# Therapy Session: struggles with anger, self-criticism, and control of painful thoughts

T: Hi Sarah, thanks for coming in today. I know we talked a little bit last time about anger and self-criticism being tough for you lately. To start, could you tell me a bit about what’s been coming up for you this week? Maybe a moment when these feelings or thoughts felt especially strong?

C: Yeah, sure. I actually had an argument with my partner two days ago. It started out small, but I got so angry so quickly. Afterward, I kept replaying the whole thing in my head and criticizing myself—like, "Why can’t you just control yourself?" or "What’s wrong with you?" It’s like I can’t shut off that critical voice.

T: That sounds really painful, Sarah. When you notice that critical voice getting loud after an argument like that, what do you usually do next? Do you try to push those thoughts away, or do they sort of take over? [defusion]

C: Most of the time, I try to distract myself or tell myself to just stop thinking about it. But honestly, it doesn’t work; the thoughts just get louder. Sometimes I’ll go for a walk or watch TV, but the self-criticism is still there in the background. It’s exhausting.

T: It makes sense that you’d want to escape those thoughts, especially when they’re so harsh. [avoidance] If you pause for a second and just notice that critical voice, almost like you’re listening to a radio in the next room, what do you hear it saying most often?

C: Mostly it says things like, "You’re too much. You’re going to ruin your relationship. No one else gets this angry." It just keeps repeating those things over and over. Sometimes it even brings up things from years ago, like mistakes I made in college or with my family.

T: That’s a lot to carry around. [defusion] When you notice those old mistakes coming up, does it feel like you’re reliving them, or more like they’re stories your mind is telling you about yourself?

C: It feels like both, honestly. Sometimes it’s like I’m right back in those situations, feeling embarrassed or ashamed. Other times, it’s just this running commentary about how I’m failing or not good enough. I feel like I can never escape it.

T: That’s really tough, Sarah. Our minds can be relentless with these stories. [defusion] If you imagine that critical voice as a separate part of you—like a commentator or a character—what would it look or sound like?

C: Hm, I guess it would be kind of harsh, maybe like a strict teacher or a disappointed parent. It’s always disappointed, always expecting more. I can almost picture it standing over me, arms crossed, shaking its head.

T: That’s a vivid image. Sometimes, when we see that voice as just one part of us—not the whole story—it can loosen its grip a bit. [defusion] If you were to thank this “strict teacher” for trying to help or protect you, what do you imagine it would say back?

C: That feels weird, but I guess it would say it’s trying to keep me from messing up again. Maybe it thinks if I’m hard enough on myself, I’ll finally change. But honestly, it just makes me feel stuck and ashamed.

T: It sounds like that inner critic is trying to protect you in its own way, even if it’s not very gentle. [self-as-context] When you notice that stuck feeling, what do you usually do in response? Do you try to argue with it, or do you find yourself avoiding situations where it might show up?

C: I usually avoid things, especially if I think I might get angry or mess up again. Like, I’ll avoid talking about certain topics with my partner or just withdraw altogether. Sometimes I’ll even cancel plans with friends if I’m feeling really bad. It’s like I’m afraid of making things worse.

T: That’s understandable, Sarah. Avoidance can feel safer in the short term. [avoidance] But I’m curious, over time, how does this avoidance affect your life and your relationships? Does it help you feel more in control, or does it create new challenges?

C: At first, it feels safer. But after a while, I just feel more isolated and frustrated with myself. I notice I’m missing out on things I care about, like connecting with my partner or enjoying time with friends. It’s like I’m trapped in this loop of anger, shame, and avoidance.

T: That sounds exhausting. When you think about the things you’re missing out on—those important connections—what does that bring up for you? Are there values or qualities you wish you could bring into your relationships more often? [values]

C: I want to be more patient, more loving. I want my partner to feel safe with me, not afraid of my anger. I want to be the kind of friend who shows up, not someone who cancels last minute. I just feel like I’m failing at all of that right now.

T: It sounds like kindness, patience, and connection are really important to you. [values] When you’re caught in that self-critical loop, does it pull you further away from those values, or is there still a part of you that holds onto them?

C: The criticism definitely pulls me away. I get so focused on what I’m doing wrong that I forget what I actually want to do or how I want to show up. Sometimes I feel like I’m just reacting all the time instead of choosing.

T: That’s an important observation. Sometimes, our mind’s attempts to control or criticize can take us further from the life we want to live. [control vs. workability] If you imagine letting go of the struggle to control or silence your thoughts, what do you think might happen? Would it open up space for something new?

C: I’m not sure. Part of me is afraid that if I stop trying to control my anger or those thoughts, things will get worse. Like, I’ll say or do something I regret. But another part of me wonders if it would be a relief to just let the thoughts be there and focus on what matters instead.

T: That’s a really honest answer. The urge to control difficult thoughts and feelings is so common, but sometimes it keeps us stuck. [acceptance] Would you be willing to try a brief exercise with me right now? We can practice noticing a difficult thought without trying to change or control it, just to see what that’s like.

C: Okay, I’ll try. What do I need to do?

T: Great. Let’s start by closing your eyes, if that feels comfortable, and bringing to mind one of those harsh self-critical thoughts. Maybe something like, “I’m too much.” Notice the thought in your mind, and see if you can observe it as just words or a story—almost like a cloud passing through the sky. [defusion] What do you notice as you do that?

C: I feel tense at first, like I want to push it away. But when I just watch it, it’s a little less overwhelming. It’s still there, but maybe not as loud.

T: That’s a powerful observation. Often, when we allow thoughts to just be there, they start to lose some of their intensity. [acceptance] If you let the thought “I’m too much” hang around in the background, what else do you notice in your body or mind?

C: My chest feels tight, and my stomach is kind of knotted. I also notice a little sadness, maybe because I’ve believed this thought for so long. But there’s also a tiny bit of relief, like I don’t have to fight it right now.

T: Thank you for sharing that. That relief is important—it shows us there’s another way to relate to painful thoughts. [acceptance] How does it feel to know you can let the thought be there, without having to buy into it or fight with it?

C: It feels strange, honestly. Like I’m not used to just letting it be. But it also feels freeing, even if it’s just a small shift. I guess I didn’t realize how much energy I spend fighting my own mind.

T: That’s a really meaningful insight, Sarah. Fighting with your mind is exhausting. [control vs. workability] If you spent less energy on that struggle, what would you want to do with that energy instead? Are there actions or relationships you’d want to invest in?

C: I’d want to try to reconnect with my partner, maybe talk things through without so much fear. I’d want to show up for my friends, even if I’m feeling rough. I think I’d also want to start being kinder to myself, instead of always tearing myself down.

T: Those sound like beautiful intentions. [values, committed-action] Moving toward kindness and connection, even when your mind is being critical, is a really brave step. What do you imagine would be the smallest action you could take this week that aligns with your values, even if self-criticism shows up?

C: Maybe I could send a text to my partner, just letting them know I care. Or I could reach out to a friend and make plans, even if I’m nervous. I could also try to notice when I’m being hard on myself and remind myself it’s just a thought.

T: Those are wonderful ideas, Sarah. Even small steps can make a big difference. [committed-action] If those critical thoughts or feelings of anger show up while you’re reaching out, how might you handle them differently, based on what we practiced today?

C: I guess I could try to notice them, but not let them decide what I do. Like, “Oh, there’s that thought again,” but still send the text anyway. I could remind myself that my values matter more than the voice in my head.

T: That’s a powerful way to put it. [defusion, values] Your values can guide you, even when difficult thoughts or feelings are along for the ride. On a tough day, what might help you remember to pause and notice the critic, instead of getting swept up in it?

C: Maybe I could set a reminder on my phone, or write a note to myself. Something simple like, “Notice the story.” I think it would help to have something to bring me back when I’m caught up in it.

T: That’s a great strategy. Sometimes, even a gentle reminder can help us step back and see thoughts as just thoughts. [present-moment, defusion] When you practice this, you might find it easier to catch yourself before you go down the self-criticism spiral. How does it feel to imagine yourself doing this in your daily life?

C: It feels hopeful, actually. Like maybe I don’t have to be at war with myself all the time. I know it’ll be hard, but I want to try. I want to see what’s possible if I don’t let those thoughts run my life.

T: That hope is really important, Sarah. It shows that you’re open to new possibilities, even in the face of discomfort. [acceptance, committed-action] When you notice anger or self-criticism bubbling up, what could you say to yourself in those moments to support your values, rather than your old patterns?

C: Maybe I could say, “It’s okay to feel this. I don’t have to act on it.” Or, “This thought isn’t in charge of me.” I could try to remind myself of the kind of person I want to be.

T: Those are compassionate and empowering statements. [values, self-as-context] Sometimes, bringing in a little kindness can help soften the critic’s impact. If you imagine offering yourself the same understanding you’d give to a close friend, how might that change things?

C: I think I’d be less harsh. I’d probably tell my friend that it’s normal to mess up or feel angry sometimes, and that it doesn’t mean they’re a bad person. I’d want them to know they’re still loved. I guess I could try saying those things to myself, too.

T: That’s a wonderful practice, Sarah. Treating yourself as you would a friend can create space for healing. [acceptance] Even if the critic pipes up, you can gently acknowledge it and choose how you want to respond. What do you most want to remember from today’s session when things get hard?

C: I want to remember that I don’t have to fight my thoughts all the time. That I can notice them and still choose what matters to me. And that it’s okay to be kind to myself, even when I’m struggling.

T: Those are powerful takeaways. [present-moment, values] Before we wrap up today, is there anything else you’d like to talk about, or any questions about what we explored?

C: I guess I just want to know if it really gets easier. Like, does the critic ever go away, or do you just learn to live with it?

T: That’s a great question. For most people, the critic doesn’t disappear completely, but with practice, its voice gets less controlling. [acceptance, defusion] You learn to recognize it as just one part of your experience—not the whole truth. Over time, it can feel less like a bully and more like background noise.

C: That gives me some hope. I want to keep practicing what we talked about. I know it won’t be perfect, but I think I can do it.

T: I believe in you, Sarah. Each step you take toward your values—even small ones—matters. [committed-action, values] We can keep exploring these skills together, and I’ll support you along the way. Thanks for your openness and courage today.