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

T: Sarah, I'm glad you're here today to explore some of the challenges you've been facing. Can you tell me a bit more about what's been going on, and what brings you to therapy at this time?

C: I just feel like I'm stuck in this pattern of anger and self-doubt. I get so frustrated with myself when I mess up, and it's like I'm constantly fighting this inner critic that just won't shut up. I feel like I'm losing control, and it's affecting my relationships and my work.

T: It sounds like you're experiencing a lot of emotional distress. Can you tell me more about what it's like to be with this inner critic? Is it like a voice in your head, or is it a more general feeling?

C: Yeah, it's definitely a voice. It's like this constant narrator that's always judging me and telling me I'm not good enough. It's exhausting, and it makes me feel so small and powerless.

T: I can imagine. It sounds like this voice is quite aversive [avoidance] for you. Have you ever tried to silence it or tell it to shut up?

C: (laughs) Yeah, I've tried to push it away, or distract myself with work or other things. But it always comes back, and it's like it's more powerful than I am.

T: That can be really demoralizing. It's like you're trying to control something that feels uncontrollable. Can you tell me more about what you value in life? What's most important to you?

C: I guess I value being happy and at peace. I want to be able to enjoy my relationships and my work without this constant feeling of anxiety and self-doubt. I want to feel like I'm living a meaningful life.

T: That's a great start. It sounds like you're looking for a sense of workability [control vs. workability] in your life, rather than just trying to control your emotions. Can you see how that might be a different approach to dealing with your inner critic?

C: I think so. I mean, if I'm focusing on what I value, rather than trying to control my emotions, that might be a more sustainable way to live.

T: Exactly. And it's not about getting rid of the inner critic completely, but about being able to observe it when it arises, and choose how you want to respond. Can you think of a time when you were able to do that, even if it was just for a moment?

C: (pauses) Yeah, I think so. There was one time when I was feeling really anxious and self-critical, but I remembered that I had a meeting with a friend later that day, and I wanted to enjoy that time with her. So I took a few deep breaths, and I told myself that I could handle whatever emotions came up, and that I could still have a good time with my friend.

T: That's a great example of observing your thoughts and choosing how to respond. It sounds like you were able to cultivate some acceptance [acceptance] in that moment. Can you tell me more about what that was like?

C: It was like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I felt more present and focused, and I was able to enjoy my time with my friend without getting caught up in my emotions.

T: That's beautiful. And it's not about avoiding your emotions or suppressing them, but about being able to observe them and choose how you want to engage with them. Can you see how that might be a more sustainable way to live, rather than trying to control your emotions?

C: Yeah, I think so. It's like, I can still feel anxious or self-critical, but I don't have to be controlled by those emotions. I can choose how I want to respond.

T: Exactly. And it's not about being perfect or never feeling those emotions again, but about being able to live a life that's in line with your values, even when it's hard. Can you think of any areas in your life where you'd like to make some changes, and start living more in line with your values?

C: (pauses) Yeah, I think so. I'd like to start being more present and mindful in my daily life. I'd like to be able to enjoy my relationships and my work without getting caught up in my emotions.

T: That's a great start. It sounds like you're looking to cultivate some more acceptance and presence in your life. Can you think of any small steps you could take to start moving in that direction?

C: (pauses) Yeah, I think so. I could start by taking a few deep breaths before meetings or conversations, and just being more aware of my body and my surroundings.

T: That's a great idea. And it's not about making huge changes all at once, but about taking small steps towards living more in line with your values. Can you see how that might be a more sustainable way to live?

C: Yeah, I think so. It's like, I can start small and build from there, rather than trying to make huge changes all at once.

T: Exactly. And it's not about being perfect or never making mistakes again, but about being able to learn from those mistakes and move forward in a way that's in line with your values. Can you think of any areas in your life where you've made mistakes or experienced setbacks, but were still able to learn and grow from them?

C: (pauses) Yeah, I think so. There was one time when I made a big mistake at work, and I was really hard on myself about it. But in the end, I was able to learn from it and move forward in a way that was more in line with my values.

T: That's a great example of being able to learn from mistakes and move forward in a way that's in line with your values. Can you see how that might be a more sustainable way to live, rather than getting caught up in self-criticism and shame?

C: Yeah, I think so. It's like, I can still make mistakes and experience setbacks, but I don't have to be controlled by those emotions. I can choose how I want to respond.

T: Exactly. And it's not about being perfect or never making mistakes again, but about being able to live a life that's in line with your values, even when it's hard. Can you think of any ways that you might be able to practice self-compassion and kindness towards yourself, especially when you're feeling anxious or self-critical?

C: (pauses) Yeah, I think so. I could start by being more gentle with myself, and reminding myself that I'm doing the best I can. I could also try to practice some self-care, like taking care of my physical health and getting enough sleep.

T: That's a great idea. And it's not about being selfish or indulgent, but about taking care of yourself and being kind to yourself, especially when you're feeling anxious or self-critical. Can you see how that might be a more sustainable way to live?

C: Yeah, I think so. It's like, I can take care of myself and be kind to myself, rather than trying to control my emotions or push them away.

T: Exactly. And it's not about avoiding your emotions or suppressing them, but about being able to observe them and choose how you want to engage with them. Can you think of any ways that you might be able to practice mindfulness and presence in your daily life?

C: (pauses) Yeah, I think so. I could start by paying more attention to my body and my surroundings, and just being more aware of the present moment. I could also try to practice some mindfulness exercises, like meditation or deep breathing.

T: That's a great idea. And it's not about being perfect or never getting caught up in your emotions again, but about being able to live a life that's in line with your values, even when it's hard. Can you see how that might be a more sustainable way to live?

C: Yeah, I think so. It's like, I can start small and build from there, rather than trying to make huge changes all at once.

T: Exactly. Well, Sarah, it's been really great working with you today. I think we've made some great progress in terms of exploring your values and identifying some areas where you'd like to make some changes. Do you have any questions or anything else you'd like to discuss before we wrap up?

C: (pauses) Yeah, actually, I do. I was wondering if there's any way to deal with the inner critic that's still really loud in my head. It's hard to just ignore it or tell it to shut up.

T: That's a great question. While it's not possible to completely eliminate the inner critic, there are some strategies that might help you work with it more effectively. One approach is to practice defusion [defusion] techniques, such as noticing when the critic is speaking and observing it without judgment. You can also try to reframe the critic's messages in a more compassionate and realistic light. It might be helpful to work on building your self-compassion and self-kindness, and to remind yourself that you're doing the best you can.

C: That makes sense. I can try to work on that.

T: Great. And remember, it's not about being perfect or never making mistakes again, but about being able to live a life that's in line with your values, even when it's hard. Can you see how that might be a more sustainable way to live?

C: Yeah, I think so.

T: Well, Sarah, it's been really great working with you today. I think we've made some great progress, and I'm excited to see how you'll continue to grow and develop in the coming weeks and months. Before we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to say or any final thoughts you'd like to share?

C: (pauses) Yeah, actually, I do. I just want to thank you for being such a supportive and non-judgmental space for me to explore my thoughts and feelings. I really appreciate it.

T: Thank you, Sarah. It's been my pleasure to work with you. I'm looking forward to our next session.