



SELF-REFLECTION TOOLKIT

Navigating Psychological Distress

TOOLKIT: Navigating Distress - A Relational Guide

A practical, interactive toolkit for understanding, regulating, and moving through psychological distress

How to Use This Guide

This is not a worksheet to complete once: it's a **practice**.

Move slowly, skip around and come back.

Use a pen, write things out and pause when something resonates.

The goal is not perfection. The goal is **awareness + small shifts over time**.

1. Understanding Your Distress

Case Example (Adult)

Context: Sarah, 38, notices she becomes overwhelmed after work when her partner asks simple questions.

- Trigger: Partner asks, "How was your day?"
- Thoughts: "I can't deal with this right now. I'm failing at everything."
- Emotions: Irritability, anxiety
- Body: Tight chest, shallow breathing
- Behaviour: Snaps or withdraws

Reflection:

- What stands out to you in this example?
- Where do you see similarities or differences in your own experience?

Notes:

Case Example (Teen)

Context: Jayden, 15, comes home from school and immediately goes to their room, refusing to talk.

- Trigger: Social stress / feeling excluded at school
- Thoughts: “No one likes me.”
- Emotions: Shame, sadness
- Body: Heavy, low energy
- Behaviour: Withdrawal, shutdown

Reflection:

- What might be happening beneath the behaviour?
- How might this be misunderstood by adults?

Notes:

1A. Slow It Down

Think of a recent moment of distress.

- What was happening just before it started?
- What did you notice first: body, thoughts, emotions, behaviour?

Write it out like a short scene:

Notes:

1B. Map Your Experience

Trigger	Thoughts	Emotions	Body Sensations	Behaviours

1C. Pattern Spotting

- What themes do you notice?
- What tends to repeat?

- “When ____ happens, I tend to ____.”

Notes:

2. Your Nervous System (In Real Time)

Your distress doesn't start with your thoughts: it starts in your body.

Before you can make sense of what you're feeling, your nervous system has already decided whether you're safe or under threat. This is why insight alone often falls short. In moments of distress, you're not just “thinking differently”, you're functioning differently.

This section helps you begin to notice your state in real time, so you can respond with awareness instead of reaction.

2A. Identify Your State

Circle or highlight:

- Activated: anxious / racing / reactive / overwhelmed
- Shutdown: numb / disconnected / low energy / withdrawn

- Regulated: calm / present / steady

2B. Rate Your State

On a scale of 0–10:

- Activation (0 = calm, 10 = overwhelmed): ___
- Shutdown (0 = present, 10 = completely disconnected): ___

2C. What Helps You Regulate

Check what applies + add your own:

- Walking / movement
- Music / sound
- Deep pressure (blanket, hug)
- Breathing exercises
- Being with a safe person
- Silence / alone time
- Other: _____

Notes:

2D. Build A Go-To Regulation Plan

When I notice I am dysregulated, I will:

1. Pause and notice: _____
2. Do one regulating action: _____
3. Give myself at least ___ minutes before reacting

Notes:

3. Patterns As Protection

Case Example (Adult)

Context: Mark, 42, overthinks every decision and struggles to relax.

- Pattern: Overthinking / control
- Protection: Avoids making mistakes or being judged
- Origin: Grew up in a high-expectation environment

Reframe:

“This pattern helped me stay safe by staying prepared.”

Reflection:

- What might your pattern have protected you from?

Notes:

Case Example (Teen)

Context: Ava, 16, becomes argumentative and reactive with parents.

- Pattern: Reactivity / defensiveness
- Protection: Guards against feeling misunderstood or controlled
- Origin: Increasing need for autonomy

Reframe:

“This reaction protects my sense of independence.”

Reflection:

- How might this behaviour make sense developmentally?

Notes:

When distressed, I tend to:

- Overthink
- Shut down
- Avoid
- People-please
- Get reactive
- Other: _____

3B. Get Curious (Not Critical)

- What might this pattern protect you from?
- When might you have first learned this?

“This pattern helps me avoid feeling ____.”

3C. Reframe the Narrative

Old story:

“What’s wrong with me is...”

New story:

“This makes sense because...”

Notes:

4. Interrupting the Cycle

Case Example (Adult)

Context: Sarah (from earlier) notices her irritation rising.

- Old response: Snapping at partner
- New response: “I’m feeling overwhelmed—I need 10 minutes to reset.”

Shift: Pauses, regulates, then re-engages

Reflection:

- What would a “pause” look like in your life?

Notes:

Case Example (Teen)

Context: Jayden (from earlier) isolates after school.

- Old response (parent): “Why are you always in your room?”
- New response (parent): “Hey, I’m here if you want to sit together–no pressure.”

Shift: Reduces pressure, increases safety

Reflection:

- How can small relational shifts change outcomes?

Notes:

4A. Catch the Moment

- What is the earliest sign you’re getting triggered?

4B. Choose a Different Response (Micro-shift)

Instead of: _____

I will try: _____

4C. Practice Script (Real-Life Use)

Fill in:

- “I’m noticing I’m getting overwhelmed right now...”
- “I need a moment to...”

- “Can we come back to this?”

Write your version:

Notes:

5. Interrupting the Cycle

Distress doesn't resolve in isolation: it shifts in connection.

While insight and self-awareness matter, our nervous systems are wired to regulate **with others**, not just on our own. This is why even the most self-aware people can still feel stuck when they're navigating distress alone.

This section helps you identify what safe support looks like for you, and how to move toward it, even in small ways.

5A. Your People Map

List 3–5 people and what they offer:

Name	What makes them feel safe?	How I can reach out

5B. Barriers to Reaching Out

What stops you from asking for support?

Notes:

5C. Make It Easier

Complete:

“When I’m struggling, it would help if someone...”

Notes:

5D. Low-Pressure Connection Ideas

- Send a simple text: “Hey, can we check in?”
- Sit with someone without needing to talk
- Share one honest sentence instead of everything

Notes:

6. For Parents of Teens (Co-regulation in Action)

When teens are overwhelmed, they don’t need more control; they need more regulation.

What looks like defiance, withdrawal, or emotional intensity is often a nervous system in distress. In these moments, your role isn’t to fix or correct: it’s to **help stabilize what feels unstable**.

This section focuses on co-regulation in action: how your presence, tone, and response can shift the moment, and the relationship.

6A. Refine Behaviour

My teen's behaviour might be:

- A signal of: _____
- Not simply: _____

6B. Pause Before Responding

Before reacting, ask yourself:

- What state is my teen in?
- What state am I in?

6C. Co-regulation Scripts

Practice language:

- "I can see this is a lot right now."
- "You don't have to figure it out alone."
- "I'm here."

Write your own:

Notes:

6D. After the Moment (Repair)

- What went well?
- What would I do differently next time?

Notes:

7. Weekly Integration Practice

Change doesn't happen in the moment; it happens in what you notice after.

This weekly practice is a space to slow things down, reflect, and begin connecting the dots. Not to judge or fix, but to **build awareness over time**.

Use this once a week to track patterns, recognize small shifts, and strengthen your capacity to respond differently.

Check-In

- One moment of distress this week:
- What I noticed:
- What I did:
- What helped (even a little):

Notes:

Build Awareness Over Time

- A pattern I'm starting to see:
- A small shift I'm proud of:
- One thing I want to try next week:

Notes:

Final Reflection

Complete this sentence:

“I'm beginning to understand that my distress...”

Notes:

Support

If this work brings things up (or feels hard to navigate alone) that makes sense.

Therapy offers a space to:

- Slow this down in real time
- Understand patterns more deeply
- Experience safe, supported connection

You don't have to do this alone.



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