# Therapy Session: struggles with self-doubt, identity, and external pressures

T: Thank you for being here today, Sarah. To start, could you share what’s been most present for you lately, especially around that sense of self-doubt and feeling pressured by others?

C: It’s kind of overwhelming, honestly. I feel like I’m constantly second-guessing myself, whether it’s at work, with my family, or even just making small decisions. There’s this voice in my head that says I’m not good enough or that I’ll mess things up. And then I end up feeling like I’m just responding to what others want, not what I actually want myself.

T: That sounds exhausting, to always be negotiating between your own needs and the expectations of others. [present-moment] When you notice that voice saying you’re not good enough, what happens in your body or mind in that moment?

C: My chest gets tight, and I feel anxious, like I can’t breathe right. My thoughts start racing, and I replay everything I’ve done or said, looking for where I went wrong. Sometimes my stomach hurts too. I just want to disappear or blend in so no one notices me.

T: I hear how strong that urge is to pull away or hide when those feelings show up. [acceptance] If it’s okay, let’s pause here together and just notice, right now, what it’s like to have those sensations and thoughts. Maybe even breathe into that tightness, just for a moment, and see what it’s like to let them be there, without trying to change them.

C: I can try. It’s uncomfortable, but I can feel the tightness in my chest, and I’m noticing how much I want to just distract myself or think about something else. It feels unnatural to just sit with it.

T: That makes sense—our minds want to protect us from discomfort, so it’s natural to want to escape or distract. [acceptance] Would you be willing to just gently acknowledge the tightness and the urge to escape, almost like saying hello to them, without pushing them away or getting rid of them?

C: I guess I can. “Hello, tightness. Hello, urge to escape.” It feels weird, but also a little less intense when I think of it that way.

T: That’s really brave, Sarah. [defusion] Sometimes when we notice our thoughts and feelings as just experiences—not facts or threats—they lose some of their power over us. How is it for you to recognize that urge to hide as just another experience you’re having, rather than something you have to obey?

C: It’s strange, honestly. I’m so used to believing those feelings mean I really am not good enough, or that I should just stay quiet. But when I see them as just “things” happening inside me, I guess I don’t have to follow them every time.

T: Exactly. [defusion] Our thoughts and feelings can be very compelling, but they’re often like stories our mind tells us. If you imagine those stories about not being good enough as just words—maybe even printed on a ticker tape scrolling by—how does that change the way you relate to them?

C: I think it makes them seem less “true,” like they’re just things happening in my head. It’s still hard not to believe them, but I can imagine just watching them go by, instead of clinging to every word.

T: That’s a powerful shift. [defusion] You mentioned before that you often feel like you’re responding to what others want. Can you talk more about what kinds of external pressures you’ve been feeling lately, and how they influence your sense of self?

C: My parents have always expected a lot from me, like being successful in my career, being polite, never making mistakes. At work, I feel like I have to be the “perfect” employee, always available, never letting anyone down. Even with friends, I want to make sure everyone’s happy, sometimes at the expense of what I want. I guess I don’t really know where their expectations end and where I actually begin.

T: That sounds like a heavy burden to carry, constantly measuring yourself against others’ standards. [values] If you set aside what everyone else wants for just a moment, what do you notice matters most to you—what kind of person do you want to be, deep down?

C: I’m not sure, honestly. I’ve spent so much time trying to please everyone else that I don’t even know what I care about anymore. I think I want to be kind, and maybe a little more honest about who I am. I want to feel like I can trust myself, instead of always doubting everything.

T: That’s an important insight. [values] You mention wanting to be kind and honest—both with others and with yourself. When you reflect on that, what small actions could you take that would feel more aligned with those values, even if it’s just something tiny?

C: Maybe I could try being a little more honest about my feelings with my friends, instead of just agreeing with them to keep the peace. Or I could set some boundaries at work, like not answering emails after hours. I don’t know if I could actually do those things, but they feel like they fit with being more true to myself.

T: Those are wonderful examples of living according to your values, even in small ways. [committed-action] Sometimes, just naming these possible actions is a first step toward change. What do you notice in your body or mind when you imagine actually trying one of those things?

C: I feel nervous, definitely. My chest gets tight again, and I worry people will get upset or think I’m selfish. But there’s also a tiny bit of relief, like maybe I could breathe a little easier if I was being more real.

T: That mix of anxiety and relief is so common when we consider stepping outside of old patterns. [acceptance] What would it be like to make space for that anxiety, to carry it with you as you take those small steps toward honesty or setting boundaries, rather than waiting for it to disappear first?

C: I’ve never really thought about it that way. Usually I wait until I feel “ready,” but that never actually happens. Maybe if I just let the anxiety be there, I could still do the thing anyway. It sounds scary, but also possible.

T: That’s a key part of psychological flexibility—being willing to have uncomfortable feelings if it means moving toward what matters to you. [committed-action] If you imagine yourself as someone who carries their anxiety but acts on their values anyway, how does that change the way you see yourself?

C: I think I’d feel stronger, more capable. Like maybe I don’t have to be ruled by my doubts and fears all the time. I like the idea of being someone who does what’s important, even if it’s hard.

T: That’s a powerful self-image to hold onto. [self-as-context] Sometimes, it helps to remember that you are not your thoughts or feelings—you’re the person observing them, the one who chooses how to respond. How does it feel to consider that you are the observer, not just the contents of your mind?

C: It feels kind of freeing, like I have more options than I thought. If I’m the observer, maybe I can choose what matters, instead of just reacting automatically. It’s a new way of looking at things, but I think I like it.

T: I’m glad to hear that. [present-moment] Let’s try an exercise for a moment: Imagine your self-doubt as a radio playing in the background. You can hear it, but you don’t have to turn up the volume or follow its instructions. What’s it like to notice that “radio” playing, but also notice what else is present for you in this moment?

C: I can hear it, kind of like static, saying the usual things—“you’re not good enough,” “don’t mess up.” But I also notice my breath, the feeling of the chair, and your voice. There’s more going on than just the radio, and I don’t have to listen so closely to it.

T: Beautifully put. [defusion] That ability to notice your thoughts, without letting them dominate your experience, is a skill you can practice over time. When you imagine practicing this in daily life, what situations come to mind where it might help?

C: I think about meetings at work, when I start worrying everyone’s judging me. Or when I’m with my family and they ask about promotions or relationships, and I feel like I’m disappointing them. If I could just notice those thoughts instead of getting stuck in them, maybe I’d feel less paralyzed.

T: Those sound like perfect opportunities to practice. [committed-action] If you were to try just one small experiment this week—like noticing the “radio” of self-doubt at work and bringing your attention back to your values—what would that look like?

C: Maybe in my next meeting, when I start worrying about sounding stupid, I could take a deep breath and remind myself that I value being honest and contributing, even if it’s imperfect. I could try saying something, even if it’s just a small comment, instead of staying silent.

T: That sounds like a courageous and meaningful step. [committed-action] What support might you need to help you follow through with that plan, knowing the anxiety might show up?

C: I think it would help to remind myself that the anxiety is normal, and that I don’t have to get rid of it to participate. Maybe I could also write down a reminder of my values before the meeting, just to keep them in mind. And maybe talk to someone I trust afterward, to stay accountable.

T: Those are all excellent ideas. [values] What would you want to say to yourself, in those moments when the self-doubt gets loud, to encourage yourself to act on your values?

C: Maybe something like, “It’s okay to be nervous, but I’m still going to speak up.” Or, “My worth isn’t based on being perfect.” I want to remember that I can choose what matters, even if it’s uncomfortable.

T: That’s such a compassionate message to give yourself. [self-as-context] When you offer yourself that kind of support, how does it shift the experience of anxiety or doubt?

C: It softens it a little. I feel less alone, like I’m on my own side instead of always fighting against myself. The anxiety is still there, but it feels less overwhelming.

T: That’s an important shift. [acceptance] Sometimes, self-doubt is just a part of being human, especially when we care about doing well or connecting with others. If you could treat yourself with the same kindness you’d offer a friend in this situation, what would that look like?

C: I’d probably tell myself it’s okay to make mistakes, that everyone feels insecure sometimes. I’d remind myself that I’m trying, and that’s enough. I want to be gentler with myself, but it’s hard to remember in the moment.

T: That’s very understandable. [present-moment] Would you be willing to practice that self-kindness, even just for a few breaths, whenever you notice the old patterns coming up?

C: I think I can try. Maybe I can put a hand on my heart or take a deep breath and just say something kind, even if it feels awkward. It’s worth trying if it helps me feel less stuck.

T: That’s a wonderful intention. [committed-action] Over time, small acts of self-kindness can create new habits in the way you relate to yourself. How do you imagine your life might change if you made space for self-doubt, but kept moving toward your values anyway?

C: I think I’d feel freer, less trapped by everyone else’s expectations. Maybe I’d actually get to know myself better and do things because I want to, not just to please others. I might even feel more confident, just by seeing that I can handle discomfort and still act.

T: That vision sounds both hopeful and empowering. [values] When you think of getting to know yourself better, are there any qualities or interests you feel curious about exploring, outside of what others expect from you?

C: I used to love painting, but I stopped because it didn’t seem practical. I also like spending time outdoors, just walking or being quiet. I think I’d like to reconnect with those parts of myself, even if they don’t “impress” anyone.

T: That’s beautiful, Sarah. [values] Sometimes, reclaiming old interests or exploring new ones can help us reconnect with our own sense of identity. What would it look like to give yourself permission to engage with those things, no matter what others might think?

C: Maybe I could set aside a little time each week for painting, just for me. Or take a walk after work, even if I feel guilty for not doing something “productive.” I want to try, even if it’s just a small step.

T: That sounds like a meaningful way to honor your values and nurture your identity. [committed-action] If you notice guilt or self-criticism showing up when you do these things, what could you say or do to support yourself in the moment?

C: I could remind myself that it’s okay to do things for myself, that I don’t have to earn every moment of rest or fun. Maybe just say, “This is for me, and that’s enough.” I could also try to notice the guilt without fighting with it, just let it be there.

T: That’s a wise approach. [acceptance] Guilt and self-criticism may show up, but they don’t have to be the boss of your actions. When you make space for those feelings and choose to act on your values anyway, how do you think your relationship with yourself might change?

C: I think I’d start trusting myself more, instead of always second-guessing. Maybe I’d feel more solid, like I know who I am, even if others don’t always approve. I’d like to feel that kind of trust in myself.

T: That’s a powerful goal. [self-as-context] As you practice seeing yourself as the observer—the one who notices thoughts and feelings, but isn’t defined by them—how does that change your sense of identity?

C: It makes me feel bigger than my doubts or fears, like there’s more to me than just anxiety or trying to please people. I can see myself as someone who’s growing, not just someone who’s stuck. It’s a gentler way of being with myself.

T: I’m really glad to hear that. [present-moment] Let’s take a moment now to notice what it’s like, right here, to be aware of your experience without needing to fix or change it—just noticing what it’s like to be Sarah, in this moment.

C: I feel calmer, actually. My body feels a little lighter, and I’m not as caught up in my thoughts. It’s nice to just be, without having to do or prove anything.

T: That sense of just being is something you can return to, whenever you need it. [present-moment] As we close for today, what feels most important to remember or carry forward from our conversation about self-doubt, identity, and external pressures?

C: I think the biggest thing is that I don’t have to get rid of my doubts or anxiety to do what matters to me. I can make space for those feelings and still act on my values. And I want to be kinder to myself, even when it’s hard.

T: Those are such valuable insights. [values] As you move into the week ahead, what’s one small step you’d like to take toward being more true to yourself, even if it’s just a tiny action?

C: I want to try speaking up in my next work meeting, even if it’s just to share an idea or ask a question. And maybe I’ll set aside some time to paint, even if it’s only for a few minutes. I want to practice being honest and kind with myself.

T: That’s a wonderful plan, Sarah. [committed-action] Remember, progress comes from small, consistent steps, and it’s okay to be gentle with yourself along the way. Thank you for sharing so openly today. I look forward to hearing how things go, and we can keep exploring together what it means for you to live from your own values.

C: Thank you. I feel a little more hopeful after talking today. I’ll do my best to try these steps and be more patient with myself.

T: I’m glad to hear that. You’re showing so much courage by facing these challenges and being willing to experiment with new ways of being. Take care of yourself this week, and know that I’m here to support you as you explore these new possibilities.

C: Thanks, that means a lot. I’ll see you next time.

T: See you next time, Sarah.