# Therapy Session: struggling with feelings of failure and avoiding painful thoughts

T: Hi Sarah, I’m glad you made it in today. Before we get started, I want to check in—how are you feeling about having this space to talk right now?

C: I’m a little nervous, to be honest. I know I need to talk about some things, but I also feel embarrassed, like I’m admitting I can’t handle stuff everyone else seems to manage.

T: Thank you for sharing that—it’s completely normal to feel a bit apprehensive at the start. Just know that however you’re feeling, this is a space where you don’t have to handle things alone. Maybe we can start by talking a little more about what’s been coming up for you lately that feels tough.

C: I guess the main thing is this constant sense that I’m failing at life. Like, I mess up at work, I don’t keep up with friends, and I’m always behind on things. It just feels like I can’t get anything right, and that feeling is always in the back of my mind.

T: That sounds incredibly heavy to carry around—almost like you’re walking with this cloud of not-good-enoughness above you all the time. When those thoughts and feelings show up, how do you usually respond to them? [present-moment]

C: Most of the time, I try to ignore them or distract myself. I’ll watch TV or scroll through my phone, just anything to not think about it. But it never really goes away; it just comes back later, sometimes even stronger.

T: It makes sense you’d want to push those feelings away—they’re so painful. And yet, it seems like the more you try to avoid them, the more persistent they become. Have you noticed any patterns about when these thoughts come up strongest? [avoidance] [present-moment]

C: Yeah, definitely when I make a mistake, even a small one, or when I see other people doing well. Like, if a friend gets a promotion, I just spiral into this comparison mode. Or if I forget something at work, I’ll obsess over it for days.

T: That sounds like a really exhausting cycle—messing up, comparing, then feeling even worse. When you say you spiral, what sorts of thoughts run through your mind in those moments? [defusion]

C: It’s like a loop: “You’re such a loser. Why can’t you just get it together? Everyone else does.” I replay mistakes over and over, thinking about how people must see me. I start to believe I’ll never amount to anything.

T: Those thoughts sound really harsh and judgmental. I wonder if, for a moment, we could pause and notice them as just words your mind is saying, rather than absolute truths. What happens if you say, “I’m having the thought that I’m a failure,” instead of “I am a failure”? [defusion]

C: That feels weird, but...I guess it puts a little distance between me and the thought. Like it’s something happening to me, not the core of who I am. But it’s hard to really believe it’s just a thought.

T: That makes a lot of sense—it can feel strange at first. Our minds are wired to sound convincing, especially when we’re feeling vulnerable. Would you be willing to try noticing these thoughts as passing events, maybe like clouds floating in the sky, rather than facts you need to buy into? [defusion]

C: I can try. I like the idea of seeing them as clouds. But sometimes they feel more like storms—big and overwhelming, not just little puffs.

T: I appreciate your honesty—sometimes thoughts are more like storms than clouds. Even so, storms pass eventually, even if they’re intense. When you’re caught in the middle of that mental storm, what do you usually do next? [present-moment] [avoidance]

C: Usually I just shut down. I’ll cancel plans, avoid talking to people, or just zone out in front of the TV for hours. I don’t want anyone to see me like that.

T: It sounds like those moments lead you to withdraw, maybe as a way to protect yourself from more pain. Have you noticed what happens to your mood or your sense of connection with others when you pull away like that? [avoidance] [present-moment]

C: I end up feeling even more alone. I want comfort, but I also feel like I don’t deserve it. Then I get stuck in this loop where I’m both lonely and ashamed.

T: That’s such a painful place to be—wanting connection but feeling undeserving of it. It’s like the very thing you need feels out of reach. If you imagine who you’d be without these stories about failure, what kind of life or relationships would you want? [values]

C: I think I’d want to be more open with my friends, to celebrate their successes without feeling threatened. I’d want to try new things at work instead of always playing it safe. I guess I just want to feel like I’m enough, even if I mess up sometimes.

T: Those sound like really meaningful wishes—openness, courage, and self-acceptance. Underneath all the pain, it seems like you care deeply about connecting with others and growing as a person. Does that resonate with you? [values]

C: Yeah, it does. I wish I could focus on that more, instead of all the ways I think I’m failing. It’s hard to hold onto those values when my brain is shouting at me.

T: It’s so understandable—those loud, critical thoughts can drown out our values sometimes. But just by naming what matters to you, you’re already taking a step toward living in line with those values. If you imagine taking a tiny step toward one of those wishes, what might that look like? [committed-action]

C: Maybe I could reach out to a friend, even if I feel awkward. Or say yes to a project at work, instead of worrying I’ll mess it up. I don’t know, it feels scary, but maybe possible.

T: I really appreciate your willingness to consider that, even though it feels scary. Sometimes, being in touch with our values means making room for discomfort, rather than waiting for it to disappear. How do you feel about the idea of carrying the fear with you, instead of waiting for it to go away before acting? [acceptance] [values]

C: I guess I’ve spent so long waiting to not be scared that I never do anything. Maybe if I just accepted that I’ll feel nervous or insecure, I could still do things that matter to me. It’s a new way of thinking for me.

T: That’s a really important insight. Acceptance isn’t about liking the discomfort, but about letting it be there while you move toward what matters. If you were to try reaching out to a friend, what thoughts or feelings do you imagine would show up? [acceptance] [defusion]

C: Probably all the usual stuff: “They don’t really like you, you’re bothering them, you’ll say something stupid.” I’d feel anxious and maybe even a little nauseous. I’d worry they’d see me as needy.

T: Thank you for naming those thoughts and physical sensations. What would it be like to notice those reactions, thank your mind for trying to protect you, and then take the action anyway—just as an experiment? [defusion] [committed-action]

C: It would be hard, but maybe freeing. I like the idea of thanking my mind, instead of fighting with it. I guess I could try texting a friend and see what happens.

T: That’s a courageous step. If you were to send that text, what value would you be honoring in yourself? [values]

C: Probably connection, and maybe also courage. I want to have real relationships, even if it means being vulnerable.

T: That’s beautiful, Sarah. Even the smallest act in the service of connection and courage can be meaningful. As you imagine taking that step, what emotions or thoughts are coming up right now? [present-moment]

C: I feel a mix of hope and anxiety. Part of me is excited at the idea of not being so alone, but there’s still that voice telling me it won’t work out. It’s a tug-of-war inside.

T: That tug-of-war is so familiar for many people—the pull between hope and fear. What would it be like to simply notice both sides, without needing to choose one or the other right now? [acceptance] [present-moment]

C: I think I can do that. If I notice both, maybe I won’t be so overwhelmed by just the fear. It helps to see that there’s also hope in there.

T: Exactly—both feelings can exist side by side. Sometimes, making space for all our feelings, even the uncomfortable ones, can free up energy for what matters. If you imagine your future self, a year from now, living more in line with connection and courage, what do you hope would be different? [values] [self-as-context]

C: I hope I’d be less afraid to reach out to people. Maybe I’d have closer friendships, or feel more confident at work. Mostly, I’d like to feel like I belong, even if I’m not perfect.

T: That vision is really powerful. Notice how your mind might want to jump in and say “That’s not possible” or “You’ll never get there”—and see if you can just thank it for trying to protect you, then gently bring your focus back to your hopes. What’s it like to hold space for both skepticism and hope? [defusion] [acceptance]

C: It’s comforting, actually. I can see that my mind is just trying to keep me safe, but I don’t have to let it run the show. There’s something reassuring about not having to get rid of the doubts to move forward.

T: That’s a really important shift. Our minds are great at warning us about potential dangers, but sometimes the cost is missing out on what matters. When you notice your inner critic, what might you say to yourself to acknowledge its presence, but not let it dictate your choices? [defusion] [self-as-context]

C: Maybe something like, “There you are again, trying to keep me safe. Thanks, but I’m going to try this anyway.” That feels more compassionate than just yelling at myself.

T: That’s a wonderful way to relate to your inner critic—with kindness rather than hostility. It might take practice, but each time you notice and acknowledge it, you’re building a new relationship with those thoughts. As we wrap up today, what’s one small step you feel ready to try this week, in the direction of your values? [committed-action]

C: I think I’ll try texting a friend to make plans, even if I feel anxious about it. And maybe I’ll write down what my mind says when I start to doubt myself, just to get some distance from those thoughts.

T: That sounds like a thoughtful and manageable plan. Remember, it’s not about doing it perfectly, but about taking steps toward what matters, even with doubts along for the ride. How are you feeling about what we’ve talked about today? [present-moment]

C: I feel a little lighter, honestly. It’s good to know I don’t have to wait until I feel “better” to try to change things. I’m nervous, but also hopeful.

T: I’m really glad to hear that. You’ve shown a lot of courage today in exploring these difficult feelings and considering new ways to respond to them. I look forward to hearing about how your experiment with reaching out goes, and we can keep building on this together. [values] [committed-action]