From ‘stuck’ to ‘soothing’ Starter Kit

3 evidence-based, trauma-informed tools you can use on hard days when your brain won’t cooperate

Therapy with John Pelikan, LCSW, LCADC

Disclaimer: This is not therapy or emergency support

First things first...

A quick note from John

If you're reading this, there's a good chance you've been carrying a lot for a long time—anxiety that won't quiet down, the weight of old trauma, or the heaviness of depression that makes even simple things feel huge.

If it's hard to "just use your skills" or "do the things you know you should be doing," that's not a character flaw. It's often how an overwhelmed nervous system and tired brain try to protect you. You're not broken for finding this hard. Trust me... I struggle too.

This mini-guide isn't here to "fix" you or tell you you're doing life wrong. It's here to offer three gentle, evidence-based practices you can reach for on the days when you're overwhelmed, numb, shut down, or just tired of trying so hard.

You deserve tools that respect your actual capacity, not just your ideal self on a perfect day.

Therapy with John Pelikan, LCSW, LCADC

Disclaimer: This is not therapy or emergency support

And one more thing!

You don't have to do everything in here right away. In fact, please don't.

- Start small.
- Pick one skill that feels most reachable today. You can always come back for the others.
- Use it on real days, not perfect days.
- These skills are meant for when you're anxious, low, or scattered—not just when you're already feeling okay.
- Aim for "good enough," not perfect.
- If you only do half of a practice, it still counts. Tiny efforts add up over time.
- Repeat what helps, skip what doesn't.
- Everyone's nervous system and history are different. Notice what feels supportive and feel free to adapt or ignore the rest.
- Pair it with support when you can.
- These are educational tools, not therapy or crisis care. If you can, bring what you notice to your own therapist, doctor, or support system.

Disclaimer: This is not therapy or emergency support

Anxiety tool

Chances are you know at least one ***mindful technique*** such as breathing. We're going to do something a ***little bit different*** here.

1. First, begin by ***noticing or finding*** where the anxiety is in your ***body***. Can you sense the energy in your ***stomach, chest, or face***? Wherever you notice it, see if you can notice any ***judgement*** and ***soften it back***. Shift into ***curiousty*** toward the anxiety.

   Perhaps it shows up in ways ***other than physical***. It may ***look like something, sound like something, or talk a specific way.***

2. Alternatively, or subsequently, you may ask yourself three questions:

   - "Does this ***need to be thought?***"
   - "Does this ***need to be said right now?***"
   - "Does this ***need to be said by me?***"

   Asking these questions recruits your logical/rational mind, switching away from your emotional/limbic system.

Therapy with John Pelikan, LCSW, LCADC

Disclaimer: This is not therapy or emergency support

Depression Tool

Let's face it, if ***"just be happy"*** worked, I wouldn't have a job. ***It's not that simple***. Instead, we need to ***trick*** the mind and body with our knowledge of the mechanics of ***dopamine***. This is a tool called ***Behavioral Activation***.

Most of us were conditioned to think that "doing" or "behaving" ***requires*** some type of motivation. For example, "If I could just get myself motivated, I'll finally get so much done." Much like it's nearly impossible to ***force*** happiness, the same can be said about motivation.

According to research--and experience--it's found that action actually precedes motivation. In simple terms, you have to complete a task to feel the motivation to complete another.

So let's use this knowledge to our advantage! Choose something ***small***, a task or hobby, which is ***aligned with your values and goals***, and schedule a day and time in the near future where you will do this activity. It should be ***very small and easily completed***. Make sure your goal is S.M.A.R.T., or ***Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timely.***

Create corresponding SMART goals to coninue activating your behavior/mood.

Therapy with John Pelikan, LCSW, LCADC

Disclaimer: This is not therapy or emergency support

Trauma/Shame Tool

A gentle check-in with the part of you that feels “not enough.”

Use this practice when you notice:

- A wave of shame (“I’m not enough,” “I’m too much,” “I ruin everything”)
- Old memories or trauma getting stirred up
- You’re replaying something you said or did and can’t stop beating yourself up

This isn’t about fixing your past. It’s about offering a little care to the part of you that’s still carrying it.

On the next page is a short, self-compassion script inspired by “parts” work (Internal Family Systems). Instead of seeing all of you as broken or bad, we’re gently talking to one part of you that’s hurting, as if it were a younger you sitting in front of you.

You can do this out loud, in your head, or by writing it out.

Disclaimer: This is not therapy or emergency support

Trauma/Shame Tool

1

Notice the part

Take a slow breath and say to yourself: “Something in me is feeling a lot of shame right now.”

If it helps, see if you can locate it like in the anxiety toolkit above. (Physically, emotionally, thoughts, visually, auditory.)

2

Create a little space

Gently remind yourself “this is a part of me. It’s not all of me.”

Even if it doesn’t fully land, just trust me we’re planting a seed for later.

3

Offer understanding, not fixing

Imagine this part is a younger version of you. Picture them in front of you. Then say:

1. Of course you feel this way. You’ve been through a lot.
2. It makes sense that you try to protect me by criticizing or shutting me down.
3. I’m listening. I see how hard you’ve been working.

You don’t have to believe this 100%. Just try it on for a moment.

Therapy with John Pelikan, LCSW, LCADC

Disclaimer: This is not therapy or emergency support

Trauma/Shame Tool

4 ***Ask what it needs right now***

Gently ask inside:

1. "What do you need from me right now, even just a little?"
2. Common answers might be:
    - "I need you to slow down."
    - "I need you to say we're not in that old situation anymore."
    - "I need a break."
    - "I need to hear that I'm not a monster."

If you don't hear anything, that's okay. You can simply offer something kind anyway.

5 ***Respond with one kind sentence***

Choose one simple, believable thing you can say back, like:

1. "You're not alone anymore."
2. "We're not in that place or time now."
3. "You don't have to carry this all by yourself."
4. "You are more than this moment and more than this mistake."

Let yourself sit with that for a breath or two.

Therapy with John Pelikan, LCSW, LCADC

Disclaimer: This is not therapy or emergency support

About John

Hi, I'm John Pelikan, MSW, LCSW, LCADC — a psychotherapist who works with adults navigating anxiety, trauma, and depression.

My style is warm, casual, and human. I believe all parts of you are welcome in the room. In my work, I combine evidence-based approaches (like trauma-informed CBT and mindfulness-based interventions) with inner-world exploration (IFS/parts work) and a holistic view of the person. Together, that means we're not just talking about "symptoms," but about your story, your nervous system, your relationships, and the parts of you that are trying (often in clumsy ways) to protect you.

My path into this work is both professional and personal. I've lived with my own mental health struggles and spent years trying to manage difficult emotions and parts of myself I didn't fully understand. Discovering IFS and trauma-informed work was a turning point in my life and career. It gave me a way to meet my own inner world with more compassion — and it's a huge part of why I do what I do now.

I've been practicing in the mental health field since 2016 and currently hold licenses in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, and Maine. I'm a bit of a psychology nerd and I'm constantly learning — from polyvagal theory and attachment, to psychodynamic and emotionally focused approaches — so I can keep showing up as a competent, growing clinician for the people I work with.

If you'd like more support between sessions or outside of therapy, you can find free practices and meditations on my YouTube channel:
YouTube: @TherapywithJohnPelikan

Disclaimer: This is not therapy or emergency support

Quick-but-important note

This guide is for education and support only. It is not therapy, does not create a therapist–client relationship, and is not a substitute for personalized mental health care or emergency services.

Everyone's history, nervous system, and circumstances are different. Please use these tools gently, adapt what fits, and leave the rest. If you're able, consider bringing anything that comes up here to your own therapist or trusted provider.

If you are in crisis or thinking about harming yourself, please reach out to local emergency services, a crisis line, or a trusted professional in your area right away. You don't have to carry it alone. 💛

CREATING NEW PERSPECTIVES TOGETHE

Therapy with John

Therapy with John Pelikan, LCSW, LCADC

Disclaimer: This is not therapy or emergency support