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

T: Hi Sarah, welcome back. I’ve been thinking about what you emailed—how the sense of failure keeps showing up and how hard it is to stay with those thoughts. I’d love to start right there today if that feels okay. What’s the flavor of that failure feeling when it’s most vivid?

C: It’s like a tight band around my chest and this whisper that keeps saying, “You blew it, you’ll never catch up.” I try to push it away—scroll, snack, anything—but the band just gets tighter. Sometimes I rehearse the mistakes in my head like a courtroom drama where I’m always guilty.

T: So the mind is both prosecutor and judge, and the body becomes the courtroom. [defusion] What happens if we slow it down and just notice the prosecutor voice as a voice—maybe even give it a name or a silly accent—so we can see it’s not the same as you? We’re not trying to silence it, just to loosen its grip a little.

C: If I call it “Judge Judy on Red Bull,” it does feel slightly less powerful, but the fear underneath still screams. I’m terrified that if I stop fighting the thought, it’ll turn out to be true and I’ll collapse. My whole life feels like it’s balanced on proving that thought wrong.

T: That’s the bargain the mind offers: “Keep struggling or the worst will happen.” [acceptance] What if, just for the next minute, we let Judge Judy rant while we breathe into that chest band and notice where the sensation begins and ends—no fixing, just mapping? I’ll breathe with you.

C: Okay… I feel the band most under my sternum, radiating out to my shoulders. There’s heat and a kind of buzzing. Judge Judy is yelling, “You’re wasting time even noticing this!” I notice an urge to grab my phone, but I leave it in my lap.

T: Great noticing—urge to escape shows up, and you’re still here. [present-moment] Let’s thank Judge Judy for trying to protect you from disappointment, then gently place her on an imaginary stool in the corner. She can keep talking; we’ll keep breathing. How’s the band now?

C: It’s still there, but it’s like the volume on the buzzing dropped from a nine to a six. I’m surprised I didn’t implode. But I’m also suspicious—what if this is just a trick and the failure feeling will come back stronger later?

T: That suspicion is another protective move—“If I brace hard enough, maybe I won’t be blindsided.” [self-as-context] Can you sense the part of you that notices both the band and the suspicion? That observing space is bigger than any single feeling; it can hold them all without being defined by them.

C: I can kind of touch it—like I’m sitting in a wide field and the thoughts are weather moving through. But I don’t trust the field yet. I keep thinking, “If I really am a failure, then the field is just denial.”

T: Beautiful honesty. Let’s test that by turning toward a specific memory where the failure story feels most convincing. Which episode does Judge Judy wave as Exhibit A?

C: Last year I froze during a presentation to the board. My voice cracked, the slides jammed, and I ended up excusing myself halfway through. My boss had to finish. Ever since, I’ve avoided any speaking opportunities, and I feel smaller each time I say no.

T: Thank you for bringing that in. [values] Before we dive into the pain, can I ask: what value was underneath that presentation—what mattered to you that made standing up there important in the first place?

C: I wanted to contribute, to show my team that their work was worth visibility. And honestly, I wanted to grow into leadership so I could mentor younger women like my first boss mentored me. But the freeze felt like proof I’m not leadership material.

T: So the same heart that values contribution and mentorship now gets labeled “not leadership material.” [defusion] What if we treat that label as another mental product—sticky, loud, but still just words? Can we replay the scene slowly, noticing sensations and thoughts as weather in the field?

C: I’m already bracing, but okay. I see the boardroom table, the hum of the projector. My chest band is back at an eight. Judge Judy shouts, “See, you choked!” My hands feel clammy.

T: Let’s anchor in the feet on the floor, the back against the chair. [present-moment] Notice five points of contact, then allow the clamminess and the voice to be there. Can you silently thank your body for sounding the alarm even if the alarm is outdated?

C: I whisper, “Thanks, body, I get you’re trying to keep me safe from judgment.” The clamminess doesn’t vanish, but it stops spreading. I can feel my toes again.

T: Good. Now, from that wider field, look at the younger you at that table. [self-as-context] If that part of you could speak, what might she need to hear—not to erase the freeze, but to hold it kindly?

C: She’d need someone to say, “Freezing doesn’t erase your care or your competence. It just means fear hijacked your throat for three minutes.” I tear up saying that. I never gave her compassion—only criticism.

T: Let’s take a moment to let that tear move. [acceptance] There’s grief here for all the opportunities turned down in the name of not repeating that three-minute hijack. Can we honor that grief without making it a verdict on your future?

C: It feels huge, like I’m mourning the confident speaker I might have been. But also a tiny relief, like maybe the story isn’t finished. I’m scared to hope, though.

T: Hope can be scary because it feels like another place to fall from. [values] What if we shift from hoping to be confident and instead commit to practicing courage in the service of contribution and mentorship—even if fear comes along for the ride?

C: That reframes it. Courage I can touch; confidence feels like a finish line I never reach. I still don’t know how to start practicing without drowning in panic.

T: Let’s design a small experiment. [committed-action] What’s the tiniest step that would serve your values yet still trigger just enough fear to be meaningful—not overwhelming, just informative?

C: Maybe volunteering to present the team update at our next staff meeting—five minutes, friendly crowd, slides I already know. My heart races just saying it.

T: Notice the race—data, not danger. [defusion] If we rate the fear zero to ten, what number shows up right now?

C: About a seven. But there’s also a flicker of excitement, maybe a three. The two feelings are layered, like a chord.

T: Beautiful—anxiety and excitement often share physiology. [present-moment] Can you place a hand on your racing heart and thank it for gearing up to support something that matters? Then let’s plan how to carry that chord into the meeting.

C: I could rehearse once the night before, not ten times. I could tell my colleague Sam I’m nervous so I’m not alone with Judge Judy. And maybe have a grounding phrase like “contribute and connect” taped to my notebook.

T: I love the specificity. [committed-action] What day is the meeting?

C: Next Thursday at ten. I just put it in my calendar in bold. My stomach flipped when I hit save.

T: Flipping is allowed. [acceptance] Imagine it’s Thursday 9:55 a.m.—what might you do in those five minutes to anchor in the field rather than the storm?

C: I could step into the restroom, feel my feet, do two slow breaths, and remind myself, “The goal is to contribute, not to impress.” Then walk in with the fear as a passenger, not the driver.

T: That sounds workable. How does the chest band respond to imagining that sequence now?

C: It’s still there, maybe a five, but it feels like background music instead of a straitjacket. I’m surprised planning with acceptance feels different from my usual over-preparation spiral.

T: Over-preparation is often avoidance in disguise—trying to eliminate fear rather than carry it. [avoidance] When you notice the spiral starting, what’s one gentle cue to pivot back to the plan?

C: I could silently say, “Spiral spotted,” and then ask, “What would contribution look like right now?” That question cuts through the perfectionism.

T: Excellent. Let’s also anticipate Judge Judy showing up Thursday with new material—maybe “Your voice will crack again.” How might you respond in the moment?

C: I could nod inwardly and say, “Thanks for the prediction, Judy. I’m driving today.” Then re-focus on the first friendly face in the room. I’ve never tried talking back without arguing.

T: That’s defusion in action—acknowledging the mind without obeying it. [defusion] Any other passengers likely to hitch a ride Thursday?

C: The “Everyone thinks you’re incompetent” chorus might join. Same strategy: greet them, use my phrase, ground in my feet. I feel a little ridiculous scripting this, but also steadier.

T: Nothing ridiculous about rehearsing values-based moves. Athletes visualize; why not us? [values] After the meeting, how will you measure success?

C: Not by whether I’m flawless, but by whether I spoke up despite fear and stayed connected to the team. Even if I stumble, if I finish and learn, that’s a win.

T: That’s a radical shift from the old metric of “no anxiety, no mistakes.” [committed-action] What support might you need between now and Thursday?

C: Maybe text Sam tonight so the commitment feels real. And I’ll practice the breathing once a day, not obsessively. Could I email you Thursday afternoon with how it went?

T: I’d love that. We can celebrate whatever shows up—success or new learning. [acceptance] Before we close, take a breath and scan from head to toe. What’s the strongest sensation right now?

C: A warmth in my belly that wasn’t there at the start—like a small pilot light of determination. The chest band is looser, maybe a three. I’m still nervous, but it feels workable.

T: That pilot light is yours to tend. [self-as-context] Any final words to the observing field that’s holding all of this?

C: Thank you for not abandoning me when the thoughts got loud. I’m scared, but I’m still here, and Thursday hasn’t even happened yet. That feels like enough for today.

T: Beautiful. I’m here too, cheering on the courage to contribute and connect. See you on the other side of Thursday, and we’ll keep building from whatever unfolds.