# Therapy Session: struggles with avoidance of emotions, fusion with thoughts, and resistance to change

T: Sarah, I’m glad you made it in today. I remember last week you said you were “dreading even thinking about feelings.” What’s showing up for you right now as we sit here? [present-moment]

C: Honestly, a tight knot in my chest and this voice saying, “Don’t open that box—you’ll never get the lid back on.” I keep swallowing, like if I swallow hard enough the feelings will just stay down.

T: That swallowing sounds like a familiar control move, trying to keep the lid nailed shut. [avoidance] Can we just notice the knot and the swallowing together for a moment, without needing to fix or judge them? [acceptance]

C: Okay… I feel the knot spreading up into my throat. It’s hot, almost burning. And the voice is louder: “You’re weak for even sitting here.”

T: Thank you for letting me see that. The voice calls you weak—let’s treat that as a thought, not a verdict. Maybe silently say, “I’m having the thought that I’m weak,” and watch what happens to its power. [defusion]

C: I’m having the thought that I’m weak… It’s weird; it’s still there, but it’s like it stepped one inch back. I can breathe a little.

T: Nice experiment. Now, if that thought were a chess piece, which piece would it be? [self-as-context]

C: A black bishop, sliding diagonally, whispering threats from the shadows.

T: Great image. And you—what are you in this chess game? Are you the bishop, or something else?

C: I guess I’m the whole board. The bishop can slide, but it can’t leave the board.

T: Exactly. The board holds the bishop, the pawns, the whole war, and doesn’t have to fight any of it. [self-as-context] How does it feel to notice you’re the board, not the bishop?

C: A little dizzy, like the ground under me just widened. But also… safer? Like the knot is still burning, yet it’s on the board, not in my throat.

T: Beautiful. Let’s stay with that sense of safety in openness. What emotion is the knot trying to protect you from feeling fully? [values]

C: Grief, I think. If I let the lid off, I’ll see how much I miss my dad. He died three years ago, and I’ve been “handling it.”

T: Handling it by keeping the lid on. What has that handling cost you? [avoidance]

C: I don’t cry at movies anymore. I numb out with podcasts at 2 a.m. My partner says I’m half-present even when we’re laughing. I’m tired of the performance.

T: So the lid protects you from grief, and the price is disconnection from movies, sleep, your partner, and yourself. [values] What matters to you that this avoidance is chipping away at?

C: Real connection. Being the kind of partner who can cry at a stupid commercial and still be loved. Being alive, not just “handling.”

T: That value—real connection—sounds like the direction you’d choose if the lid weren’t in charge. [committed-action] But I also hear ambivalence: part of you still wants the lid. Can we give each part a voice?

C: Sure. The lid part says, “If you crack open, you’ll drown. You’ll be useless at work. You’ll scare people.”

T: And the part that values connection?

C: It whispers, “You’re already drowning in the shallow end. Go deep where you can breathe.”

T: Two voices, both trying to protect you in opposite ways. [self-as-context] Can you hold both on the board right now, without needing either to shut up?

C: I can feel them both vibrating. The lid is louder, but the whisper is steadier. My chest is still tight, but the burning is cooler.

T: Let’s experiment. Imagine placing the lid on one palm and the whisper on the other. Which hand feels heavier?

C: The lid hand feels like I’m holding a brick. The whisper hand feels like a feather, but it’s glowing.

T: Gently shift attention back and forth. Notice you can choose which to bring closer without dropping either. [acceptance]

C: When I focus on the feather, the brick protests, “You’re betraying me!” But the board just… holds the protest too.

T: Exactly. Now, what small committed action could move you one inch toward that glowing feather this week? [committed-action]

C: I could tell my partner I want to talk about Dad for ten minutes without fixing anything. Just talk.

T: Ten minutes of open connection—beautiful. What might the brick say to sabotage that plan?

C: “You’ll cry like a baby and he’ll think you’re broken.” Same old bishop.

T: Can you thank the bishop for its concern—“Thanks, mind, for trying to keep me safe”—and still make the phone call? [defusion]

C: I can practice that. “Thanks, mind,” feels like patting a barking dog on the head.

T: Love that metaphor. Any other control tricks you notice when grief starts to rise?

C: I scroll real-estate apps, plan vacations I won’t take, even clean the oven at midnight. Anything to keep the wave from cresting.

T: Those are creative life-preservers. [avoidance] But they keep you treading water instead of swimming toward connection. What would it be like to let the wave crest for just thirty seconds?

C: Terrifying. But maybe thirty seconds is doable. I could set a timer.

T: Great. When the timer dings, you can always pick up the phone and scroll if you need. You’re not trapped. [acceptance]

C: That lowers the stakes. I keep thinking acceptance means liking the grief. It doesn’t, right?

T: Acceptance means making room for what’s already here, liking it or not. Like allowing rain while you keep walking toward the café you care about. [values]

C: The café is connection with my partner, with Dad’s memory, with myself.

T: Yes. And the rain is tears, memories, maybe trembling. Both can be true. [self-as-context]

C: I’m noticing sadness rising now, just talking about it. My eyes are stinging.

T: Can we sit with that sting together? No need to wipe it away or force it. Just noticing the sting as a gentle burn of love for your dad. [present-moment]

C: It feels like warm water filling a glass. I’m scared it’ll overflow.

T: If it overflows, we have towels. Spilled water doesn’t mean you’re broken; it means the glass was full. [acceptance]

C: I just had the thought, “I should apologize for crying.” Old programming.

T: Let’s defuse that: “I’m having the thought that I should apologize.” How does it land now?

C: It sounds like a rule from childhood: “Good girls don’t make messes.” I can see it’s just a rule, not a law of physics.

T: Beautiful. What would the board say to that rule?

C: The board says, “Tears are allowed here. The rule can sit in the corner and watch.”

T: I’m smiling with you. Now, back to the thirty-second experiment. When might you try it?

C: Tonight, after dinner. My partner’s doing dishes; I’ll sit on the couch and set the timer.

T: And if the bishop starts shouting mid-experiment?

C: I’ll say, “Thanks, mind,” and maybe picture the glowing feather.

T: Perfect. Any other emotions sneak up when you stop controlling?

C: Anger. I get mad at Dad for leaving, then mad at myself for being mad. It’s like emotional whack-a-mole.

T: Let’s welcome anger to the board too. Anger often shows up to protect the softer stuff underneath. [acceptance]

C: So the anger is another chess piece?

T: Maybe a knight, jumping around unpredictably, trying to shield the king—your grief. [self-as-context]

C: If I’m the board, the knight can jump without knocking the whole game over.

T: Exactly. Can you feel the anger now, just a little?

C: Yeah, a hot spike behind my eyes. It says, “He should have taken better care of himself.”

T: Thank the knight for its fierce protection. Then gently ask what it’s guarding.

C: It’s guarding a little kid version of me who just wants her dad back.

T: Let’s bring the kid onto the board too. How old is she?

C: Maybe eight. Wearing my old yellow raincoat.

T: Place the eight-year-old next to the knight. What does she need?

C: She needs to know it’s okay to miss him, that missing doesn’t mean I’ll fall apart.

T: Can the board offer her that reassurance?

C: The board says, “You can miss him forever and still stand.” I feel my shoulders drop.

T: Wonderful. Now, any urges to shut this down?

C: I want to crack a joke, change the subject. Classic deflection.

T: Notice that urge as another piece—maybe a jester juggling bells to distract the kingdom. [defusion]

C: The jester’s bells are loud, but the board just listens to the clang without dancing.

T: You’re practicing radical hospitality for every part. How’s the knot now?

C: It’s loosened into a soft ache, like after a good stretch. Breathing is easier.

T: Let’s anchor this with a short breathing space. Inhale for four, noticing the ache; exhale for six, making room. [present-moment]

C: In… the ache spreads. Out… it stays, but lighter.

T: Good. When you leave today, what reminder can you carry of the board?

C: I’ll picture the glowing feather taped to my laptop, reminding me I’m the space, not the pieces.

T: Lovely. Any final resistance popping up about tonight’s thirty-second experiment?

C: The bishop is muttering, “Therapists always give homework.” I can smile at that.

T: Smile and nod, then do it anyway. [committed-action] Remember, you can always bail after thirty seconds.

C: That makes it feel like a choice, not a trap.

T: Choice is the heart of ACT. You’re choosing connection over control, one small feather at a time.

C: Thank you. I feel like I brought a whole army in here, and we’re all sitting on the same bench now.

T: The bench is big enough for armies, bishops, jesters, and eight-year-olds in raincoats. See you next week, Sarah.