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

T: Welcome, Sarah. I’m glad you’re here. From what you shared on the phone, it sounds like anger and a harsh inner critic have been running the show lately. I’d love to hear, in your own words, what brought you in today and what matters most to you about changing this pattern. [present-moment]

C: Thanks. I guess I’m exhausted from trying to keep a lid on my anger and then beating myself up when the lid pops off. I snap at my kids, replay the scene all night, and promise I’ll be “better” tomorrow, but the same cycle repeats. I’m terrified I’m becoming the parent I swore I’d never be. Deep down I just want to be calm and connected with them.

T: It makes sense that you’re exhausted—fighting your own emotions and then attacking yourself for having them is like running two marathons at once. [defusion] When you say “keep a lid on,” it sounds like there’s a belief that anger must be contained or else something catastrophic will happen. Can we slow it down and notice what shows up in your body right now as you describe that fear? [present-moment]

C: My chest feels tight, like someone cinched a belt around my ribs. There’s heat in my throat, and my mind flashes to yesterday when my six-year-old spilled juice on the couch and I screamed “Why can’t you be careful!” His little face crumpled, and I hated myself instantly. I can feel the shame pooling in my stomach like cold oil.

T: Thank you for staying with those sensations. [acceptance] That tight chest and hot throat are data, not directives. I wonder if we could treat them like weather passing through—uncomfortable, yes, but not requiring an emergency lockdown. What does the angry voice in your head say in that exact moment before you scream?

C: It hisses, “He’s ruining everything, you’ll never have nice things, you’re failing as a mom.” Then another voice jumps in: “Nice moms don’t yell, you’re such a bitch.” They’re rapid-fire, like dueling narrators, and I’m stuck in the crossfire.

T: So on one side there’s the “protector” voice trying to prevent loss or chaos, and on the other the “critic” voice trying to punish you for not meeting an impossible standard. [fusion] Both sound so convincing that you fuse with them—becoming the anger, becoming the failure—rather than noticing you’re the person hearing them. What happens if we just label them: “I notice I’m having the thought that he’s ruining everything” and “I notice I’m having the thought that I’m a bitch”? [defusion]

C: It feels… weirdly lighter. Like I stepped back half an inch. But I’m scared if I step back too far I’ll lose control and really explode. The critic says that distance is just laziness, letting myself off the hook.

T: That’s the critic’s job—to keep you fused so you’ll keep striving. [avoidance] Ironically, the more we try to control or suppress anger, the more it builds pressure like a shaken soda. What if the goal isn’t to control the anger but to relate to it differently, so it doesn’t drive your parenting bus? [values]

C: Relating differently how? I’ve tried counting to ten, deep breathing, but in the moment it’s like my prefrontal cortex just evaporates.

T: Those techniques are fine, but they’re still in service of control—getting rid of the feeling. [workability] Let’s test something smaller first. Could you be willing to have that heat and tightness without needing them to go away, just long enough to choose an action aligned with the mom you want to be? [acceptance]

C: I want to say yes, but willingness feels like agreeing to let a tornado stay in the living room. What if it wrecks everything?

T: Great image—tornado in the living room. [metaphor] A tornado is powerful, but notice you’re not the tornado; you’re the sky it moves through. The sky doesn’t have to like the tornado, just give it room to pass. If the tornado could talk, what does your anger need you to hear?

C: It says, “I’m overwhelmed, I have no help, I’m terrified I’ll always be alone in this.” When I say it out loud, my eyes sting. That’s… not what I expected.

T: Under the anger is grief and fear—totally human stuff. [self-as-context] The critic tries to shut that down because it fears vulnerability will make you weak. But what if acknowledging overwhelm is actually the gateway to connection with your kids rather than disconnection?

C: Connection sounds good, but I don’t know how to get there when my nervous system is screaming.

T: Let’s anchor in the present. Feel your feet on the floor, the temperature of the air on your skin. [present-moment] From this grounded place, can you recall a moment, even tiny, when you felt warmth toward your kids this week?

C: Yesterday my daughter crawled into my lap while I was working and said, “Mommy, your heartbeat is my favorite song.” I softened for a second, then the critic jumped in: “Enjoy it while it lasts before you ruin her too.”

T: That softening is your values speaking—love, presence, nurturing. [values] The critic tries to hijack it with a threat, but the fact that you noticed the warmth means it’s still alive in you. What would you want your daughter to remember about you when she’s grown?

C: That I was safe, that she could come to me with anything, that I saw who she really was and loved her anyway. My throat’s tight again saying it.

T: Beautiful. That’s a compass, not a destination we arrive at perfectly. [committed-action] Every time anger shows up, you have a choice: serve the critic’s agenda of suppression and shame, or serve the mom you want to be. Both are hard; which hard do you choose?

C: I choose the mom I want to be, but I need a plan for when the heat rises.

T: Let’s build a tiny experiment. Next time you feel the belt around your chest, could you silently say, “Hello, old friend, I see you’re scared,” and place a hand on your heart—just as an act of kindness to yourself, not to make it go away? [acceptance]

C: I can try. The critic will call it cheesy, but I’ll try.

T: Good. And if the critic pipes up, we can thank it for its opinion—“Thanks, mind”—and return to the experiment. [defusion] We’re not asking the anger to vanish; we’re practicing giving it room so your values can steer.

C: What if I still yell?

T: Then we practice repair. You go to your son and say, “I got overwhelmed and spoke harshly; that’s on me. I’m working on staying kind even when I’m upset.” Repair is values in motion. [committed-action]

C: That feels terrifying but also… relieving. Like I don’t have to be perfect, just accountable.

T: Exactly. Perfection is the critic’s mirage; accountability is the path. [values] How does your body feel right now talking about repair instead of perfection?

C: Shoulders dropped a little. There’s still a knot in my gut, but it’s looser, like it has permission to be there without defining me.

T: Notice that shift. [present-moment] The knot isn’t the enemy; it’s a signal you care. Caring is the fuel for change, not the obstacle.

C: I never thought of it that way. I’ve been treating my caring like a weakness the critic needs to whip into shape.

T: Let’s turn the whip into a compass. [metaphor] If your caring could speak directly to the critic, what would it say?

C: “Back off, I’ve got this. Your panic isn’t helping me parent.” I feel a spark of protectiveness toward myself, which is new.

T: That spark is the self-as-context—the part of you that can hold both anger and compassion without being either. [self-as-context] Can we rest here for a breath and just feel the spark?

C: It’s small, like a candle in a windy cave, but it’s steady. I want to cup my hands around it.

T: Beautiful image. [present-moment] Each time you choose willingness over control, you feed that flame. We have about fifteen minutes left—what feels most important to take from today?

C: That I don’t have to wait until I’m “fixed” to be the mom my kids need. I can practice small acts of kindness toward my anger and my kids, even when it’s messy.

T: That’s a powerful commitment. [committed-action] Between now and our next session, would you be willing to track moments when you either serve the critic or serve your values, just as data, no judgment?

C: Yes. I’ll jot them in my phone notes. And maybe try the hand-on-heart thing.

T: Lovely. And remember, every stumble is grist for the mill—evidence you’re in the arena, not on the sidelines. [acceptance] I’m honored you let me witness that candle today.

C: Thank you. I feel… less alone with it.