

PATIENT CHEAT SHEETS

Evidence-Based Psychology Techniques

A practical, printable companion for your mental health journey.

Inside this guide, you'll find short, step-by-step reference cards for evidence-based techniques used in psychiatry and psychotherapy — the same tools your care team may introduce during your visits. Keep this guide handy, print the pages you use most, and bring it to your next appointment with questions.

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How to Use This Guide

Each cheat sheet in this booklet follows the same simple format: what the technique is, how to practice it step-by-step, and when it tends to be most helpful. These techniques are meant to support — not replace — the personalized care you receive from your provider.

Try one technique at a time. Practice it when you're calm, so it feels more familiar to use when things feel harder. If you have questions about any technique, bring this guide to your next visit — your provider is happy to walk through it with you.

A Note on Safety

These techniques are educational tools and are not a substitute for professional care. If you are in crisis or feel unsafe, please turn to the “When to Seek Immediate Help” page at the back of this guide.

Quick Reference: Find the Right Technique

If you're feeling...	Try this technique
Anxious or panicked	Box Breathing · 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding
Stuck in negative thoughts	Thought Record
Low motivation or down	Behavioral Activation
Physically tense or wound up	Progressive Muscle Relaxation
In emotional crisis	TIPP Skill
Having trouble sleeping	Sleep Hygiene Checklist
Needing to set a boundary	DESC Assertive Communication

Tip: Print only the pages you need, or print the whole guide double-sided to keep on hand at home.

Box Breathing

ANXIETY & STRESS · BREATHING

What it is

A simple, structured breathing pattern that calms the nervous system by slowing the breath and balancing oxygen and carbon dioxide levels in the body.

How to do it

1. Breathe in slowly through your nose for 4 counts.
2. Hold your breath gently for 4 counts.
3. Breathe out slowly through your mouth for 4 counts.
4. Hold again for 4 counts before breathing in.
5. Repeat the cycle for 4–6 rounds.

When to use it: Before a stressful event, during a panic moment, or anytime your breathing feels fast or shallow.

My Notes — when did you try this, and how did it go?

5-4-3-2-1 Grounding

ANXIETY · GROUNDING

What it is

A sensory grounding exercise that brings your attention back to the present moment by engaging each of your five senses.

How to do it

1. Name 5 things you can see around you.
2. Name 4 things you can touch or feel.
3. Name 3 things you can hear.
4. Name 2 things you can smell.
5. Name 1 thing you can taste.

When to use it: During moments of anxiety, panic, or when you feel disconnected, overwhelmed, or “checked out.”

My Notes — when did you try this, and how did it go?

Thought Record

COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY (CBT)

What it is

A core CBT tool used to identify, examine, and reframe unhelpful or distorted thinking patterns.

How to do it

1. Write down the situation that triggered distress.
2. Identify the automatic thought that came up.
3. Rate the emotion and its intensity (0–10).
4. List evidence that supports and contradicts the thought.
5. Write a more balanced, realistic thought.
6. Re-rate the emotion — notice if the intensity shifted.

When to use it: When a thought feels stuck, overly negative, or is driving distress out of proportion to the situation.

My Notes — when did you try this, and how did it go?

Behavioral Activation

DEPRESSION · MOTIVATION

What it is

A technique that uses small, scheduled activities to gradually lift mood — especially helpful when motivation is low.

How to do it

1. List activities that used to bring enjoyment or a sense of accomplishment.
2. Choose one small, realistic activity to start with.
3. Schedule it for a specific day and time.
4. Do the activity, even if motivation is low beforehand.
5. Rate your mood before and after — notice the difference.

When to use it: When depression makes it hard to get started, or you've been withdrawing from things you used to enjoy.

My Notes — when did you try this, and how did it go?

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

ANXIETY · PHYSICAL TENSION

What it is

A relaxation method that reduces physical tension by systematically tensing and releasing muscle groups throughout the body.

How to do it

1. Find a quiet, comfortable position, seated or lying down.
2. Starting with your feet, tense the muscles tightly for 5 seconds.
3. Release and notice the relaxation for 10–15 seconds.
4. Move upward — legs, abdomen, hands, arms, shoulders, neck, face.
5. Finish with a few slow, deep breaths.

When to use it: Before sleep, during periods of high physical tension, or as a daily stress-reduction practice.

My Notes — when did you try this, and how did it go?

TIPP Skill

DIALECTICAL BEHAVIOR THERAPY (DBT) · CRISIS

What it is

A DBT distress tolerance skill designed to rapidly lower intense emotional arousal by changing the body's chemistry.

How to do it

1. Temperature — splash cold water on your face or hold an ice pack.
2. Intense exercise — do a short burst of jumping jacks or running in place.
3. Paced breathing — make your exhale longer than your inhale.
4. Paired muscle relaxation — tense muscles, then release as you breathe out.

When to use it: During emotional crisis, overwhelming urges, or when emotions feel too intense to think clearly.

My Notes — when did you try this, and how did it go?

Sleep Hygiene Checklist

SLEEP

What it is

A set of consistent habits that support better, more restorative sleep — a foundation for managing anxiety, depression, and mood symptoms.

How to do it

1. Keep a consistent sleep and wake time, even on weekends.
2. Avoid screens for 30–60 minutes before bed.
3. Limit caffeine intake after midday.
4. Keep your bedroom cool, dark, and quiet.
5. Reserve your bed for sleep only — not work or scrolling.
6. Get natural sunlight exposure earlier in the day.

When to use it: Nightly — as an ongoing foundation for emotional and physical well-being.

My Notes — when did you try this, and how did it go?

DESC Assertive Communication

RELATIONSHIPS · COMMUNICATION

What it is

A structured framework for expressing needs and setting boundaries clearly, calmly, and respectfully.

How to do it

1. Describe the situation objectively, without blame.
2. Express how the situation makes you feel.
3. Specify what you'd like to happen instead.
4. Consequences — share the positive outcome of the change.

When to use it: When setting a boundary, addressing conflict, or asking for something that matters to you.

My Notes — when did you try this, and how did it go?

When to Seek Immediate Help

These techniques are tools for everyday coping — they are not designed for emergencies. If you or someone you know is in crisis, please use the resources below right away.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline	Call or text 988
Crisis Text Line	Text HOME to 741741
Emergency Services	Call 911 or go to your nearest ER

Questions about your care?

Reach out to I Amadeus Psychiatry — we're here to support you between visits, too.

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