# Therapy Session: struggles with emotional dysregulation, avoidance, and internal conflict

T: Hi Sarah, I’m glad you could make it today. I’d like to start by checking in—how have things been for you since we last spoke?

C: Thanks. Honestly, it’s been rough. I keep finding myself overwhelmed by my emotions, especially anger and anxiety, and I’m not really sure what to do with them.

T: That sounds really tough, Sarah. When those emotions show up, how do you usually respond? Do you notice any patterns in what you do or how you try to manage them? [present-moment]

C: I usually try to push them away or distract myself. I’ll scroll through my phone, eat junk food, or just avoid talking to anyone. Sometimes I’ll snap at people without meaning to, and then I feel guilty afterwards.

T: It sounds like there’s a lot going on internally—strong feelings, efforts to avoid them, and then some guilt about how you react. When you notice yourself avoiding or snapping, what thoughts or beliefs tend to come up for you? [defusion]

C: I often think I’m failing or that I should have more control. There’s this voice that says, “Why can’t you just handle this? Other people do.” And then I just want to hide.

T: That self-critical voice sounds really loud and demanding. When it tells you you’re failing or should have more control, how do you feel in your body? [present-moment]

C: My chest gets tight, and I feel kind of heavy, like I just want to curl up and disappear. Sometimes my hands shake or I feel this knot in my stomach.

T: Thank you for sharing that. Let’s try something together for a moment. Can you notice that tightness in your chest and see if you can just sit with it, without trying to change or judge it? What happens if you allow the feeling to be there, just for a few breaths? [acceptance]

C: I’ll try… Okay. It’s uncomfortable, but I can feel it… It’s still there, but I guess it’s not getting worse. I usually want to run from it, but just noticing it is different.

T: That’s really brave, Sarah, and you’re doing something new by being present with the discomfort instead of immediately escaping it. What’s it like to notice you can stay with this feeling, even if only for a short time? [acceptance]

C: It’s kind of weird… I always thought it would swallow me up, but I guess I’m still here. I don’t like it, but maybe I can handle more than I thought.

T: That’s a powerful realization. It makes sense to want to avoid pain, but sometimes those avoidance strategies create more difficulties in the long run. What do you notice about yourself when you reflect on the ways you avoid or fight your feelings? [avoidance]

C: I think I end up feeling worse. Like, I eat junk food to feel better, but then I feel gross and guilty. Or I push people away and then I’m lonely. It’s like I’m stuck in a loop.

T: That loop sounds exhausting. If you imagine stepping back from your thoughts for a moment—almost like watching them from a distance—how do those stories about control and failure look from that perspective? [defusion]

C: From a distance, the thoughts seem kind of harsh. Like, I wouldn’t say that to a friend. They’re just stories I tell myself, but they feel real in the moment.

T: That’s a really helpful observation. Our minds are good at creating convincing stories, especially under stress, but sometimes those stories aren’t the whole truth. If you could speak to that critical voice, what would you want to say? [defusion]

C: I guess I’d say, “You’re not helping.” Or maybe, “I’m doing my best. I don’t need you to make me feel worse.”

T: Beautifully said. Sometimes, naming and talking back to that inner critic can help us see it as just one part of our experience, not the whole picture. What would it be like to notice those critical thoughts, and instead of believing them completely, just acknowledge them as thoughts your mind is offering? [defusion]

C: That sounds freeing, actually. I can see how it might make things feel less heavy. I’d like to try that—just noticing the thoughts, instead of fighting with them.

T: That’s a great intention. Let’s practice for a moment. Can you bring to mind a recent situation where you felt emotionally overwhelmed, and notice the thoughts that came up? See if you can say to yourself, “I’m noticing I’m having the thought that…” and fill in the thought. [defusion]

C: Okay… Yesterday, I was angry at my partner for not helping with chores. I thought, “He doesn’t care about me.” So, “I’m noticing I’m having the thought that he doesn’t care about me.”

T: Excellent. How does it feel to phrase it that way, as “I’m noticing I’m having the thought that…” instead of just believing it’s absolutely true? [defusion]

C: It feels a little less… permanent. Like, it’s just a thought passing through, not a fact set in stone.

T: That’s exactly the shift we’re aiming for. Creating that bit of space can open up new possibilities for how you respond. When you’re able to step back from those thoughts, what do you want your behavior to look like, especially in moments of conflict or intense emotion? [values]

C: I want to be calmer, to talk instead of yelling or shutting down. I’d like to be honest about how I feel without attacking or running away.

T: Those are powerful values—calmness, honesty, and connection. When you imagine acting in line with those values, even when it’s difficult, what feelings or fears come up for you? [values] [acceptance]

C: I get scared that I’ll be rejected or that people won’t take me seriously. Sometimes I worry that if I’m not angry, no one will listen to me. It’s hard to trust that being vulnerable is safe.

T: That fear of being hurt or ignored makes a lot of sense. If we could imagine making room for those fears, instead of letting them dictate your actions, what might that open up for you? [acceptance]

C: Maybe I’d feel less controlled by them. I could try things differently, even if it’s scary. I might actually get what I want—a real connection or understanding.

T: That’s such a hopeful possibility. It’s natural to want to protect yourself, and sometimes our minds use anger or avoidance as shields. What would it be like to thank your mind for trying to keep you safe, and then choose actions that move you toward your values, even if discomfort is present? [self-as-context] [committed-action]

C: I’ve never thought of it that way. Maybe if I could appreciate that part of me, I wouldn’t have to fight it so much. I could let it be there, but still choose to act differently.

T: That’s a compassionate approach, Sarah. Let’s explore a specific situation—maybe with your partner or another close relationship—where you’d like to respond differently next time. What might that look like if you were guided by your values and willing to accept some discomfort? [committed-action] [acceptance]

C: I think I’d pause before reacting. Maybe say, “I’m feeling overwhelmed right now,” instead of yelling. I could ask for a few minutes to calm down before talking things through.

T: That sounds like a thoughtful plan. What do you imagine might get in the way of doing that in the moment? [barriers] [acceptance]

C: My emotions feel so strong, and it’s almost automatic to react. Sometimes I just want that relief right away, even if I regret it later. I worry I’ll forget to pause when I’m upset.

T: Those automatic responses are deeply ingrained, and it’s completely normal for them to show up. Sometimes it helps to have a simple reminder—a word, phrase, or even a physical gesture—that can cue you to pause and notice what’s happening. What might be a helpful reminder for you? [present-moment] [committed-action]

C: Maybe I could try putting my hand on my heart when I feel angry. Or I could say to myself, “Pause.” That might help me remember to slow down.

T: That’s a wonderful idea. Placing your hand on your heart can be a grounding gesture, and a simple “Pause” can be a powerful reminder. If you practice this, even outside of conflict, it can become more natural over time. How do you feel about giving this a try over the next week? [committed-action]

C: I’m willing to try. I know it won’t be perfect, but I like the idea of practicing. I want to have better control over my reactions, or at least not be so ruled by them.

T: That willingness is so important. Remember, the goal isn’t to get rid of difficult feelings or thoughts, but to relate to them differently so you have more freedom to choose your actions. What’s one small, specific situation where you can practice this pause, even if just for a moment? [committed-action]

C: Maybe when my partner leaves his socks on the floor. That’s something that usually annoys me right away. I could notice the irritation, put my hand on my heart, and pause before saying anything.

T: That’s a great example. The more you practice in those smaller moments, the more prepared you’ll be for bigger challenges. When you imagine yourself pausing and choosing how to respond, what do you hope your partner might notice or experience? [values]

C: I hope he sees that I’m trying, and maybe it helps us talk instead of argue. I want him to know I care, even when I’m frustrated. I hope it brings us closer.

T: Those are beautiful intentions, rooted in caring and connection. If things don’t go perfectly—which is completely normal—how can you offer yourself kindness instead of criticism? [acceptance] [self-as-context]

C: I could remind myself that I’m learning. Maybe tell myself, “It’s okay to make mistakes.” I don’t have to be perfect to make progress.

T: That’s a compassionate approach, and it aligns with how you’d treat a friend in the same situation. Sometimes, self-kindness is just as important as any skill we practice. As you think about these changes, what fears or concerns do you notice coming up? [acceptance]

C: I worry it won’t make a difference, or that I’ll just fall back into old habits. I’m afraid I’ll disappoint myself or others. Sometimes I wonder if it’s even possible to change.

T: Those doubts are natural, especially when you’re working on longstanding patterns. If you could hold those fears gently, rather than letting them stop you, what’s one thing you’d want to try anyway? [acceptance] [committed-action]

C: I’d want to keep practicing the pause, even if I mess up sometimes. I think just trying is worth something. Maybe I’ll surprise myself.

T: Absolutely, the act of trying is already a step toward change. And over time, those small efforts add up. If we look at the bigger picture, what kind of person do you want to become through this process? [values]

C: I want to be more patient and understanding—with myself and others. I want to feel like I can handle my emotions instead of being afraid of them. I’d like to be someone who can face hard things without running away.

T: Those are such meaningful values—patience, understanding, courage. When you find yourself stuck in avoidance or self-criticism, how can you use those values as a compass to guide your behavior? [values] [committed-action]

C: Maybe I can ask, “What would a patient or brave version of me do right now?” That could help me make choices that fit who I want to be, not just how I feel in the moment.

T: That’s a great strategy, Sarah. Sometimes, imagining ourselves as the person we want to become can help us bridge the gap between intention and action. How do you feel having talked through all of this today? [present-moment]

C: I actually feel a little lighter. It’s good to have a plan, and to know I’m not alone in feeling this way. I’m nervous, but also hopeful.

T: I’m really glad to hear that. Remember, change is a process, and every step counts—even the small ones. What’s one thing you want to take with you from today’s session? [values] [committed-action]

C: I want to remember that my thoughts aren’t facts, and I can pause before reacting. I want to practice being kinder to myself when things are hard.

T: That’s a wonderful takeaway. I appreciate your openness and willingness to explore these difficult topics today. Would you like to check in about how things go with the pause and self-kindness next time? [committed-action]

C: Yes, I think that would help. It would keep me accountable and give me something to focus on.

T: Great, we’ll plan to revisit that. Before we wrap up, is there anything else on your mind, or anything you’d like to ask or share?

C: No, I think we covered a lot. Thank you for listening and helping me figure this out.

T: It’s truly my pleasure, Sarah. You’re doing important work, and I look forward to hearing how things go. Take care until next time.