

**Regulation**  
**Before Insight:**  
**A Sandtray Session**  
**Guide for Working**  
**with Anxiety**



# WHY REGULATION COMES FIRST:

**Core Principle:** Regulation is not the warm-up, it *is* the work

Anxiety lives in  
the nervous  
system before it  
lives in language

When clients are  
dysregulated,  
the brain  
prioritizes safety  
- not insight

**Sandtray supports anxiety work best when it:**

- Externalizes internal chaos
- Creates distance from overwhelming emotion
- Offers containment before meaning
- Allows insight to emerge organically



# FIRST SESSION

## FLOW ~

**ARRIVAL**

**REGULATION**

**READINESS**

**REFLECTION**

**INTEGRATION**

EACH STAGE CAN TAKE  
MINUTES OR THE ENTIRE SESSION



# 1.) ARRIVAL & ORIENTATION:

**Clinical Goal: Safety, predictability, choice**

## **Watch for:**

- Rapid speech or shallow breathing
- Perfectionism (“Am I doing this right?”)
- Hesitation or over-control
- Scanning the tray repeatedly

## **Supportive Language:**

- “There’s no right or wrong way to do this.”
- “We can go slowly.”
- “You’re in charge of the tray.”

**\*If anxiety is high, stay here longer**



# 2.) REGULATION THROUGH THE TRAY:

**Clinical Goal: Nervous system settling**

## Regulation-Focused Prompts:

- “What would help this tray feel safer?”
- “Choose a miniature that helps your body settle.”
- “Where does this figure want to be right now?”
- “Is there something that could contain or hold this?”



Reference ‘Must-Have Miniatures  
Guide: Anxiety Edition’ for  
appropriate miniatures



**\*Invite the tray to do the regulating rather than asking the client to explain.**



# 3.) READINESS

## CHECK:

**-IS INSIGHT AVAILABLE?**

**Signs regulation is taking hold:**

- Slower movements**
- Longer pauses or stillness**
- Deeper breathing**
- Tray reorganizes without prompting**

**\*If these signs are missing:**  
**Stay with regulation. Insight can wait.**

# 4.) GENTLE REFLECTION & MEANING:

**Clinical Goal: Allow meaning to emerge, not be forced**

## **Insight-Supporting Prompts:**

- “What stands out to you?”
- “What feels important here?”
- “If this tray could speak, what might it say?”
- “Does any part of this feel familiar?”

## **Avoid:**

- Early interpretation
- Assigning symbolic meaning
- Pushing for insight
- Explaining the tray to the client

***\*Let the client lead the meaning.***



# 5.) INTEGRATION & CLOSING:

**Clinical Goal: Leave regulated, not raw**

## **Before ending:**

- Invite one grounding action (touch sand, notice breath)
- Ask what they want to remember
- Offer a regulating miniature to “carry” into the week

## **Closing Prompt:**

**“What would help you leave today feeling steady?”**

**\*A regulated session is a successful session.**



# COMMON PITFALLS:

- Moving to insight too quickly
- Confusing emotional expression with regulation
- Over-directing anxious clients
- Assuming insight = progress

# THERAPIST REFLECTION:

After the session, reflect:

- Where did I feel the urge to interpret?
- What supported regulation most effectively?
- How was *my* nervous system during this work?

