We use what can be considered “tools” every single day—from toothbrushes, screwdrivers, and silverware for routine tasks to aspirin and antibiotics for physical maladies. This assignment asks you to invent a “tool” to help someone who is experiencing emotional/psychological discomfort such as—but not only—insecurity, loneliness, grief, anger, heartache, or fear. You will base your project on a specific experience so that you know firsthand what it feels like and what may help you, and thus someone else, in the future. After making drawings and models of some ideas, you will make this tool out of balsa wood using simple hand tools. You may also incorporate accessory materials such as fabric or leather.

Some considerations: What size is this object? Will it be handheld and/or interactive? Will it be worn, and if so, on what part of the body? Will it be wall mounted or intended for a specific site? Will the object be smooth or textured? Will the object help by offering distraction from the discomfort or will it address the discomfort directly in some way?

MATERIALS
- An assortment of different sizes of balsa wood (i.e., strips, sheets, blocks)
- X-Acto and utility knives
- Linoleum cutters
- Small wood files
- An assortment of sandpaper grits (i.e., coarse, medium, fine)
- White glue
- Masking tape and pins (to glue balsa wood)
- Plasticene (oil-based, non-hardening) clay for modelmaking

INSTRUCTIONS
1. You will begin by considering a specific “problem,” wish, or purpose, since tools are often sought to fix or help in a specific situation. For example, what kind of tool could aid in alleviating shyness? If you’ve ever felt shy or uncomfortably self-conscious, recall the circumstance and articulate your feelings by writing them down. What may have helped you in that particular circumstance? What would a “remedy” be? Usually, when someone feels shy in a particular circumstance it is due to a lack of confidence at that moment. How could you manifest confidence as a tool to help in that particular situation? What might a tool that increases confidence look like? What might it feel like—in your hand, your body, or in your pocket, etc.? What might it “do”? How would it work or function?

2. Make several sketches of your ideas, and decide which three ideas you would like to make clay models of.

3. Once you decide on the idea that best manifests the tool for your chosen emotional/psychological challenge, you can begin making it out of balsa wood.

A demonstration of the tools and techniques involved in working with balsa wood will be given between steps 2 and 3.

Given the increasingly virtual and instantaneous manner in which our students experience the world, I find it essential to provide them with hands-on, actual object-making experiences that demand both time and collaboration with materials, as well as eye-hand skill development gained from using the tools required to work with the materials. Additionally, given the increasingly narcissistic nature of much of the social media that our students engage with, I find it equally essential to assign projects that mandate their consideration of others. Although I assign the “Psychological Tool” project as a comprehensive four-week project for which students use pine and learn to use wood shop machinery as well as hand and power tools, it can be scaled down to a three-hour project for which students use balsa wood that can be easily worked with simple hand tools.