PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS FOR DIFFICULT TIMES

A Shared Resource Library for Students and Educators

Practical tools for grounding, emotional regulation, coping, connection, and support-seeking in crisis-affected higher education.

CLOUD HED

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Toolkit at a glance

PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS FOR DIFFICULT TIMES

INTENDED AUDIENCE	Students, educators, tutors, programme staff and other members of a higher education community who want a brief, optional and non-clinical psychological tool.
PURPOSE	To provide a shared library of grounding, regulation, coping, connection, recovery and stabilisation tools that can be used independently or alongside the audience-specific toolkits through cross-references.
LEARNING GOALS	• Identify the tool that best matches the current need. • Use grounding, orientation, breathing or movement safely. • Notice thoughts, feelings, body signals and urges to action. • Choose one manageable and values-consistent next action. • Map support and plan small recovery or stabilisation actions. • Recognise when to stop and seek human, professional or urgent support.
USE AND CONNECTIONS	This library functions independently but is also designed to complement the **Student**, **Educator** and **Institutional Toolkits** through cross-references. It provides a shared set of optional, non-clinical psychological skills that can be used across roles, while audience-specific guidance remains within each toolkit. It contains its own boundaries for safety, choice, privacy, help-seeking, and urgent support. It provides personal tools, not academic decisions, educator procedures, institutional policy, therapy, or emergency response.

About this toolkit

Crises can affect attention, memory, sleep, emotional regulation, motivation, decision-making, and the ability to remain connected with other people. This library brings together simple psychological skills that may help reduce immediate overload, restore a sense of orientation, and support one workable next step.

The tools can be used by students, educators, tutors, programme staff, and other members of a higher education community. They may be consulted in any order.

SAFETY NOTE

Stop any tool that increases distress. Choose a different tool, pause, or seek support.

What this toolkit is not

- It is not therapy, diagnosis, clinical treatment, or a substitute for professional support.
- It is not designed to process traumatic memories or require detailed discussion of distressing events.
- It is not an emergency service and should not be relied on when someone may be in immediate danger.
- It is not a performance, assessment, or compliance tool.

Find the tool you need

Start with the description that is closest to what you are experiencing. More than one tool may be useful, but one is enough to begin.

WHAT IS HAPPENING?	GO TO
I feel scattered, disconnected, or pulled into the crisis around me.	**Tool 1**: Pause and orient
My attention is stuck on distressing sensations, memories, or thoughts.	**Tool 2**: Ground through the senses
My body feels activated, tense, or unable to settle.	**Tool 3**: Slow the exhale
I know something is wrong, but I cannot identify what I feel or need.	**Tool 4**: Name what is happening
I feel an urgent need to react, reply, withdraw, or make a decision.	**Tool 5**: STOP before reacting
My thoughts, feelings, body signals, and actions are pulling in different directions.	**Tool 6**: Thought–Feeling–Body–Action Check
A difficult thought feels like a fact or a command.	**Tool 7**: Unhook from difficult thoughts
I am overwhelmed by everything I cannot control.	**Tool 8**: Control–Influence–Acknowledge Map
I cannot start because the task is too large.	**Tool 9**: One manageable next step
I feel disconnected from what matters or unsure how I want to act.	**Tool 10**: Values-based action
My inner response is harsh, blaming, or hopeless.	**Tool 11**: A kinder and more realistic response
I feel alone, or I do not know who can help with what.	**Tool 12**: Support Network Map

WHAT IS HAPPENING?	GO TO
I need to reduce accumulated strain or reconnect with a sustainable rhythm.	**Tool 13**: Small recovery actions
Stress has been building, and I need a personal plan.	**Tool 14**: Personal Stabilisation Plan
Distress feels unsafe, persistent, or too heavy to handle with these tools.	**Tool 15**: When these tools are not enough

Safety and choice

Psychological tools are most useful when they increase choice, orientation, and access to support. They should not force calm, disclosure, or emotional processing. Different people respond differently to the same practice.

PRINCIPLE	WHAT IT MEANS	WHAT TO DO
Choice	You decide whether to use a tool and may stop at any point.	Select the least demanding option that feels workable.
Present focus	The tools return attention to the current environment and the next step.	Do not use them to revisit or analyse traumatic memories.
Flexibility	Breathing, sensory, writing, and movement practices do not suit everyone.	Switch methods if one increases discomfort.
Connection	Self-help should not mean becoming isolated.	Use support from trusted people and professional services when needed.
Safety	Immediate risk needs direct action, not a worksheet.	Follow local emergency, safeguarding, or crisis procedures.

BREATH-FOCUSED PRACTICES ARE OPTIONAL

Some people find breath-focused practices uncomfortable, especially during panic or after trauma. Use sensory grounding, movement, or orientation instead.

IMMEDIATE DANGER

If you or someone else is facing immediate danger, thoughts of suicide or serious self-harm, an inabiltiy to remain safe, severe disorientation, or the risk of harm to another person, contact local emergency services or a verified crisis service now. Do not rely on this toolkit alone.

TOOL 1

Pause and orient

RETURN ATTENTION TO THE PRESENT ENVIRONMENT BEFORE DECIDING WHAT TO DO NEXT.

USE THIS TOOL WHEN

You feel mentally scattered, disconnected, frozen, flooded by information, or pulled into many demands at once.

1. Pause what you are doing if it is safe to do so.
2. Notice the support beneath you: the chair, floor, wall, or surface.
3. Look around and name where you are. Notice the date, the approximate time of day, and what is happening in the immediate environment.
4. Identify one thing that needs attention now and one thing that can wait.
5. Choose the next action that protects safety, clarity, or connection.

Where am I now?	Name the place and what is directly around you. (Enter your answers)
What is true right now?	Separate the immediate situation from the whole crisis.
What needs attention first?	Choose one priority rather than trying to solve everything.
What can wait?	Name one demand that does not need action yet.
My next useful action	Keep it specific and within reach.

KEY IDEA

Orientation is not denial. It creates enough distance from overload to make a safer and more deliberate decision.

TOOL 2

Ground through the senses

USE INFORMATION FROM THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENT TO RECONNECT WITH THE PRESENT MOMENT.

USE THIS TOOL WHEN

Attention is caught in distressing thoughts, memories, numbness, panic, or a sense of unreality.

Notice the environment without forcing any particular feeling. You may name the items silently, write them down, or point to them.

5 things I can see	Colours, shapes, light, objects, movement.
4 things I can feel	Feet on the floor, clothing, temperature, chair, an object in the hand.
3 things I can hear	Near sounds, distant sounds, your own movement.
2 things I can smell	A nearby scent, fresh air, food, soap. Skip this if nothing is noticeable.
1 thing I can taste	Water, tea, food, or simply the current taste in the mouth.
One present-moment fact	For example: “I am in this room, and I am reading this page.”

One safe and useful next step	Choose what comes immediately after grounding.

ADAPT, STOP, OR CHANGE APPROACH

Grounding is not a test and does not need to be perfect. Replace any sense with colours, shapes, objects, movement, a neutral object, gentle pressure, temperature, or orientation to the room. If the practice increases distress, stop and try movement, a practical activity, human contact, or a safer place. Seek support if disorientation or distress persists.

TOOL 3

Slow the exhale

USE A GENTLE BREATHING PATTERN TO REDUCE PHYSICAL ACTIVATION WITHOUT FORCING RELAXATION.

USE THIS TOOL WHEN

Your body feels tense, hurried, activated, or ready to react before you have decided what to do.

1. Sit, stand, or lie in a position that allows comfortable breathing.
2. Let the inhale remain natural. Do not take an unusually large breath.
3. Allow the exhale to become slightly longer and softer than the inhale.
4. Release the jaw, shoulders, or hands if that feels comfortable.
5. Return to normal breathing whenever you want. Notice whether anything has shifted, even slightly.

A comfortable rhythm for me	There is no required count. The exhale may be a little longer.
What I noticed in my body	No change is also useful information.
What I will do next	Choose a practical next action.

CHOOSE ANOTHER TOOL IF NEEDED.

Do not hold your breath or continue if you feel dizzy, trapped, or more distressed. Try **Tool 1** or **Tool 2** instead.

TOOL 4

Name what is happening

CLARIFY THE SITUATION, YOUR BODY'S RESPONSE, YOUR EMOTIONS, AND YOUR CURRENT NEED WITHOUT JUDGING YOURSELF.

USE THIS TOOL WHEN

You feel "bad", overwhelmed, irritated, numb, or unable to decide what kind of support would help.

Naming an experience can create structure. The goal is not to find a perfect label, but to move from a general sense of overload toward a more workable understanding.

Situation	What is happening in neutral, observable terms?
Body	What sensations, energy changes, or physical urges are present?
Emotion	What feeling words come closest? You may choose more than one.
Need	What do you need now: safety, information, rest, food, connection, space, practical help, clarity, or professional support?
Helpful response	What would address the need without creating additional harm?

POSSIBLE EMOTION WORDS

anxious · afraid · angry · sad · guilty · ashamed · lonely · numb · confused · frustrated · exhausted · relieved · hopeful

USE NEUTRAL LANGUAGE

Try: "I notice tension and urgency" rather than "I am failing". Description creates more choice than judgement.

TOOL 5

STOP before reacting

CREATE A PAUSE BETWEEN EMOTIONAL ACTIVATION AND ACTION.

USE THIS TOOL WHEN

You feel pushed to reply immediately, withdraw, argue, agree to too much, abandon a task, or make a major decision while activated.

STEP	PROMPT
S — Stop	Pause the action. Do not send, decide, or commit yet unless safety requires immediate action.
T — Take a step back	Move away from the screen or situation if possible. Reconnect with the body and environment.
O — Observe	What are you feeling? What thought is driving the urgency? What is actually being asked of you? Is there a safety issue?
P — Proceed with purpose	Choose the response that best reflects safety, clarity, values, and appropriate limits.

What am I about to do?	Name the action without judging it.
What is driving the urge?	Emotion, thought, fear, pressure, guilt, anger, avoidance?
What matters in this decision?	Safety, care, clarity, fairness, learning, boundaries, connection?
My deliberate next action	Write down the action you will take after the pause.

TOOL 6

Thought–Feeling–Body–Action Check

SEE HOW AN INTERPRETATION MAY SHAPE EMOTION, BODILY RESPONSE, AND ACTION.

USE THIS TOOL WHEN

A stressful situation is producing guilt, helplessness, anger, avoidance, urgency, or a sense that there is only one possible response.

Situation	What happened? Use concise and observable language.
Automatic thought	What did your mind say the situation means?
Emotion and body	What feelings and physical responses followed?
Action urge	What do you feel pushed to do or avoid?
Evidence and context	What supports the thought? What information may be missing?

Helpful and realistic response	Write a response that is accurate, compassionate, and workable.
Next action	Choose one action consistent with the realistic response.

BALANCED DOES NOT MEAN POSITIVE

A helpful response does not deny difficulty. It includes the difficulty without treating the most frightening interpretation as the only truth.

TOOL 7

Unhook from difficult thoughts

NOTICE A THOUGHT AS A MENTAL EVENT RATHER THAN AN INSTRUCTION THAT MUST BE OBEYED.

USE THIS TOOL WHEN

A thought feels repetitive, absolute, self-critical, catastrophic, or like a rule that leaves no room for choice.

1. Write the thought exactly as it appears.
2. Add the phrase: "I am having the thought that..."
3. Notice whether the thought is a fact, prediction, memory, judgement, or rule.
4. Ask yourself: "What happens when I follow this thought completely?"
5. Ask yourself: "Can this thought be present while I choose a different action?"
6. Choose an action guided by the current situation and your values rather than by the thought alone.

The thought	Write it in its original form.
I am having the thought that...	Repeat it with this phrase in front.
This thought is acting like a...	Fact, prediction, memory, judgement, rule, warning, or other.
Following it completely leads me to...	What behaviour or avoidance follows?

A more flexible action	Choose one workable action you can take while the thought is still present.

THE GOAL IS NOT TO REMOVE THE THOUGHT

Unhooking changes your relationship with a thought. It creates room to choose; it does not require the mind to become quiet.

TOOL 8

Control–Influence–Acknowledge Map

SEPARATE DIRECT ACTION FROM INFLUENCE AND FROM REALITIES THAT CANNOT CURRENTLY BE CHANGED.

USE THIS TOOL WHEN

Many uncertainties are competing for attention, and everything feels equally urgent or that it is your personal responsibility.

I CAN CONTROL	I MAY INFLUENCE	I CAN NOT CONTROL
My next action	A request	The wider crisis
My communication	A shared decision	Other people's choices
My use of support	Access to information	Past events
My boundaries	A relationship	Immediate infrastructure conditions
My preparation	An institutional response	Every possible outcome

One action from the control column	Choose the smallest responsible action.
One influential action	Who can you ask, inform, invite, or consult?
One reality to acknowledge	Acknowledging a current limit does not mean approving it or giving up action where action is still possible.
What I will stop carrying alone	Name what needs to be shared, referred, postponed, or released.

TOOL 9

One manageable next step

REDUCE PARALYSIS BY DEFINING THE SMALLEST ACTION THAT MEANINGFULLY MOVES SOMETHING FORWARD.

USE THIS TOOL WHEN

A task, decision, recovery need, or practical problem feels too large to start.

A manageable step should be specific, visible, and possible under current conditions. It does not need to solve the whole problem. It should make the next decision easier.

The larger issue	What feels too big or complicated?
The useful direction	What would "slightly more workable" look like?
The smallest meaningful action	Choose an action, not a vague intention.
What I need	Information, device, document, food, rest, contact, support, quiet, permission?
Likely barrier	What may interrupt the action?
Fallback action	What is the simpler alternative if the first action is not possible?

What comes after	What information or result will help you decide the next step?

SMALL IS NOT INSIGNIFICANT

A small action can protect a larger goal by restoring movement, information, or connection.

TOOL 10

Values-based action

CHOOSE HOW YOU WANT TO ACT EVEN WHEN YOU CANNOT CONTROL THE SITUATION OR REMOVE DIFFICULT FEELINGS.

USE THIS TOOL WHEN

You feel disconnected from purpose, uncertain about the "right" response, or trapped between competing demands.

Values are qualities of action rather than outcomes. You cannot guarantee that a situation will become fair, safe, calm, or successful, but you can choose an action that expresses fairness, safety, care, or courage.

POSSIBLE VALUE	WHAT IT MAY LOOK LIKE	MY ACTION
Care	Responding with respect without taking over responsibility	
Clarity	Naming what is known, unknown, possible, and not possible	
Safety	Reducing risk and seeking appropriate support	
Learning	Protecting one meaningful learning action	
Fairness	Using consistent principles while recognising different needs	
Connection	Making one honest and appropriate contact	
Sustainability	Choosing an action that can be maintained	
Courage	Doing the responsible thing even when it is uncomfortable	

The value I choose now	Select one quality of action.
One action that expresses it	Keep the action concrete.
One limit that protects the value	How will you avoid turning the value into overextension?
Complete the sentence	"I cannot control everything, but I can choose..."

TOOL 11

A kinder and more realistic inner response

REPLACE HARSH SELF-JUDGEMENT WITH LANGUAGE THAT INCLUDES REALITY, DIGNITY, AND A NEXT STEP.

USE THIS TOOL WHEN

Your inner response is blaming, absolute, humiliating, hopeless, or demanding perfection under crisis conditions.

1. Write the harsh or hopeless message your mind is repeating.
2. Identify the real difficulty or value underneath it.
3. Imagine how you would respond to a respected person facing the same conditions.
4. Write a response that combines kindness with accuracy. Do not make promises you cannot keep.
5. Add one next action or support request.

The harsh message	Write it without editing.
The real difficulty underneath	What loss, pressure, fear, need, or value is present?
What I would say to someone I respect	Use a tone that protects dignity.

A kinder and more realistic response to myself	Include both the difficulty and what is still possible.
My next action or support request	What would care look like in practice?

COMPASSION IS NOT LOWERING ALL EXPECTATIONS

A compassionate response helps you use realistic expectations, recognise limits, and take responsible action without adding shame.

TOOL 12

Support Network Map

IDENTIFY WHO OR WHAT CAN PROVIDE DIFFERENT KINDS OF SUPPORT BEFORE EVERYTHING DEPENDS ON ONE PERSON.

USE THIS TOOL WHEN

You feel alone, do not know where to turn, or keep turning to the same person for every need.

A support network is stronger when it includes different functions. One person does not need to provide emotional, academic, practical, professional, health, and emergency support.

TYPE OF SUPPORT	PERSON, SERVICE, OR RESOURCE	HOW TO CONTACT	POSSIBLE REQUEST
Emotional connection			
Academic or professional guidance			
Practical help			
Health or psychological support			
Institutional support			
Emergency or safeguarding support			
Community or peer connection			

My first support action	Identify the first person, service, or resource you will contact.
What I will say	A short and direct request is enough.
Access check	Can you realistically use this support? Consider language, cost, timing, transport, internet, documentation, privacy, accessibility, and trust.
A backup contact	Who or what is the alternative if the first option is unavailable?

TOOL 13

Small recovery actions

REDUCE ACCUMULATED STRAIN AND RECONNECT WITH A SUSTAINABLE RHYTHM WITHOUT TURNING RECOVERY INTO ANOTHER PERFORMANCE TASK.

USE THIS TOOL WHEN

Stress has been building; ordinary demands feel never-ending; rest is becoming difficult; or you need one small action to support continued functioning.

Recovery does not always mean returning quickly to a previous level of productivity. During prolonged crises, it may mean reducing strain, protecting basic functioning, reconnecting with support, and establishing a rhythm that allows continued functioning without constantly operating in emergency mode.

RECOVERY DOMAIN	EXAMPLES	ONE USEFUL QUESTION
Body	Sleep opportunity, food, hydration, necessary medication, movement, medical care, reduced physical strain.	What basic physical need is easiest for you to address next?
Attention	Lower information input, fewer channels, planned breaks, offline time, and one-task focus.	What can you stop monitoring for a defined period?
Boundaries	Response times, role limits, saying no, delegating, and pausing non-essential commitments.	What boundary would protect your capacity this week?
Connection	Peer contact, supervision, family, community, and professional or institutional support.	Who could you tell that you need additional support?
Meaning and agency	Values, purpose, small contribution, choice, and recognition of what has already been managed.	What small action could reduce powerlessness without demanding too much?

PLEASURE OR COMFORT	MASTERY OR COMPETENCE	CONNECTION OR BELONGING
One small experience that may feel nourishing:	One small action that may restore capability:	One person, group, or service I may contact:

RECOVERY IS ALSO STRUCTURAL

Individual practices cannot compensate for unsafe conditions or inaccessible services. Pair personal tools with practical, professional, and institutional action.

TOOL 14

Personal Stabilisation Plan

PREPARE A WRITTEN PLAN FOR PERIODS WHEN STRESS IS BUILDING OR WHEN FUNCTIONING BECOMES HARDER.

USE THIS TOOL WHEN

Strain is ongoing, early warning signs are recurring, or you want to decide in advance what support and adjustments you will use.

My early-warning signs	Changes in sleep, concentration, mood, body, communication, routines, or behaviour.
What tends to increase the overload	Demands, environments, communication patterns, news exposure, isolation, uncertainty, lack of rest.
What helps my body feel more stable	Food, water, medication as prescribed, movement, warmth, rest, medical care, sensory grounding.
What helps my attention	One task, written priorities, reduced notifications, quiet, structure, offline materials, orientation.
What helps me remain connected	Trusted people, colleagues, classmates, family, community, support groups, services.
One boundary or adjustment	Identify one thing you will reduce, postpone, decline, simplify, or ask to change.

Professional or institutional support	Which verified service can help if self-management is not enough?
If things worsen	Identify the signs that would indicate a need for urgent or specialist support.
My first action	Write down the first action you will take when you notice that the plan is needed.

KEEP THE PLAN ACCESSIBLE AND REVIEW IT AFTER USE

Store it somewhere you can reach even when your concentration is low. After a difficult period, note what helped, what was inaccessible or unhelpful, which supports responded appropriately, and what should be changed before the plan is needed again.

My verified support contacts

SERVICE OR PERSON	CONTACT DETAILS	WHEN TO USE THIS CONTACT
Local emergency service		
Crisis or suicide support		
Health or psychological support		
University student support		
University staff support		
Trusted person		
Backup contact		

VERIFY BEFORE RELYING ON A CONTACT

Emergency numbers, opening hours, eligibility, language access, and university procedures differ by location. Confirm them locally and update this page.

TOOL 15

When these tools are not enough

RECOGNISE WHEN DISTRESS NEEDS ADDITIONAL, URGENT, OR SPECIALISED SUPPORT.

SEEK ADDITIONAL SUPPORT WHEN

Distress is persistent, worsening, unsafe, interfering substantially with daily functioning, or too heavy to manage alone.

- You feel unsafe or unable to keep yourself safe.
- You are thinking about suicide, serious self-harm, or harming another person.
- You are severely disoriented, detached from reality, or unable to care for basic needs.
- You cannot sleep, eat, work, study, or carry out essential daily activities for an extended period.
- Panic, intrusive memories, nightmares, or trauma reminders are intense, recurring, or worsening.
- You feel persistently hopeless, numb, trapped, or unable to continue.
- Alcohol, medication, or other substances are being used in unsafe ways to cope.
- A situation involves violence, abuse, safeguarding, coercion, or immediate physical danger.
- You have tried several self-help strategies, and the situation is not improving.

What to do

1. Move toward safety if this can be done without increasing danger.
2. Tell a trusted person clearly that additional help is needed.
3. Contact a verified health, psychological, crisis, safeguarding, or institutional service.
4. Use emergency services when there is immediate danger or an inability to remain safe.
5. Do not remain alone with a high-risk situation when another responsible person or service can be involved.

IMMEDIATE DANGER

Contact local emergency services or a verified crisis service now. This toolkit cannot assess risk, provide emergency intervention, or replace professional care.

The support I need now	Emergency, health, psychological, safeguarding, practical, institutional, or trusted-person support.
The first person or service I will contact	Use the verified contact page.
What I can say	"I am not feeling safe, I am struggling to function, I need urgent support."
Who can stay connected with me	Name a person who can remain present or help access services.

Evidence-informed foundations

This toolkit translates established psychological and psychosocial principles into brief, non-clinical tools for higher education settings. Its foundations include psychological first aid, trauma-informed practice, grounding and stress-management guidance, cognitive-behavioural reflection, acceptance and values-based action, distress-tolerance skills, social-network mapping, and layered support systems.

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