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

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We are generating a single continuous therapy session transcript between a therapist (T) and a client Sarah (C) on the topic of 'struggling with feelings of failure and avoiding painful thoughts'. The session uses ACT techniques and should last about 60 minutes with 30-40 exchanges. Each turn should be 3-5 sentences. We'll alternate between T and C, and use ACT process tags in square brackets when applicable.

We'll structure the session to cover:

1. Initial check-in and setting the agenda.

2. Exploring current struggles with feelings of failure and avoidance.

3. Introducing ACT concepts: present-moment awareness, defusion, acceptance, values, self-as-context, and committed action.

4. Gently guiding Sarah to experience these processes.

5. Closing with reflections and next steps.

Let's keep the tone warm and supportive, encouraging Sarah to explore her thoughts and feelings.

Now, we write the transcript accordingly.

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T: Welcome back Sarah, it's good to see you. How have things been since our last meeting? I recall you mentioned wanting to explore feelings of failure today - where would you like to begin with that? [present-moment]

C: Honestly? I feel stuck in this loop where every setback confirms I'm failing at life. Last week I froze during a presentation at work, and since then I've been avoiding emails and meetings. The thought "You're inadequate" just plays on repeat in my head constantly.

T: It sounds like that critical thought has really taken hold. I'm curious - when "I'm inadequate" shows up, do you notice physical sensations too? Like maybe tightness in your chest or shoulders? [defusion]

C: \*sighs\* Yes, like a heavy weight here \*touches chest\*. And then I scramble to distract myself - binging shows, overworking, anything to escape. But avoiding it just makes me feel guiltier about failing at handling my own emotions.

T: Thank you for naming that avoidance pattern so honestly. What if we gently approached this differently? Instead of wrestling with the thought, could we just notice it passing through, like a cloud drifting across the sky? [acceptance]

C: I try, but it feels impossible when the feeling is so intense. That voice says "If you were competent, you wouldn't be struggling like this." It ties into childhood stuff - my dad constantly said "Winners don't make excuses."

T: Ah, so this "failure" story has deep roots. Notice how it blends past memory with present judgment. Could we try something experiential? Close your eyes and breathe into that chest tightness for a moment... just observing without fixing it. [self-as-context]

C: \*after pause\* It's still there... but less overwhelming when I don't fight it? Like background noise instead of a shout. That's surprising actually.

T: Beautiful noticing! You're discovering the space between sensation and reaction. Now, when "failure" shows up today, what's underneath it? Maybe a care for something important? [values]

C: \*voice cracks\* It hurts because... I deeply value being capable and contributing meaningfully. But avoiding work makes me betray that value - which just confirms the failure story!

T: That insight is gold. Your pain points directly to your values - competence and contribution matter greatly. How might this change if we saw avoidance not as failure, but as your mind trying to protect you from hurt? [acceptance]

C: That... makes it less shameful. But how do I stop the cycle? Yesterday I skipped my team call again because I couldn't face them after the presentation disaster.

T: Let's gently disentangle here. The "disaster" story is a thought, yes? What if we name it each time it appears: "Ah, the 'I humiliated myself' story is back." Just labeling creates distance. [defusion]

C: Okay... "The failure story is here." Huh. It does feel less solid when I say it that way. Like it doesn't define me entirely?

T: Exactly! You're the sky, not the storm passing through. Now, connecting to your value of contribution - what tiny step could honor that today? Even something microscopic? [committed-action]

C: I could... reply to one easy email? Not all fifty, just one. But what if I mess it up? That old panic surges just thinking about it.

T: Notice where you feel that "what if" in your body right now. Breathe space around it while holding your intention: "I'm choosing to act for my values, alongside discomfort." [present-moment]

C: \*takes audible breath\* It's buzzing in my stomach... but persisting feels different than avoiding. Like I'm choosing me over the fear?

T: Profound shift! You're contacting the difference between being hijacked by thoughts and consciously choosing action. How might celebrating that small win nourish you? Even mentally whispering "I showed up"? [values]

C: That actually brings tears... because I've been so cruel to myself. Instead of "Why can't you do more?" I could whisper "You did the brave thing."

T: Beautiful self-compassion. Now, let's anchor this: When old failure stories appear this week, how will you greet them? Maybe "Hello story, I see you - but I'm mailing that one email anyway"? [committed-action]

C: Yes. And when avoidance tempts me, I'll touch my chest and remember: This heaviness means I care deeply. That's not failure - it's human.

T: Exactly. Your pain isn't a flaw; it's a testament to your values. Shall we explore how to gently widen these courageous steps next week? [acceptance]

C: Please. For the first time in months... this doesn't feel hopeless. Thank you for seeing me through this storm.

T: The courage was always yours, Sarah. I'm simply honored to witness you reclaiming it. Until next Tuesday? [values]