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

T: Sarah, it’s good to see you again. Last week you mentioned the wave of anxiety that hits whenever you try to slow down, and I’ve been curious how that showed up for you in the days since. [present-moment] Can you bring that experience into the room right now and let’s notice it together?

C: Well, it’s here already. The moment I sat down my chest tightened and my mind started listing everything I should have done before coming—emails, laundry, the birthday gift I still haven’t mailed. It’s like a swarm of bees in my head, and if I stop moving they’ll sting.

T: So the swarm arrives with the message “If you pause, you’ll get stung.” [defusion] Let’s hold that thought lightly for a moment and notice the actual sensations—tight chest, buzzing mind—without leaping into action. Can you feel the tightness and still keep your seat?

C: I can feel it, but every cell wants to bolt. My legs are literally tingling like they’re revving an engine. Part of me thinks, “This is stupid, just leave and do the errands, then you’ll feel better.”

T: That “stupid” label is another bee in the swarm. [defusion] What if we treat the urge to bolt like a weather pattern passing through the sky of awareness? You can notice the tingling legs, the racing thoughts, and still choose to sit here a little longer. What happens in your body if you give the storm permission to be exactly as it is?

C: My shoulders drop a tiny bit, but then a new thought pops up: “If I let the storm stay, it’ll grow and swallow me.” That fear feels like a black hole opening in my stomach.

T: Ah, the mind predicts catastrophe if we stop controlling. [avoidance] It’s offering you a bargain: keep running or be annihilated. Have you noticed whether running actually dissolves the black hole, or just keeps you sprinting around it?

C: Sprinting, definitely. The hole never closes; it just follows me. I’ll binge a show, scroll my phone, reorganize the pantry—anything so I don’t have to look at it. But it’s still there, heavier at 2 a.m. when the distractions run out.

T: So the control strategies give temporary relief but charge interest later. [acceptance] I’m wondering what tiny piece of that 2 a.m. heaviness you’d be willing to carry into the light right now, here with me, without fixing it.

C: It’s a mix of shame and grief. Shame that I can’t handle normal adult life, grief that I’m always braced for the next wave. They feel like twin weights chained to my ankles.

T: Shame says “I’m broken,” grief says “I’ve lost something precious.” [defusion] If those were just sounds your mind makes—like background radio—could you let the sounds play while you stay curious about the actual sensations of weight around your ankles?

C: When I try, my mind argues, “Curiosity won’t pay the bills or silence the panic.” It’s like a courtroom drama in there, and curiosity feels like a flaky public defender.

T: Nice image—courtroom drama. [self-as-context] Imagine you’re not the defendant, the prosecutor, or even the flaky defender. Picture yourself as the courtroom itself: walls, ceiling, floor. All those voices echo inside you, but you’re the space that holds them. How does that shift things?

C: I feel a weird spaciousness, like I just stepped back twenty feet. The voices are still loud, but they’re tiny figures now. I’m not sure I trust it, though—what if the walls crumble?

T: The mind will always forecast collapse; that’s its job. [acceptance] But notice you’re still here, still breathing. Let’s test the crumbling fear: can you breathe into the walls and notice any cracks widening, or is the spaciousness still holding?

C: The cracks aren’t widening; they’re flickering like bad Wi-Fi. My breath is shaky but it’s moving. I can sense the floor of the courtroom under me—solid enough for now.

T: Good. From that floor, I’d like to invite you to place the twin weights—shame and grief—on the chessboard we talked about last time. [self-as-context] See the board with all its pieces: panic, shame, grocery lists, birthday gifts. Where would you like to set those two pieces so you can see them without being them?

C: I’ll put shame on a black pawn square and grief on a white bishop square. They’re still on the board, but I’m… above it? Like I’m the wood grain of the board itself, not the pieces fighting.

T: Exactly. The wood doesn’t have to eliminate the pieces to be whole. [values] From that vantage point, what matters enough that you’d keep those pieces on the board rather than flipping the whole game over?

C: My daughter. She’s eight. I don’t want her to inherit this frantic sprinting. I want her to see that emotions don’t have to be enemies. That’s probably the only reason I’m here instead of folding laundry right now.

T: Beautiful. So “being a model for my daughter” is a value that can coexist with shame and grief riding along. [committed-action] What’s one small move you could make this week that serves that value, even if the swarm and the black hole come too?

C: I could sit with her while she does homework without multitasking—no phone, no mental to-do list. Just be present. But I’m scared I’ll snap or space out.

T: The fear of snapping is another piece on the board—maybe a knight that jumps around unpredictably. [defusion] If you bring the courtroom or the chessboard with you to the homework table, could you let the knight jump while still choosing to keep eye contact with your daughter?

C: I think so. If I remind myself I’m the wood grain, not the knight, maybe I can watch the jump without riding it. But what if she notices I’m tense?

T: Then you get to model something even richer: “Mom feels tense and stays anyway.” That’s emotional regulation in real time. [acceptance] Could you name it out loud? “I’m feeling a storm in my body, and I’m choosing to sit with you.”

C: That feels exposing, but also… honest. She’s asked before why I sigh so much. Maybe I can tell her the sigh is just weather.

T: Weather-reporting instead of storm-dodging. [present-moment] Let’s practice a five-second weather report right now. Look at me and describe the current climate inside you without fixing it.

C: There’s a cold front in my chest, pressure dropping behind my eyes, and scattered showers of “you’re not enough.” That’s the forecast.

T: Thank you. I felt the authenticity land between us. [values] Now, from that same honest place, what’s the tiniest committed action you’ll take with your daughter tonight?

C: I’ll ask her to pick one worksheet, set a ten-minute timer, and I’ll keep my hand on her shoulder the whole time unless she doesn’t want it. If the storm gets loud, I’ll name it like we just practiced.

T: Lovely. And if shame leans over and whispers, “You’re only doing this to look like a good mom,” how will you respond from the wood grain?

C: I’ll say, “Thanks, shame, noted,” and keep my hand on her shoulder anyway. The wood doesn’t argue; it just holds.

T: Perfect. [committed-action] Now let’s zoom out. You’ve named shame, grief, panic, and the fear of collapse. Which of these feels most in charge of your life right now?

C: Panic. It hijacks my mornings. The second my eyes open, adrenaline floods and I’m scrolling emails before my feet hit the floor.

T: Classic panic alarm. [avoidance] What’s the function of that scroll? What does it promise you?

C: It promises I can outrun disaster—if I see every subject line, nothing can blindside me. But it’s like trying to drink from a fire hose; I just get soaked and still thirsty.

T: So the scroll is a control valve that never shuts off. [acceptance] Let’s experiment tomorrow morning. Instead of reaching for the phone, you place both feet on the ground and feel the adrenaline like a surge of electricity. Can you let it sizzle for thirty seconds without moving?

C: Thirty seconds feels like an eternity when panic’s screaming. My brain will say I’m wasting precious disaster-prevention time.

T: Exactly—let’s thank the brain for that forecast. [defusion] “Thank you, mind, for protecting me from imaginary catastrophes.” Then return attention to the soles of your feet. Do you notice any difference between the thought “I must check emails” and the actual vibration in your feet?

C: The thought is loud and fast; the vibration is… steadier, almost like a bass drum under the cymbals.

T: Beautiful distinction. [present-moment] Stay with the bass drum. If you can ride that beat for thirty seconds, you’re practicing willingness instead of avoidance. How might that willingness serve the value you have with your daughter?

C: It means I start the day calmer, so when she bursts in with her own morning storm, I’m not already maxed out. I can meet her energy instead of barking at her to find her shoes faster.

T: Exactly. [committed-action] Let’s stack the commitments: tonight the homework shoulder-touch, tomorrow morning the thirty-second foot-feel. Any resistance popping up as we speak them aloud?

C: A voice says, “Two new habits in one day? You’ll fail by noon.” That’s the prosecutor again.

T: Let’s have the courtroom wood grain absorb that gavel slam. [self-as-context] Failure is just another chess piece—maybe a rook sliding sideways. Can the board hold both success and failure without splintering?

C: The board’s held worse. I once burnt dinner, cried, and still managed bedtime stories. The rook didn’t break it.

T: Good memory. [values] So if the rook of failure lands, you can still read bedtime stories. Speaking of stories, what does your mind predict will happen if you actually allow shame and grief to stay on the board long-term?

C: It says they’ll multiply like rabbits until the whole board is black and white blur, no room for anything else. I’ll become this walking cloud of heaviness and drag everyone down.

T: That’s the fusion talking—believing the forecast is the weather. [defusion] Let’s test it gently. Right now, with shame on the pawn square and grief on the bishop square, do you feel 100% consumed, or is there still color elsewhere on the board?

C: There’s color. I can see the queen of love for my daughter, the knight of curiosity about this therapy stuff. The board’s crowded but not monochrome.

T: So the mind’s prediction isn’t matching current data. [acceptance] What would it be like to let the rabbits hop without fencing them in or stomping them out?

C: Exhausting at first, maybe, but less lonely. I’m tired of pretending I’m fine when my eyes are puffy from crying in the car before school pickup.

T: Pretending is another control strategy. [values] What would authenticity look like at school pickup today?

C: Instead of fixing my face and chirping, “How was your day?” I could say, “I had a rough moment this afternoon, but I’m glad to see you.” Keep it simple, not a trauma dump, just real.

T: Beautiful. [committed-action] Let’s add that as a third layer: homework shoulder-touch, morning foot-feel, pickup authenticity. Any overwhelm rising?

C: My chest is doing that tight thing again, but it’s more like stage fright before opening night. I know the lines; I just don’t trust the audience.

T: The audience is your daughter, the school parking lot, and your own mind. [self-as-context] Can you be the theater instead of the performer? The walls hold applause and rotten tomatoes alike.

C: I like that. The theater doesn’t take the reviews personally; it just houses the play.

T: Exactly. [present-moment] Let’s close our eyes for three breaths and feel the theater. Notice the air on your skin, the sounds from the hallway, the tightness in your chest as part of the scenery, not the script.

C: I can feel the seat under me, the hum of the AC, and the chest-tightness is like a prop piece—cardboard, not iron.

T: Good. [defusion] When you open your eyes, that prop comes with you, but it’s lighter. Ready to open?

C: Yes. The prop’s still there, but I can see the edges now; it’s not fused to my ribs.

T: Lovely. Let’s anchor back to the value of modeling emotional courage for your daughter. If she were watching this very moment, what would she learn?

C: That big feelings don’t make you broken—they make you human, and humans can sit still with them.

T: Beautiful. [committed-action] So tonight, if the cardboard chest prop flares while you’re touching her shoulder, you can silently say, “This is the prop doing its job,” and stay. How does that plan sit?

C: Scary but doable. Like holding a sparkler instead of a stick of dynamite.

T: Great metaphor. [acceptance] And if the sparkler burns your fingers a little, that’s feedback, not failure. Before we wrap, any last piece on the chessboard that wants to be seen?

C: There’s a tiny pawn labeled “hope” that’s been hiding behind shame. It’s shaking but still upright.

T: Let’s move hope one square forward. [values] Even a pawn can become a queen if it keeps stepping. What’s one square of hope you can claim between now and our next session?

C: I’ll text a mom-friend and ask if she wants to walk the track Saturday morning. I’ve been avoiding her because I’m scared I’ll cry in public, but hope says connection might help.

T: Perfect. [committed-action] If tears come on the track, you can let them be weather in the outdoor theater. Any final resistance to texting her?

C: My thumb is already hovering. I’ll hit send as soon as I leave this room.

T: Then I’ll bow to the theater and exit stage left. Thank you for letting me witness the whole cast of characters today.