice is it, really? When did you first hear something like it?

What was it originally trying to protect you from — and is that danger still here, now?

The steadier voice — what would a wise, kind figure say back to the dictator, on your behalf? (the one who sees the whole story)

"The armour kept you alive once. You're allowed to thank it — and to set it down where it's safe."

IN THE MOMENT

Lower the armour safely

You don't drop it all at once. You titrate — a little, then steady. ~5 minutes.

Defended is not the same as regulated. Regulated means you can feel something and stay steady; defended means you've shut the feeling out to stay steady. The skill is letting a little of the feeling in *while* staying grounded — so the nervous system learns the feeling is survivable.

1. **Notice the move, name it kindly.** “Ah — I'm intellectualising.” No contempt. Naming is the inch of space in which choice becomes possible.
2. **Drop from head to body.** Ask: *where is the feeling I'm avoiding, in my body?* Put a hand there. You're not analysing it now — you're letting it exist, physically, for a moment.
3. **Let in one true sentence.** Not the whole flood — one honest line, to yourself or a safe person: “I'm more hurt by this than I'm letting on.” That's the armour lowered an inch, which is enough.
4. **Steady, and notice nothing broke.** Long exhale, feet on the floor. The feeling rose, you stayed, the world held. That is the rep that teaches the door it can stay open.

After trying it — what feeling did the armour turn out to be guarding, and what happened when you let a little of it in?

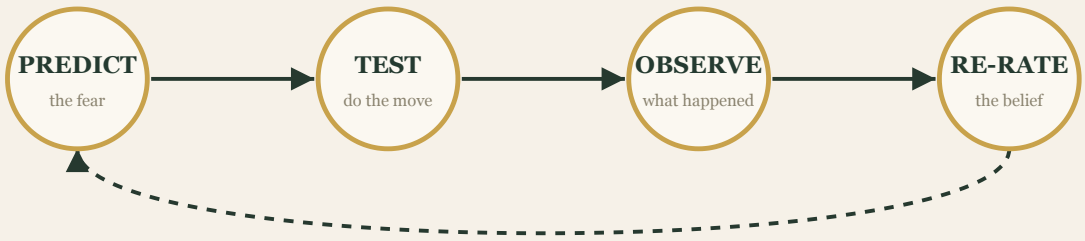
A caution: some armour guards genuinely heavy things — trauma, loss, abuse. If lowering it opens something that feels too big to hold alone, that's not failure; it's a sign to do this work with a good therapist alongside you. Titrate. You set the pace.

PRACTISE IT · 7 TIMES

Lower it, an inch at a time

Awareness of the armour changes nothing until you test setting it down — and watch the catastrophe not come.

Pick safe moments over the next two weeks and practise letting a little of the real feeling show. The experiment is simple: does the disaster the armour predicts actually happen? This is a **behavioural experiment** — one of the core methods CBT uses to change a belief: you don't argue with the fear, you *test* it in real life and let the evidence update it.



each round, the belief updates — then you run it again

Before · Set it up

The belief I'm putting to the test. What does the armour predict will happen if you lower it? ('they'll judge me / use it / I'll fall apart')

How strongly I believe that *right now*: _____ / 100

The move I'll make. The specific, doable thing I'll do to test it:

e.g. say one true sentence instead of deflecting · let a feeling show to a safe person · drop the joke / the busyness / the 'I'm fine'

When & how often: **7 times over the next two weeks** — aim for one a day.

What I expect will happen. Exactly what do I predict when I do it?

My best guess at how I'll feel afterwards (0 = awful, 10 = fine): _____ / 10

DURING & AFTER · THE DAILY LOG

Run it — and watch the evidence build

One honest line a day. The belief score falling, day by day, is your change made visible.

Each day, three small steps: (1) do the move — even a tiny version counts; **(2)** write one honest line on what *actually* happened (not what you feared — what real life did); **(3)** re-rate how strongly you still believe the original fear, 0–100. After the first few, jot what you let show — and what the other person actually did:

You don't need a perfect run — miss a day, just pick it up the next. Even four honest entries will show you something real. Watch the last number, not your mood: that score drifting down, day by day, *is* your change, in your own handwriting. Keep going — you're doing the part most people only read about.

Day	What I did — and what *actually* happened	Believe the fear now /100
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		

When the 7 are done — the verdict

What actually happened, across the reps. What did the reps teach you about the feared outcome — and what became possible when the armour came down an inch?

What the evidence actually says — my updated belief, in my own words:

Believe the *original* fear now: _____ / 100 — compare it to your starting score. That gap is the proof, in your own handwriting.

However far it moved — even a little — you just tested a fear instead of obeying it. That is the whole skill, and it compounds every time you use it. Be proud of this page, and keep it.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Common traps — and the truth

The mistakes people make with their own defences, and what's actually true instead.

“My defences mean I'm fake or cold.” — They mean you were once protecting yourself intelligently. A defence is a kindness the mind did for you under pressure. The work isn't to condemn it — it's to thank it and update it.

“I should just rip the armour off.” — Forcing it usually backfires. Exposing a guarded wound all at once usually slams the door harder. Lasting change comes from titration — a little, steady, safe — not from forcing yourself open.

“The critical voice is just being honest with me.” — The inner dictator feels like truth because it's familiar, not because it's accurate. It's an internalised recording. You can listen to what it was trying to protect — and still decline to obey its contempt.

“If I feel this, it'll never stop.” — Feelings are waves, not floods without end. The thing that makes them endless is the defending against them. Felt and named, even big feelings crest and pass.

“Other people don't need all this armour.” — Nearly everyone is defended somewhere; the composed people around you have their own well-worn pieces. You're not uniquely guarded. You're human, and now you're becoming aware — which is where it starts to change.

The one to remember: you don't have to be undefended to be free. You have to be able to *see* your armour, and choose — in the rooms that are safe — to set a little of it down. That choice is the whole of it.

KEEP THIS

The pocket version

Photograph this page. The whole audit, in the space of one honest breath.

When you notice yourself going cold, busy, or ‘fine,’ ask:

1. **Armour** — which piece did I reach for? (name it kindly)
2. **Underneath** — what would I feel if I weren't doing that?
3. **Origin** — when did this first make sense to need?
4. **Dictator** — what's the harsh voice saying? Whose is it?
5. **Soften** — let in one true sentence. Steady. Notice nothing broke.

The steadier voice:

“That feeling is allowed here. I'm safe enough now to let a little of it in. I don't have to perform ‘fine.’”

“The armour kept me alive once.
I can thank it — and set it down where it's safe.”

What you call coldness isn't a flaw in you. It's protection that outlived its war — and you are learning, rep by rep, to lay it down where you're finally safe enough to.

REFERENCES & FURTHER READING

Where this comes from

Real, published work — so you can read further, and check it for yourself.

The ideas here draw on published research and established psychological theory; the key sources are below, with enough detail to find them. Some framings (the images and metaphors) are my own, built from that work; a few practical heuristics (noted as such) come from books or everyday practice rather than single studies.

Freud, A. (1936/1992). *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*. Karnac.

Vaillant, G. E. (1977). *Adaptation to Life*. Little, Brown. — longitudinal study of adaptive vs maladaptive defences.

Young, J. E., Klosko, J. S., & Weishaar, M. E. (2003). *Schema Therapy: A Practitioner's Guide*. Guilford Press. — critical/punitive parent & protector modes.

Gilbert, P. (2009). *The Compassionate Mind*. Constable. — the threat-based inner critic.

Bowlby, J. (1988). *A Secure Base*. Basic Books. — internalisation of caregivers.

Schwartz, R. C. (1995). *Internal Family Systems Therapy*. Guilford Press. — protective vs vulnerable parts.

Bennett-Levy, J., Butler, G., Fennell, M., Hackmann, A., Mueller, M., & Westbrook, D. (Eds.). (2004). *Oxford guide to behavioural experiments in cognitive therapy*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/med:psych/9780198529163.001.0001 — the behavioural-experiment method.

How to go deeper: To find any of these: copy the *title* (in quotation marks) into Google Scholar (**scholar.google.com**) — journal articles often show a free PDF link on the right, and books are available from any library or bookshop. For the frameworks used here: self-compassion (**self-compassion.org**, Kristin Neff), Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (**contextualscience.org**), Metacognitive Therapy (Adrian Wells), and CBT (the **Beck Institute**, beckinstitute.org).



This is the first thread.

One worksheet won't dissolve a lifetime of armour — but learning to see it, and lower it where it's safe, changes everything that comes after. If this helped, the full *Understand My Inner Life* Emotion Regulation course is where you learn to do this with every protective pattern: where it came from, what it guards, and exactly what to do in the moment — step by step, with the same care and depth — skills you can keep for life.

> *"The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change."*
>
> CARL ROGERS

Understand My Inner Life · Built on 8+ years of frontline work in mental health services.
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CONTINUE YOUR WORK

Where to go from here

More tools, and the deeper work — for whenever you're ready.

If this helped, here's where it continues. The free tools are yours to keep; the deeper programs are where this work goes much further, with the same care and depth.

Go deeper

The Emotion Regulation Course — the full method, step by step

Perfectionism & Burnout — for the quietly exhausted

The Secrets of the Brain — how your mind actually works

The Limerence Workbook — when a person becomes the thing you can't put down

The Saturday Morning Protocol — a weekly 90-minute ritual

The Relapse Prevention Toolkit — keep the gains you've made

The Accountability System — close the gap between knowing and doing

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