

Session 1

Counselor: Hello Emily, what brings you to counseling today?

Client: Um, hi. I guess I just feel... well, I'm struggling a lot with school. It's like, no matter how hard I try, I just can't keep up with everything. And it's really frustrating, you know? It's hard to concentrate in class and sometimes I just feel really left behind. Everyone else seems to get things so easily, and that kinda makes me feel... rejected by my peers too. Like they don't really want to be around someone who doesn't understand stuff as easily as they do.

Counselor: You are frustrated because the effort you invest in school doesn't seem to translate into the outcomes you'd hope for.

Client: Uh, yeah, I guess that's kinda close. But it feels more like... like no matter how much effort I put in, it just seems pointless sometimes. It's not just frustration; it's more like this sinking feeling that I'm never going to catch up or be good enough. It's hard to explain, but it's really draining to feel stuck while everyone else is moving forward. Counselor: It is draining emotionally to see others doing well while you are never able to catch up or achieve in the desired way.

Client: Yeah, that's sort of what I mean. But it's not just about not achieving the right way; it feels more like I'm... like I'm always on the outside looking in. Like people see me struggling and don't want to include me because of it. So it's not just tiring; it feels really lonely sometimes, you know?

Counselor: That must be quite lonely, being on the outside while in the same school building with others.

Client: Yeah, it really is. I sit in class and see everyone else working together, laughing... I just feel like I'm not part of that. It's like I'm there physically, but emotionally? I'm just kinda disconnected. Sometimes it makes me want to just zone out or not even be there at all. It's hard to keep trying when you feel so alone in it.

Counselor: It sounds like a cycle. You see others having fun and learning, whereas you're struggling. And the more that you struggle the further disengaged you become, making you even further behind.

Client: Yeah, that's... um, that's pretty accurate. But sometimes it feels a little worse than just being disengaged. It's like I can't even get back into it because the more I fall behind, the more I want to avoid everything. It's like this heavy weight pulling me down; it's not just a cycle but also kind of a trap or something. Ugh, I don't know...

Counselor: A trap is something that captures you from the outside and won't let go. wonder what things about school trap you?

Client: I guess there are a lot of things that feel like traps. Like, the pressure to keep up with everyone else, or the way some teachers seem to just expect you to understand everything right away. And when I don't get it, it's like... I just feel worse about myself and want to disappear, you know? It's hard not feeling... good enough sometimes. It's all just too much pressure on top of the stress from schoolwork itself.

Counselor: How long have you been experiencing this type of stress at school?

Client: Um, I guess it's been building up for a while... maybe since I started high school? It was tough at first, but now it just feels like it's piling on more and more. Like each year brings new challenges that just add to the stress, and sometimes I wonder if I'll ever get a break from it all. It's hard to remember what it felt like before all this pressure and anxiety about school set in.

Counselor: You mention the anxiety that you're experiencing, what specific types of experiences in school are related to these feelings of anxiety?

Client: Well, it's mostly when I'm in class and trying to keep up with the lessons. Like, when I don't understand something and my mind starts to race. I get really nervous about answering questions, or even just being called on—it's super embarrassing if I can't answer right away. Or during tests, I freak out because I feel like everyone else is finishing while I'm still stuck on the first few questions. It's just... a lot of pressure that makes me feel like everyone is watching and judging me all the time.

Counselor: Can you describe for me the timeline of the stress. For example, does the stress occur when you are assigned something or there is a test, or might it start sometimes before?

Client: Uh, yeah, I think it starts even before we get assigned something or have a test. Like, when I hear about a new topic coming up in class or if I know something is due soon, that's when the anxiety really kicks in. It's like this shadow looming over me. Then as we get closer to the assignment or test date, I stress about how little time I've had to prepare or how many things I don't understand yet. By the time it actually happens, I'm already overwhelmed and just hoping to get through it without making too many mistakes. It feels like an endless loop of waiting for.

Counselor: Once you recognize the experience of stress, how does that affect how you prepare for school?

Client: Um, it kind of messes everything up, to be honest. I know I should probably prepare more or ask for help, but when I'm feeling that way, I just freeze up. Sometimes I end up procrastinating because the idea of starting makes me more anxious. So instead of studying or working on assignments early, I'll put them off until the last minute... and then it just gets worse. It's like this cycle—feeling stressed leads to not preparing well enough, which makes me stress even more about not being ready. It's really hard to break that pattern.

Counselor: With that amount of stress building up before the content is even introduced in class, it is probably difficult, if not impossible, to even know if you have the ability to perform well in school. The stress seems to affect you even before the learning or performance opportunity begins.

Client: Yeah, exactly. It's like I'm already defeated before I even get a chance to try. When that stress builds up beforehand, it makes me doubt myself even more. I can't really focus on what we're learning when all those thoughts are running through my mind, you know? It's not just about whether I can perform well—it's about feeling like there's this heavy cloud of anxiety following me around all the time. And then when things don't go well, it just reinforces that feeling of being stuck and not good enough.

Counselor: Earlier in our conversation, you suggested that it is hard to concentrate and others appear better than you in school and learning. But I wonder if that is fully true, based on what you are now saying about your stress. Might it be that you have a similar ability to learn, but the stress and anxiety takes you out of the mindset before you even have the opportunity to learn or perform?

Client: Um, I mean, maybe that's true? But it still feels like everyone else just gets it and I don't. Even if my stress is getting in the way, it's hard not to feel like I'm falling behind. It's like... even on days when I think I might do okay, that anxiety kicks in and takes me out of the moment. So yeah, there might be something there about my ability to learn being affected by stress... but sometimes it just feels like I'm not even on the same level as others. It's complicated.

Counselor: I get that it is complicated and certainly it is painful. Yet if we try and look at what you're experiencing a bit differently -- that is, focus on the stress rather than jump to the conclusion that you are not able to perform like others -- there might be new possible outcome.

Client: I guess... that could be a new way to look at it. But it's hard for me to switch my mindset like that when I've been feeling this way for so long. It's like, even if the stress is a big part of it, all I see are the grades and how much I'm struggling compared to others. It feels overwhelming sometimes, like I can't help but think about how far behind I am instead of focusing on what might improve things. It's not easy to change my perspective when I'm in that moment of anxiety and doubt, you know?

Counselor: Yeah, it is really hard to change, especially if you have felt this way for a long time. Maybe we could also have a different perspective on that too. If you are looking for change to occur that is similar in duration as the amount of time you have struggled, it might make it harder for you to notice small and yet important changes.

Client: Um, I guess that makes sense? Like, if I'm expecting big changes right away after feeling this way for so long, I might just get even more frustrated. But it's still hard to see those small changes when everything feels so overwhelming all the time. I want

to feel better and improve, but sometimes it seems like it's going to take forever or like I'm stuck at square one. It's just... a lot to think about while I'm already feeling anxious about everything else.

Counselor: Yeah, we don't want to add more anxiety to your current anxiety. But as you said, your anxiety seemed to be inevitable anyway. Might it be better to try a new strategy if anxiety is inevitable?

Client: I mean, yeah, maybe trying a new strategy could be helpful. But I guess part of me is just unsure about what to even try. I don't want to get my hopes up and then feel let down again if it doesn't work. It's like, I know anxiety is going to be there, but figuring out what new things might help me deal with it just sounds... challenging? I'm not really sure where to start with that or if anything will actually make a difference.

Counselor: What would be something meaningful to you to risk trying something new?

Client: I think it would be meaningful to try something that might help me feel more confident in myself, maybe? Like, if there was some way to build my skills without the pressure of being compared to others or worrying about grades, that could help. A smaller step where I could focus on understanding one thing at a time might make a difference. I just want to feel like I can actually learn and not get overwhelmed right away. But... actually taking that risk feels kinda scary too.

Counselor: Do you have any evidence that others are comparing themselves to you?

Client: Um, not really evidence, I guess. It's mostly just how I feel. Like when I'm in class and I see people talking or laughing together while I'm struggling to keep up, it just makes me think they must be comparing themselves to me or seeing me as lesser somehow. But maybe that's all in my head? It's hard to shake off those feelings when they come up, you know?

Counselor: So you are doing the comparison and they may or may not be comparing themselves with you?

Client: Yeah, I think that's probably true. It's just... easier to assume they're judging me when I'm already feeling so low about myself. But really, I don't know what they're thinking. Maybe it's just me putting that pressure on myself and not understanding that everyone has their own struggles, too. It feels a little silly now that I'm saying it out loud, but it's hard to change how deeply those feelings run inside of me.

Counselor: You assume that they are judging you because you are judging you.

Client: I guess that makes sense. I'm super hard on myself, and maybe that's why I think others are too. It's like, if I feel not good enough, it's easy to project that onto them and think they feel the same way about me. But recognizing that doesn't make it any

easier to let go of the anxiety or those feelings of being judged, you know? It's frustrating because I want to break free from all this pressure but don't really know how.

Counselor: I wonder if there is a relationship between the anxiety that you are feeling and the judgments about yourself that you make?

Client: Uh, yeah, I think there probably is a connection. The more I feel anxious about not doing well or keeping up, the harsher I am on myself. It's like one fuels the other. If I'm nervous about an assignment or a test, my brain starts saying things like "you're not smart enough" or "you'll fail," and that just makes it all worse. It's kind of a cycle that feeds into itself, which makes it feel even harder to break free and just try to relax for once.

Counselor: I don't know if that's true; while it is hard to break free from anxiety but continuing to live this the anxiety seems pretty challenging too.

Client: Um, I mean, yeah, it's definitely challenging. It just feels like I'm stuck in this endless cycle where no matter what I do, I still end up feeling anxious and not good enough. Honestly, it can feel really overwhelming to think about trying to break free when I'm so used to living with that anxiety every day. Sometimes it feels safer to stay in my comfort zone of feeling anxious rather than risk trying something new and possibly failing at it.

Counselor: You say that it is safer to stay in your comfort zone, yet you are describing anxiety and judgment in a way that doesn't sound comfortable.

Client: Yeah, I see what you're saying. It's not really comfortable at all—it's just familiar. Even if it feels overwhelming and heavy, it's something I know how to deal with, in a weird way. Trying to step out of that might mean facing even more uncertainty and fear, which is intimidating. But I guess what you're pointing out makes me think that maybe staying in my comfort zone isn't as safe as I thought. That kind of makes me want to run away from the conversation a bit...

Counselor: Sometimes coming to these realizations about ourselves can be challenging. Let's try and hold on for just a few minutes or more. If the anxiety gets to be too much, we will use that as a lesson to teach us about your ways of dealing with stress.

Client: Um, okay... I'll try my best to hold on. But I can feel the anxiety creeping back in already. It's hard to talk about this stuff without feeling like I just want to disconnect from it all. I guess if we're going to use this moment as a learning experience, that could help me understand more about my stress and how it affects me? But, honestly, it's still pretty tough for me.

Counselor: You say that it is challenging, but I want to applaud you, as you've done an incredible job of describing yourself and your feelings with me today.

Client: Oh, um, thanks. I appreciate you saying that. It's nice to hear some praise since I often feel like I'm not doing anything right at school or anywhere else. But... it does also feel a little weird to accept that kind of acknowledgment? Like, maybe I should be doing more or achieving something bigger before hearing compliments. But thanks, anyway—it helps a bit, even if it's hard for me to fully accept right now.

Counselor: You mention the word acceptance. That is a powerful word. It is kind of the opposite of judgment, a word we talked about before.

Client: Yeah, it really is. Acceptance feels like it could make things a bit easier—like recognizing where I am right now without that harsh judgment on myself. But it's tough to feel accepted when I'm so used to judging myself based on how I compare to others or what I think success looks like. If acceptance is the opposite of judgment, then maybe that's something I really need to work on... figuring out how to be okay with where I'm at instead of constantly pushing for perfection or feeling not good enough. It's just hard to switch gears in my mind sometimes.

Counselor: Yes, it is hard. But as you said before, it might be harder because of the expectation of perfection or expectations in how you compare yourself to others. I wonder if we make acceptance more manageable.

Client: Hmm, I guess if we could make acceptance more manageable, it might help me feel less pressure. Maybe breaking it down into smaller steps or focusing on little things I can accept about myself could be a start? Like recognizing small achievements or simply acknowledging that it's okay to struggle sometimes. But that sounds easier said than done... It's just hard when I'm so used to being critical of myself.

Counselor: You've already done it in our conversation now. You have accepted the possibility of accepting small bits of yourself.

Client: Yeah, I guess I have started to think about it that way. It feels kind of nice to realize that maybe I can take those small steps toward acceptance instead of just feeling overwhelmed all the time. It's still tough for me—I mean, I worry how long it'll take for those feelings to really settle in and feel real. But maybe it's a good first step? Thanks for pointing that out; it helps me see things from a different angle.

Counselor: You are doing it again, jumping to the end and comparing your immediate accomplishments to what you have not yet accomplished in the distant future.

Client: Yeah, I see what you mean. I guess it's just how my mind works—I keep jumping ahead to what I haven't done yet instead of just focusing on what I've done right now. It's like I can't help but think about the end goal instead of appreciating the small steps I'm taking. That's something I really need to work on... trying to be present in this moment rather than getting lost in thoughts about where I want to be or worrying about how long it will take to get there.

Counselor: Let's come back and deeply honor what you have done today. You are accepting that you experience anxiety, you are accepting your habit to jump to judgment and perfectionism, and you have also accepted that keeping things small make you feel a small bit more relieved.

Client: Thank you for saying that. It feels nice to hear it's being honored, even if it's hard for me to really accept it myself right now. Recognizing those things today feels like a step—like I'm starting to see that I can work on my anxiety and how I judge myself instead of just feeling stuck all the time. It's still a lot, but maybe holding onto these small victories is what will help me make progress? That feels... kind of hopeful, which is nice for a change.

Counselor: One of my teachers say to me, "little by little, bit by bit, I am improving everyday."

Client: I like that saying! It feels encouraging to think about improvement as a gradual process instead of something that needs to happen all at once. Little by little definitely sounds more manageable and realistic for me, especially with everything I've been feeling. I'll try to remember that—focusing on just making small progress each day rather than expecting huge changes right away. Thanks for sharing that; it's a nice reminder!

Counselor: Today you started with a new possibility. Maybe there is something small and yet equally meaningful that you could try once you leave our appointment?

Client: Um, yeah, I think I could try to do something small that feels manageable. Maybe I could set a little goal for myself, like taking just 10 minutes to review some material in a way that feels less pressured? Or maybe I could write down a couple of things I've done well this week instead of focusing on what went wrong. It doesn't seem too overwhelming, and it might help me build that sense of acceptance we talked about. Thanks for helping me see that there's potential for small steps—I really appreciate it.

Counselor: That sounds like a potentially helpful goal. Can you touch base later this week and see how it went?

Client: Uh, yeah, I think that would be good. It'd be nice to check in and see how it went or if I even managed to stick with those small goals. Honestly, just having that support feels helpful—as much as I worry about failing or not measuring up, knowing someone is there makes it feel a little less daunting. So yeah, let's touch base later this week! Thanks for being here for me today.

Counselor: Thank you for your courage. I am genuinely excited to hear about your efforts. See you later this week.

Client: Thank you! I appreciate your support. I'll do my best to try those small steps, and I'm looking forward to sharing how it goes. See you later this week!

Session Two

Counselor: It is good to see you again, I am excited to hear if you were able to try out the strategies of non-judgment we discussed or if there are any new happenings that you'd like to talk about instead.

Client: Um, hey. I guess it's good to see you too... I didn't really get a chance to try out those non-judgment strategies, though. School's just been really overwhelming lately, you know? It's like I'm still stuck in the same spot and – ugh – everyone else is moving ahead without me. Sometimes it feels like when I'm struggling in class, my classmates just notice and... I don't know. It makes me feel kind of rejected or invisible, like I'm just not part of it all. Maybe we can talk about that?

Counselor: Yes, that sounds like a perfect place to pick back up. I do want to commend you though, as last time we spoke you were a little cautious and skeptical at the beginning and then you started to get more motivated and optimistic that growth can occur; whereas today you seem to be ready to talk from the outset.

Client: I mean... I guess it's good that you noticed I'm here and talking, but it doesn't really feel like I'm more motivated or optimistic. It still feels hard to keep up, and I just feel bad about falling behind. Like, even if I talk to you today, it doesn't change how things are going in class. I don't know... maybe I'm just not as ready as you think? But thanks for saying something anyway.

Counselor: Change is very difficult. For example, let's consider how long you've experienced these challenges. If I recall correctly, you mentioned years, whereas this newfound perspective is less than a week old.

Client: Yeah, I guess that's true. It has been a long time, like forever. But it still feels kind of weird to think about it that way. Like just because I'm trying to change my thoughts doesn't mean everything is magically better overnight, you know?

Sometimes I feel like people expect me to just get over it or something. It's not that simple... but whatever. I don't really want to keep talking about this if it's just going back and forth like last time.

Counselor: It sounds like we are in agreement, no changing overnight is expected of you. Last time we talked about small changes and you were quite encouraged by that possibility.

Client: Um, yeah, I guess I mentioned being okay with small changes? But honestly... it feels like those “small changes” are still so far away. It's hard to stay encouraged when I see everyone else in class just understanding stuff while I'm still trying to catch up. So, I don't know... it doesn't feel like anything has really changed since we last talked. Maybe it's just too much pressure or... whatever. Can we talk about something else?

Counselor: We can talk about anything that you like, yet what you mentioned before is that your anxiety affects most everything in your life. If that is true, what could we possibly talk about that is not affected by the anxiety?

Client: I don't know... I mean, I guess everything is a bit affected by it, but maybe we could talk about, like, what I like to do in my free time or something? It's not all bad. Sometimes I just want to escape and forget about the classes and the pressure... I've been watching some shows that help me relax or get lost in some music. Just not think about all this stuff for a while would be nice. Can we go there instead?

Counselor: That's a great idea, but I cannot promise that talking about things that reduce your anxiety is not in some way relevant to helping you make small accomplishments in your emotional growth.

Client: Um, okay, I get that you're trying to link everything back to the anxiety stuff. But sometimes it feels like you think too much about it? Like, can't we just talk about something without trying to connect it all back? I don't know... maybe I'm just tired of going in circles and I just want a break from labels or whatever. It's hard enough as it is. If we could...just focus on the fun things for a bit maybe?

Counselor: Okay, let's start with what brings you the greatest sense of peace.

Client: Um, I guess when I'm in my room just listening to music or watching my favorite shows? It just feels nice to be able to zone out and not think about schoolwork or anything else. Sometimes I feel like I can breathe again in those moments. It's like everything else falls away, you know? But then when it's over, it hits me that I have all these things waiting for me. So yeah... maybe that's what brings me peace, but also a little anxiety... Sorry if that sounds confusing.

Counselor: No need to apologize. It doesn't sound confusing at all. It is normal. In fact, almost all people who experience peace also feel some anxiety, even if the peace and anxiety comes from the same experience or activity.

Client: Um, okay, I guess... But it kind of feels like you're saying that everyone deals with this and it's just normal? That's not really what I meant. Like, for me, it feels heavy and different. Sometimes I think maybe I'm just a bit more messed up than everyone else or something. I don't know if that helps explain how I'm feeling? It's like it's nice to find peace in those moments, but the anxiety just creeps back in and makes everything feel harder again... Can we go back to talking about music or something?

Counselor: I think you are right, there are definitely differences in how people experience things, be it peace or anxiety. What I am suggesting is that we all experience it, but what seems to make things difference across people is the amount of peace or anxiety.

Client: Yeah, I get that you're trying to make sense of it, but it still feels like you're just saying what everyone else would say. Like yeah, some people have different levels of anxiety or peace, but I guess—it's hard for me because sometimes it feels like no one really understands how bad mine gets.

I don't know... I just feel kind of drained talking about it this way. Can we keep this part lighter? It's exhausting thinking about how to measure everything.

Counselor: Sometimes resistance is a way of testing if someone is safe. You acknowledge that I am trying to make sense of your experiences, but at the same time you are saying that no one really understands. I have learned a lot about you, and I wonder how that affects you?

Client: I mean... I guess it's nice that you say you've learned a lot about me, but honestly it feels like I'm still trying to figure out my own experiences too. And I don't know if saying "no one understands" means anything specific about you or anyone else, it just sucks feeling that way.

It's just hard to open up when I feel like I'm not being really heard or understood. Like maybe what I'm going through is different enough that talking doesn't actually help? I'm kind of losing interest in this conversation... can we move on?

Counselor: Certainly, I am trying to get to know you better. What do you suggest would be a way to get to know you?

Client: I don't know... maybe ask about the stuff I really like? Like, talking about music or shows, things that make me laugh or help me forget about everything else for a bit. Those are more fun topics to dive into.

It's just easier, you know? When we're not focusing on all the struggles and can talk about what brings me joy instead... it feels more genuine that way. So what do you want to know about those things?

Counselor: Can you tell me about those first moments of joy you experience when diving into these activities?

Client: Um... okay, I guess. So like, when I first put on my headphones and hit play on a favorite song or show, there's this rush of relief that hits me. It feels like everything else just fades away for a little while, you know?

The music can really wrap around me, almost like a cozy blanket. It's nice to feel something different than all the stress from school and stuff. Or when I'm watching a show and it starts off funny or exciting—it's like I can breathe again!

But then... sometimes it also makes me sad when it's over because I'm back to reality feeling all weighed down again. So yeah, that's kind of how those moments feel for me at the start anyway...

Counselor: You mention breathing when you listen to music. Can you describe how your breathing is different when listening to music compared to how you breath normally, or even how you breath when you're feeling anxious?

Client: Um, well... when I'm listening to music, my breathing feels deeper and more relaxed, I guess? Like I'm not holding my breath or trying to push out all these thoughts. But normally, especially when I'm anxious, it's like I'm barely breathing at all. It feels shallow and quick — like I'm just trying to get through it but can't catch a break. Sometimes I end up feeling light-headed or like I'm drowning in everything that's happening around me.

So yeah... music helps make it feel easier—just for those moments—until the anxiety comes back again. It really is kind of a rollercoaster...

Counselor: Emily, this is a potentially profound realization. Just like when we spoke before, you had a deep insight about your anxiety, and I think you might be onto something again here. There is a relationship between your breath and your feelings of anxiety.

Client: Um, I guess that makes sense? But honestly, it kind of feels like you're putting a lot on me to figure out this relationship stuff. Like yes, I know when I'm listening to music, my breathing is better! But that doesn't really change how hard things are overall or make everything magically easier all the time.

It just feels like those connections you're bringing up can be overwhelming sometimes. I don't want to feel pressured to find patterns or meanings right now. Can we chill a bit on that and just talk about something else?

Counselor: That's fair, but I do want to remind you that earlier you indicated that it is difficult to find even small goals to work on. I wonder if maybe you have found that small goal to work on - attending and regulating your breathing. This doesn't require you to force things to "magically" get easier; just one small thing and notice how it affects your feelings.

Client: I mean, I see what you're saying, but it still sounds like... a lot? Like, are you trying to turn everything into a lesson again? I don't know if I'm ready to focus on my breathing as some goal or whatever.

Honestly, it feels exhausting thinking about goals when I'm just trying to get through each day without feeling so overwhelmed. Can't we just talk about what makes me feel good again? That feels easier than trying to tackle something that's just going to add more pressure on me.

Counselor: You're right, more pressure on you is not the goal. Maybe I was a bit hopeful that breathing might be something very convenient. We don't have to make a goal of breathing. We just do it. But the quality of our breath is something we might be able to influence.

Client: Okay, I get it. You're trying to make it sound like something simple, but it still feels complicated to me. It's hard not to feel pressured when we're talking about "influencing" anything, especially with all the other stuff going on in my head. I just want to... you know, enjoy some parts of life without feeling like I have to analyze everything. It gets tiring when we keep going back and forth on these deeper topics. Can we just take a break from all this for now?

Counselor: again, you impress me with your insights. You said, "especially with all of the other stuff going on in my head." I get that focusing on breathing would be tough when you're being influenced by the other stuff in the head. Maybe that is something to consider, when those other things come to mind, and they feel overwhelming, just breath... and do what you are asking me to do in this conversation, make the moment lighter.

Client: Um, thanks for saying that? But I don't know... it still feels like you're sort of telling me what to do again. Like, yeah I get that breathing could be helpful, but it also feels like another thing I have to manage in my head when I already feel overloaded. It's just... hard for me to focus on lighter things when it seems like we keep returning to the serious topics. Can we talk about something fun? Like shows or music or anything else? Maybe just a little break from this whole mental juggling act?

Counselor: I cannot promise that I won't continue to be impressed with your insights and how they might relate to your approach to anxiety; but I do think that you are right, maybe if we talk about the things that provide you some moment of lesser anxiety here, then it is possible that it can translate over.

Client: Okay, I appreciate that you see my insights or whatever. It's just, I really want to focus on things that make me feel good instead of digging into how it all connects to anxiety and breathing again. So... let's talk about music! What are some of your favorite shows or songs? Maybe I can share some of mine too. That sounds more enjoyable right now!

Counselor: How about you start, what engages you?

Client: Alright, cool. Lately, I've been really into this show on Netflix called "Everything Sucks!" It's a bit nostalgic since it's set in the 90s or whatever. I just love how relatable the characters are and how they deal with all their high school drama. It makes me laugh a lot and reminds me that everyone has their struggles, even if they seem way more put together than me.

And music-wise, I can't stop listening to Olivia Rodrigo's songs! They hit hard about feelings and stuff... it's nice finding someone who gets all that teenage angst while making awesome tunes. How about you? What shows or music do you like?

Counselor: There is a bit of a theme between that show and Rodrigo's lyrics, which does seem to reflect your current personal experiences. For me it is the same, I like

music and shows that seem to capture what I am experiencing or what I am interested in; mostly shows and music about how people experience themselves and the world.

Client: Yeah, for sure! That's what makes those shows and songs so relatable. They really capture the ups and downs of being in high school, which is kind of comforting sometimes. Like even though I feel like I'm struggling a lot, seeing characters go through similar stuff can help me feel less alone in it all. It's nice to find something that reflects what I'm feeling instead of just putting on a facade all the time. But anyway... do you have any favorite songs or shows that you connect with? I'd love to hear about them!

Counselor: You mention how they make you feel less like you're alone in these experiences, which I think is true. It is an older song, but what you said reminds me of a song from the 90s by a group called REM and the title was "everybody hurts."

Client: Oh yeah! I've heard that song before. It's really powerful, for sure. The message about how we all go through tough times resonates so much. It's nice to have something that reminds you it's okay to feel sad sometimes and that others are dealing with their own stuff too.

That kind of comfort goes a long way, right? Sometimes I just sing along to songs like that and feel like I'm part of something bigger than just my own problems. It's soothing in a way... thanks for bringing it up! Do you have other songs from back then that speak to you?

Counselor: I am starting to notice a pattern. Emily, while you indicate to me that you don't want me to offer possible connections, I do note that you consistently offer beautiful insights about your life and inner world; yet it seems easier when we cover them in songs or shows.

Client: I mean, I guess I can see that? It's definitely easier for me to talk about my feelings through the lens of music or shows. They just create this buffer, you know? It feels less direct and less... heavy to just connect through something already made. But when it comes down to talking about my own stuff directly, it feels way more intense. You know what I mean? So yeah, if talking about songs helps me open up a bit without feeling too exposed, then maybe that's why it's easier for me. But still... can we keep focusing on those fun topics instead of veering back into deeper analysis? I'm just trying to keep it light right now!

Counselor: It does make me more connected to you, understanding how your world works. And I hear you asking me about my favorite shows and music; which might indicate that you also want to understand my perspective too.

Client: Yeah, I guess that's true. I'm just trying to find common ground, you know? It makes the conversation feel easier and less intense if we can relate to each other through stuff we both like. Plus, hearing about your perspective might give me something new to enjoy!

It feels less like it's all about my struggles then. So... what are some things you genuinely enjoy? You mentioned before liking shows and music related to experiences—I'd love to hear your faves too!

Counselor: We are definitely learning about each other. And I hope to pick this up again soon. Would you like to schedule a time to talk again in the next few days?

Client: Um, yeah... I think that could be good. It's nice to have an open space to talk about lighter stuff and even some deeper things too, but it definitely feels like a lot sometimes. So having a set time could help me prepare myself. Maybe we can plan for a few days from now? That way I can think about some more fun topics or shows to share!

Counselor: Sounds good. I look forward to hearing about them and learning more about you. In the meantime, without it becoming something too intense or effortful, flatter me and do take a minute or two and try and attend to your breathing and see how it might affect your feelings.

Client: Okay, I can do that. Thanks for suggesting something light like that at the end! I'll try to take a moment just to breathe and see what happens... even if it's just for a few minutes.

And, um, by the way, I appreciate you being understanding during our talk today. It does make me feel more comfortable sharing things with you, so thanks for being cool about it.

I'll focus on breathing and hopefully catch some of those lighter feelings before we chat again next time!

Counselor: See you soon.

Client: See you soon! Take care!

Session 3

Counselor: Hello, Emily, it is great to see you again. Last time we talked about some of the things you do that bring you peace, like music and shows you watch. We also added talked about how breathing in an intentional manner can also bring momentary relief. Would you like to start here or with something else?

Client: Hi... um, yeah, I guess we can start with that. Music and shows are definitely my go-to for when I'm feeling stressed. It's just easier to escape into those worlds. Breathing stuff is kind of... interesting? But sometimes it feels awkward trying to focus on that when everything around me feels so loud and crazy. I don't know if I'm really ready to dive deep today though... Just thinking about how heavy things can get makes me anxious. Can we keep it more light? Maybe talk about some new music or something?

Counselor: Sure. Maybe you can tell me about some of the feelings you experience when listening to some of this new music.

Client: Um, I don't know... it kind of varies? Like, when I listen to Olivia Rodrigo, her songs really hit hard sometimes. It's like she gets how confusing everything is—like feeling left out or not understanding things in class. But then there's this sense of relief too? It's like I'm not alone in feeling that way. But honestly, if we get too deep into feelings, it just makes me feel more overwhelmed. I guess... I just want to keep it lighter for now? You know what I mean?

Counselor: Olivia Rodrigo seems to be able to touch on that delicate experience of confusion, feelings of loneliness; there is something about it being set to music that makes it less overwhelming, maybe compared to talking about it directly like we've been doing?

Client: Yeah, kind of. But I mean, it's not just "less overwhelming." It's more like music gives me a way to just feel those things without having to talk about them. When I listen, I'm in my own little world where I don't have to explain anything or feel judged. Talking about it directly makes everything seem heavier and... ugh, I don't know... easier to get lost in my thoughts. I shouldn't need pressuring feelings every time we talk right? Just listening is good enough for me sometimes... It's easier that way.

Counselor: What would you like for me to hear you say?

Client: Um, I guess I just want you to hear that sometimes it's hard for me to talk about my feelings. I need space, and... maybe reassurance that it's okay not to dive deep every time. I like when it feels easy and chill, you know? It helps me feel less anxious. I'm just trying to figure everything out without added pressure, so if we can keep things more relaxed, that would be really nice.

Counselor: You want someone to share in the feelings of peace you crave. You don't want to be forced to feel overwhelmed.

Client: Yeah, that's close, but it's not just about sharing. It's more like... I want to feel comfortable and not have everything be so heavy all the time. I don't want to be pushed into feeling overwhelmed like it's expected of me. Just chilling and enjoying things without going deep into feelings is what helps me cope better, you know? Sometimes I feel like... like if we get too far in there, I'll just... check out or something.

Counselor: Maybe to help me out, you can let me know what is your typical tipping point when it gets too intense?

Client: I guess when it feels like we're spending too long digging into heavy stuff without breaks... that's when I start to feel really anxious. Like, my mind starts racing and it's hard to focus on anything else.

If I feel like we're just going deeper and deeper without any lighthearted moments, I just kind of zone out or just want to escape the conversation entirely. It's almost like my brain hits a limit, and then... ugh, it gets frustrating. So yeah, keeping things balanced between fun and serious is what helps me the most.

Counselor: Cool. Make sense. We have established that talking about too much deep and serious stuff can be overwhelming, so maybe we can also establish the other end of the continuum, what are the things that bring you the fun and peace you crave?

Client: Um, definitely music, like I said. And shows—like **Everything Sucks!** is really relatable and funny in a way that just makes me feel better. I love getting lost in those characters and stories because they're kind of like... real-life situations but just done differently, you know?

Hanging out with my close friends can be nice too, especially when we talk about random stuff or share memes—just laughing together feels good. So yeah, anything that gives me that light feeling instead of stress helps a lot!

Counselor: What can you tell me about your friends?

Client: Uh, well, I have a few close friends, and they're kind of my go-to people when I just want to hang out. We usually talk about music or the latest shows we're into and just joke around a lot. It feels good to be able to relax with them without any pressure. But sometimes I feel like I'm not totally included in everything because of my struggles... Like when they understand class stuff easily, and I'm sitting there feeling lost. It can feel lonely even when they're around. But we still have fun together most of the time!

Counselor: They are kind of like the music you described earlier. The music can have a deep feeling but it doesn't overwhelm you because you can listen on your terms. With your friends, there can be some things that are overwhelming but there is a rhythm that goes along with just hanging out and having fun.

Client: Yeah, I guess that's kind of it! My friends can be like that rhythm—a nice flow where we just enjoy each other's company without too much pressure. It feels safe and easy, so I can just be myself without worrying too much about school stuff or anything heavy.

But... it's definitely a balancing act. Sometimes I still feel left out of conversations if they're talking about things I don't get or understand well enough. So while it's good most of the time, there are moments where that anxiety creeps in again—especially when it feels like everyone is on a different page than me.

Counselor: I imagine that that feels quite isolating.

Client: Yeah, it really does sometimes. Just sitting there, feeling like I'm on the outside looking in can be really tough. Like, I want to connect with them and laugh, but when school stuff comes up and I can't relate... it's a reminder of how different things feel for me.

It makes me anxious about how others see me too—like they might think I'm not trying hard enough or something. It's just... isolating fades into that awkwardness where I don't know what to say or how to fit in anymore.

Counselor: Have you ever let them know about what you're experiencing inside?

Client: Uh, not really. I mean, I want to but... it's hard to find the right words. I don't want them to feel sorry for me or make things awkward. Plus, it's like... if I open up about feeling confused or left out, what if they don't get it?

Most of the time, I just try to keep things light and pretend that everything's okay. It feels safer that way—like if we keep laughing and avoiding the heavy stuff, maybe it'll stay fun. But then I end up feeling more alone when I'm quiet about what I'm actually going through.

Counselor: I imagine that that can be disappointing and lonely; not knowing the right words and therefore feeling close but yet afar from these friends you care about?

Client: Yeah, that really is it. It's disappointing because I do care about them, and I want to feel close, but not having the right words just makes it harder to connect. It's like there's this invisible wall between us that I can't break down, and it feels lonely knowing I can't share what I'm really feeling.

I see them laughing and joking, and then there's me trying to keep up but also feeling lost inside. Sometimes it's frustrating... It makes me wish things were easier so we could all just understand each other better without having to worry about all this other stuff.

Counselor: What type of things would you want to say if you could?

Client: Um, I guess I'd want to say that sometimes I feel really lost in class and it's hard for me to keep up. Like, even when everyone seems to get it, I'm just... struggling in my own head. I'd probably tell them that it's frustrating not being able to express what I'm feeling because I'm afraid of ruining the fun.

Maybe I'd explain how helpful their support would be if they understood where I was coming from but also let them know that it's okay if we don't always dive into heavy stuff too! Just finding a balance would be really good.

Counselor: And what might you feel if you heard them respond to you in a way that you desire?

Client: If they responded in a way that I hoped for, like being really understanding and supportive, I think I'd feel... relieved? Like it would take a huge weight off my shoulders to know they actually get where I'm coming from.

It would make me feel less lonely and more accepted, you know? Just hearing them say something like "it's okay to struggle" or "we're here for you no matter what" would mean

a lot. It might even help me open up more instead of feeling all shut down just sitting there with my thoughts. That kind of acceptance would be comforting and give me hope that we can have those deeper conversations without it being too heavy or awkward.

Counselor: I also imagine it is disappointing not to hear these things from them; yet you're aware that it is probably unlikely that they would say such a thing because they are unaware of what is really going on with you beneath the surface.

Client: Yeah, exactly. It's like this cycle of disappointment where I want to connect and share but then hold back because I'm not sure they'd understand. And it sucks to think that they might never know what I'm going through unless I say something—like they're just unaware of the struggle beneath the surface.

I guess sometimes I feel like I'm waiting for a cue or something from them, but it never comes. So I just end up staying quiet and trying to play it cool, even though on the inside, I really wish they'd reach out or recognize that things aren't all fine-and-dandy for me. It's definitely isolating feeling stuck between wanting to connect and being too anxious to speak up.

Counselor: What type of cue would be enough for you to know that it is okay to try to disclose something, even if something modest?

Client: Um, I think if they just casually mentioned how they also have struggles with school or feelings, that would help a lot. Just a little openness on their part would make me feel like it's safe to share—even if it's something small.

Or maybe asking how I've been doing lately instead of sticking to the usual light topics could be a good cue too. Just showing that they're interested in more than just surface-level stuff would make me feel more comfortable trying to disclose even something modest about what I'm experiencing. It's really all about creating that safe space where sharing doesn't feel so scary.

Counselor: I wonder, have you even seen any of these types of cues in them? In other words, have you seen one of your friends opening up about themselves which allowed you to be there for them?

Client: Um, a couple of times, yeah. I remember one of my friends mentioned struggling with schoolwork and feeling really stressed about it. It caught me off guard because they usually seem so on top of everything. In those moments, I felt like I could be there for them and support them.

But when it came to sharing my own stuff... I don't know, it's different for me. Even though they opened up a bit, I still felt this hesitation to reciprocate. It's like I'm scared that if I'm not as strong or positive as them in their moment of struggle, maybe they'll see me differently?

So yeah, it's cool to see them open up and feel more connected in those moments—but for some reason when it's my turn, that anxiety just takes over again.

Counselor: There is a lot of risk in putting yourself out there and being vulnerable/

Client: Yeah, exactly. It feels super risky to be vulnerable. Like, what if they don't get it or think I'm just being dramatic? Or worse, what if they don't want to hang out with me anymore because of my struggles? That fear makes it really hard for me to open up. So even though I see that my friends can share and still be accepted, I worry that my own feelings won't be received the same way. It's tough wanting to connect but feeling that risk holding me back from actually doing it. Sometimes it just feels safer to stay quiet and keep everything bottled up instead.

Counselor: Safer and yet disappointed because it is lonely.

Client: Yeah, that's totally it. It feels like I'm choosing the "safer" route by not opening up, but at the same time, it just leads to disappointment and loneliness. It's frustrating knowing that I could potentially feel better if I shared more but then being scared of the backlash—or worse, keeping everything inside and still feeling isolated. It's like this constant tug-of-war between wanting to connect with my friends and just protecting myself from possible rejection or misunderstanding. And even though I know it might be nice to share and feel less alone, that fear often wins out.

Counselor: It does seem like a very challenging dilemma. Feeling safe but not really. Protected but also harmed by protecting oneself.

Client: Yeah, exactly. It's such a tough situation to be in. Like I'm trying to protect myself from feeling rejected or judged, but in the end, I'm just making myself feel more alone and isolated. It feels like a double-edged sword where I think I'm doing the right thing by keeping things inside, but it ends up hurting me just as much—if not more. I want that connection and understanding from my friends so badly, but the fear of being vulnerable makes it hard to reach out. So instead of finding safety in sharing my feelings, I'm stuck feeling both protected and cut off at the same time. It's really exhausting to navigate those mixed emotions constantly.

Counselor: You've really opened up to me in the last 10 minutes. You have such expressive feelings that you have shared; evidence that the words are in there and you're able to share them with another person. I wonder what is different about our conversation versus with your friends?

Client: Um, I guess it feels different because this is more of a safe space where I don't feel judgmental vibes or pressure to be someone I'm not. You've been really understanding and respectful about what I'm feeling, which just makes it easier for me to talk. It's like there's no expectation for me to be all fun and positive—just a place where I can share what's on my mind without worrying too much. With my friends, there's that underlying fear of how they'll react or if they'll feel weird about it. Plus, we often stick with lighter topics because that's what tends to keep things feeling good among us—so when the heavier stuff comes up, it feels riskier. So yeah, just being able to express myself here without that pressure really helps me open up more than I usually do with them. It's nice in a way!

Counselor: Having the assurance that you're in a safe place when you disclose the inner most feelings is important.

Client: Definitely! That assurance of being in a safe place makes all the difference. It's like I can actually breathe and let my guard down a bit. When I feel that safety, it lets me share things that are usually buried under anxiety and fear—like talking about what I'm really going through.

It's reassuring to know there won't be judgment or expectations here, and I think that helps me explore my feelings more openly. With my friends, though... it feels trickier because there's that pressure to keep everything fun and lighthearted; otherwise, it's like risking everything if I go deeper. So yeah, having that safety net is key for me when talking about inner feelings!

Counselor: I wonder if the context matters too? Maybe disclosing to friends when you are out or in school, too many leering eyes and ears... or the group think typical of high schoolers, even good friends... but a conversation in a more intimate setting, not too intense but natural and more facilitative of being more open and authentic?

Client: Yeah, that's a really good point. The context makes a huge difference! When I'm with my friends in school or out in public, it feels like there are too many eyes and ears around. It can turn into this group dynamic where everyone's trying to keep things light or funny, and you don't want to be the one who brings all the heavy stuff to the table. In more intimate settings, though—like just one-on-one conversations or low-pressure hangouts—it's way easier to be open and authentic. There's less fear of what others might think or say if I share something vulnerable. It feels like there's room for deeper conversations without feeling judged by an audience of classmates.

So yeah, having a comfortable setting allows me to let my guard down and really connect with someone instead of feeling caught up in that high school vibe where everything needs to appear perfect or fun all the time.

Counselor: Are there any friends who are less risky and settings that are less risky? Maybe if you could predict it, you could plan for a very low risk but nonetheless important disclosure to see how you feel and how they respond?

Client: Um, yeah, I think there are a couple of friends who might be more supportive and easier to talk to. Like, there's one friend who seems really understanding and has opened up about their own struggles before; talking to them feels less risky.

As for settings, maybe hanging out somewhere quieter—like just grabbing coffee or chilling outside when it's not too busy would work best? It could help get rid of that pressure from being in a crowded space or having lots of people around.

If I could plan it out ahead, I'd want to start with something small—maybe just mention feeling stressed about school or saying that I sometimes feel lost during class. That way it's like dipping my toes in the water without going all in right away. Seeing how they respond could give me more confidence for future discussions, you know? It feels manageable that way!

Counselor: Might this be something you could try this week? Maybe we can take our last few minutes to create a tangible and yet flexible plan.

Client: Yeah, I think that's a good idea! Creating a plan sounds helpful. Okay, so maybe I could reach out to my friend and see if they want to hang out this week—maybe grab coffee or just chill in a park where it's quieter.

I could aim for one of the days after school when we can have some time alone without others around. And then for the actual conversation, I could start by asking them how they've been feeling with everything happening at school. That way, it opens the door for sharing without it feeling too intimidating.

If they share something first, then I can gauge how comfortable they are with deeper topics and see if it's okay to mention my own feelings of stress or confusion about class work as well. But if things feel tense or heavy at any point, I can just steer the conversation back to lighter stuff.

So yeah! It's kind of flexible; if I'm not feeling

Counselor: You sound motivated and enthused.

Client: Thanks! I guess thinking about it this way makes me feel a bit more hopeful.

Having a plan feels like I have some control over the situation, and that kind of takes off some pressure.

Just knowing that I might be able to share something—even if it's small—feels exciting and scary at the same time! But yeah, I'm definitely feeling more motivated to give it a shot. It's nice to have something positive to work towards instead of just staying stuck in my head all the time.

Counselor: Maybe more addition to this plan, how about you and I plan on meeting again next week where we can talk about how it went?

Client: Yeah, that sounds great! Having a check-in next week would be super helpful. I can think about how it went and share what worked or didn't work during the conversation. Just being able to talk it through with you afterward will help me process everything.

I'll make sure to write down any feelings or reactions I have after the hangout so it's easier to remember everything when we meet again. It feels good to have that follow-up planned, like I've got support no matter what happens this week. Thanks for being so understanding!

Counselor: I am very proud of you for this plan. Regardless of how it goes, you have accomplished a lot by disclosing authentically to me and creating a plan that can potentially affect relationships outside of our counseling talks.

Client: Thank you! That really means a lot to me. Just hearing that you're proud makes me feel more encouraged about everything. I think having this plan and being able to talk about it here with you has already started to help me feel more confident.

I know it won't be easy, but it feels like a step in the right direction—like I'm actually doing something that could make a difference in my friendships. So, yeah, I appreciate your support so much! I'm looking forward to our next session and sharing how it goes.

Counselor: See you next week.

Client: See you next week! Thanks again for everything. I'll be thinking about our conversation and my plan. Take care!