

Understand My Inner Life

Your First Three Tools

A free starter kit from Understand My Inner Life — three things you can use today, the moment a feeling hits, when knowing isn't enough.

Free, yours to keep — print it or fill it in digitally. A complete, self-contained kit: the science of why feelings hijack you, and three tools that actually work 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

The problem was never that you don't understand yourself.

Most advice tells you *about* your emotions. You can probably already name your patterns, explain your triggers, trace your history. And still, in the actual moment — when the feeling floods in — the understanding evaporates and you react the way you always have. That gap, between *knowing* and *being able to do it when it counts*, is the real problem. It's also entirely trainable.

These three tools are different from advice because they're things you *do*, not things you think. None of them asks you to feel less or think harder. Each one gives your nervous system a different experience in the moment — and a new experience, repeated, is what actually re-trains a reaction. That's not motivation talking; it's how learning works.

How to use this kit

Read the science page once — it's short, and it makes the tools make sense. Then pick the one tool that fits the trouble you have most: the Golden Second (for reacting too fast), the 5-Minute Reset (for being flooded), or the decoder (for a bad feeling you can't name). Practise it when things are calm, so it's there when they're not. You're building reflexes, not reading a pamphlet.

A promise about scope

This is psychoeducation and self-help — genuinely useful, and honestly limited. It is not therapy, and it won't fix everything. But these are among the first things I'd hand anyone who feels stuck despite understanding themselves perfectly. Take what helps; leave the rest.

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

Why feelings hijack you

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



the shape all three tools share

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 — sometimes called an 'amygdala hijack.' This is why 'just think it through' fails mid-flood: the part that thinks is exactly the part that's been turned down. You have to work *with* the body, not against the wiring.

Naming calms the alarm — Brain-imaging studies (Lieberman, UCLA) show that putting a feeling into words — 'this is fear,' 'this is anger' — measurably lowers activity in the amygdala. *Affect labelling*, in the jargon. One accurate word brings the thinking brain back online. This is why every tool here starts with naming.

An emotion is a wave, not a permanent state — The acute surge of an emotion is short-lived — it rises, crests, and falls far faster than it feels like it will. What keeps a feeling going long past the surge is the *story* we tell on top, and the fighting against it. Knowing the wave passes changes how you ride it — you can stay, instead of flee.

The thread through all three tools: notice the signal in the body → name it in a word → choose your response instead of being run by it. Notice, name, choose. Once you see that shape, the tools are just three ways of practising it.

Sources: the 'amygdala hijack' (Goleman, after LeDoux's fear-circuitry research); Lieberman et al. on affect labelling; the parasympathetic 'brake' engaged by slow exhalation (Jerath et al., 2006; Zaccaro et al., 2018).

WHY THIS IS SO HARD

Why knowing better never changed it

If you understand yourself and still get hijacked — here's why, and why it isn't your fault.

If you've read the books and still react in ways you regret, you're not failing. You've run into the gap almost no one explains: understanding and changing run on different systems.

Insight and action are different skills — Knowing *why* you react lives in the thinking brain; changing the reaction in the moment is a body-level skill. One doesn't automatically become the other — they're trained differently.

The thinking brain goes offline when you need it — Under a strong feeling, the reasoning part is partly muted by design. So 'just think it through' fails exactly when it matters — not because you're weak, but because of the wiring.

Old patterns are deep grooves — Your reactions have been rehearsed for years. Repetition makes them automatic — and automatic doesn't yield to a single good intention.

So if knowing hasn't been enough: if you know better and still do it, that's not a willpower problem or a character flaw. It's the difference between insight (which you have) and practice (which is learnable).

And here's the hope — this is the part that matters: a reaction that was learned can be re-learned — through small reps, in real moments, while it's still small. That's the whole point of these three tools: not more understanding, but practice that closes the gap. Start with one.

TOOL 1

The Golden Second

For reacting too fast — the snap, the lash-out, the regret. The space between signal and reaction is where freedom lives.

1 · Notice the signal

Something happens in your body before your mind catches up — a tightening, a heat, a pull, a clench. That sensation is the earliest signal, arriving *before* the thought and well before the reaction. The whole skill begins with catching it as early as you can. Early is easy; late is almost impossible.

2 · Name it

Say it, even silently: “This is anger.” “This is hurt.” “This is fear.” One accurate word calms the alarm centre and brings the thinking brain back online (that's the affect-labelling research, working for you in real time). You are not indulging the feeling by naming it — you're taking back the wheel.

3 · Choose

Now you're in the gap — one second between the signal and the automatic response. That second is yours. The reaction is a habit; the choice is freedom. You don't have to choose perfectly. You just have to choose *on purpose*.

Practise on something small — recall a recent minor reaction you'd take back. What was the body signal (and how early could you have caught it)? What's the word for the feeling? What could you have chosen in the gap?

“You don't control the first feeling. You get to choose what happens next.”

TOOL 2

The 5-Minute Reset

For when you're over the edge — racing, panicky, flooded, can't think. You can't reason your way calm. Speak to the body first.

When you're flooded, the thinking brain is partly offline by design — so trying to talk yourself down doesn't work, and trying harder makes it worse. The body, though, has switches the mind can't reach. This takes about five minutes, and each step is doing something specific.

1. **Lengthen the exhale.** In through the nose for 4, out slowly for 6 or 8 — the out-breath longer than the in. Five rounds. *Why:* a long exhale physically engages the parasympathetic 'brake' via the vagus nerve. The single fastest non-drug way to lower the alarm.
2. **Cool or ground.** Cold water on the face or wrists, or press both feet hard into the floor and feel the contact. *Why:* cold triggers a reflex that slows the heart (Linehan, 2015); grounding gives the alarm system clear 'safe, solid, here' signals it can't argue with. *(Skip the cold water if you have a heart condition or very low blood pressure.)*
3. **Orient to now.** Slowly name three things you can see, two you can hear, one you can feel. *Why:* distress lives in the remembered past or predicted future; orienting drags attention into the actual present, where you're almost always safe.
4. **One small move.** Stand, stretch, walk to another room. *Why:* the stress response mobilised your body for action; a small movement lets that energy discharge instead of churning.

After trying it — what shifted, even a little? (Naming the shift is how your brain files the evidence that it works, so you'll reach for it again.)

Under the edge instead? If you're not flooded but numb, heavy, shut down — flip every step: stand, move, step into daylight, warmth, call someone. Gently *activate* rather than calm. Both are dysregulation; they just need opposite medicine.

TOOL 3

Why Do I Feel This Way?

For a vague bad feeling you can't name — a 60-second decoder from murky dread to the actual need underneath.

A hard feeling is rarely random. Far more often it's a signal with a cause — and very often that cause is a need that's gone unmet, frequently a plain physical one your mind has dressed up as a crisis. Work down the four steps; don't analyse, just notice.

1 · The sensation — what do I notice in my body right now? (tight, heavy, restless, hollow, hot, clenched…)

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2 · The emotion — if I had to name it in one word? (and naming it, notice it settle slightly)

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3 · The likely need — which of these is low right now? (circle — be honest; it's often the boring one)

sleep · food / blood sugar · water · movement · daylight · rest · connection · safety · being seen · too much caffeine

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4 · The smallest step — one tiny, genuinely doable thing I can give that need today (not the whole solution — the next true step)

Why the boring answer matters: a huge amount of what feels like a psychological crisis is a tired, hungry, lonely, or over-caffeinated body sending up flares. Meeting the need doesn't dismiss the feeling — it removes the fuel the feeling was running on.

"Some of what you're feeling isn't a flaw in you. It's a need, asking to be met."

HOW THEY FIT

One skill, three doors

When to reach for which — and how they build on each other.

These aren't three unrelated tricks. They're three entry points into the same underlying skill — *notice, name, choose* — matched to three different kinds of moment. Use this as your map.

Reacting too fast? — The Golden Second. Catch the body signal early, name it, and find the gap before the automatic reaction. Best for snappy, reactive moments with other people.

Flooded and can't think? — The 5-Minute Reset. Don't try to think — bring the body down first, then the mind comes back on its own. Best for panic, overwhelm, racing.

Vague, nameless bad feeling? — The decoder. Work down from sensation to emotion to need to next step. Best for low, murky, can't-put-your-finger-on-it states.

The deeper pattern, if you want it

Underneath all three is a single shift: from being *run by* your emotions to being *in relationship with* them. You stop treating feelings as emergencies to be escaped and start treating them as signals to be read. That shift — practised in a thousand small moments — is the whole of emotional regulation. These three tools are simply where it begins.

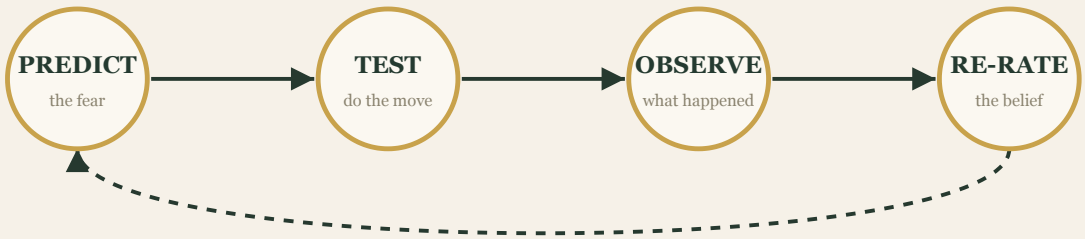
If you only remember one thing: in any hard moment, drop into the body, name the feeling in a word, and ask what it needs. Notice, name, choose. Everything else is detail.

PRACTISE IT · 7 TIMES

Wear the tools in

A tool only works if you've already used it when calm. Build the reflex, and prove it to yourself.

These three tools only do anything when used. Over the next two weeks, reach for one — the Golden Second, the 5-Minute Reset, or the 'why do I feel this way?' decoder — the next several times a feeling rises, while it's still small. 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 do you predict — can a small tool really change a real moment? (rate your honest expectation, 0–100)

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. Golden Second on a flash of irritation · 5-Minute Reset when flooded · decode a heavy, hard-to-name feeling

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: which tool, what moment — and what shifted, even slightly?

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. Across the reps — which tool worked best for *you*, and in which kind of moment? That's the start of your own kit.

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.

KEEP THIS

The pocket version

Photograph this page. All three tools, ready before the next hard moment.

The Golden Second — for reacting too fast

Notice the body signal (early!) → **name** it in a word → **choose** in the gap.

The 5-Minute Reset — for being flooded

Exhale long (in 4, out 6–8) · **cool or ground** · **orient** (3 see, 2 hear, 1 feel) · **one small move.** *(Numb instead? Flip it — activate, don't calm.)*

Why Do I Feel This Way? — for a nameless feeling

Sensation → **emotion** (one word) → **need** (what's low?) → **one small step** to meet it.

And hold onto this:

"Notice. Name. Choose.
You don't control the first feeling — you choose what happens next."

Three tools won't change everything — but they're real, and they work, and they're a start. Reach for them when it's calm, so they're there when it's not.

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.

Lieberman, M. D., Eisenberger, N. I., Crockett, M. J., Tom, S. M., Pfeifer, J. H., & Way, B. M. (2007). Putting feelings into words: Affect labeling disrupts amygdala activity in response to affective stimuli. *Psychological Science, 18*(5), 421–428. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01916.x

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LeDoux, J. E. (1996). *The emotional brain: The mysterious underpinnings of emotional life.* Simon & Schuster.

Jerath, R., Edry, J. W., Barnes, V. A., & Jerath, V. (2006). Physiology of long pranayamic breathing: Neural respiratory elements may provide a mechanism that explains how slow deep breathing shifts the autonomic nervous system. *Medical Hypotheses, 67*(3), 566–571. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mehy.2006.02.042 — a hypothesis paper; see Zaccaro et al. (2018) for the empirical review.

Zaccaro, A., Piarulli, A., Laurino, M., Garbella, E., Menicucci, D., Neri, B., & Gemignani, A. (2018). How breath-control can change your life: A systematic review on psycho-physiological correlates of slow breathing. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience, 12*, 353. https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2018.00353

Linehan, M. M. (2015). *DBT skills training manual* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press. — the cold-water / dive-reflex ("TIP") skill.

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 where it begins.

Three tools won't change everything — but they're real, they work in the moment, and they're a true start. If something here landed, the full *Understand My Inner Life* course is where this work goes much deeper: why you feel the way you do, what each emotion needs, and exactly what to do about it — step by step, with the same care and depth. No pressure. The door's open whenever you're ready.

> *"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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