

How to Work with Clients Who Blame

Bonus 3:

A Step-By-Step Approach to Restore the Mentalizing Lost to Blame

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A Step-By-Step Approach to Restore the Mentalizing Lost to Blame

Dr. Buczynski: Now in Module 2 of this program, we spent some time with Dr. Peter Fonagy. He showed us how a client's fault-finding mindset was often linked to an inability to mentalize.

And as we mentioned, mentalizing means being able to attend not just to our own experience, but also to the mental state of another.

So how can we help to restore a blame-prone client's ability to mentalize?

Here, Peter walks us through the steps he uses . . .

"We start from the narrative of an event."

Dr. Fonagy: We start from a narrative: the narrative of an event. That narrative is an experience at the time.

So, they tell me about a particular thing that happened with the husband or their wife – let me think of a young man I saw fairly recently. He was telling me about an encounter that he had with his "sort of girlfriend" (I don't know whether the girlfriend would call him her boyfriend, but he likes to refer to her as a girlfriend). There was something that happened, which he came in complaining about, which really was about her – them being at a party and she took – as far as he was concerned – too much interest in this other person who actually came in later.

Anyway—first step, number one, he tells me that this is what happened: he felt that she had lost interest in him. And I then asked him what his experience of it was at the time.

He says, "Well..." – you know, he felt pushed out, neglected, angry with this guy. Then I asked him, as he reflects back on it, "What was really happening there? What could she be thinking, and what was the nature of that?"

He then tells me about how she was obviously fancying this guy— maybe even a crush on him or something; that there was more to it. That's why he felt the experience was so crushing.

Then I would, as a next step, say, "Well, when you think about it now, do you still think that that's what was happening? How do you see it from our perspective now? How do you see it?"

Then he experiences a little bit more doubt – that he's not so certain about it. Maybe he was a bit of a loner and she'd shown interest in him because he didn't know anyone at the party and she wanted to be friendly to him and so on – so, starting to develop an alternative perspective.

Then I ask him, "How do you feel about/what's it like talking about it now?" And he says, "Well, it's sort of helpful. It kind of makes me think about what might be happening."

And then I come in and say, "Is it it's just moved in so quickly, that thought of yours – that he was trying to steal your place – that moved in so quickly, really before any other thought could – and you reacted to that? And you walked away, and went into a huff, and then she and you had an argument. Maybe now it seems like it may not have been necessary – am I right about that?"

And then you've got an alternative perspective.

Dr. Buczynski: So just so you've got them all, let's recap Peter's steps . . .

1. Start with the narrative. Get the client to think of a particular event or experience, and have them go into detail about the experience at the time it happened.
2. Move the client into the reflecting phase. Have them reflect on the current feelings that come up as they talk about the past event in the here-and-now. And then also, reflect on the therapeutic part of what's being revealed in those current feelings. By this point, the client is often more open and ready to consider an alternative way of looking at the same experience.

Now in addition, there's one more nuance to Peter's process that I think is also very important.

I'll let Peter explain . . .

Dr. Fonagy: You try and do a little bit of watching what's happening as well, so you're keeping attention on if there's a disjunction in the tone, in the dialogue, between what's declared about it – say if it was an experience of abandonment and so on and so forth, and how they talk about it.

So, with this young man, very often it happens that he talks about these negative experiences, but actually it somehow comes across as if he felt some kind of – in his tone – as if some kind of triumph about it almost. He felt, "You see? You see, *again* it's happening."

So I might pick it up, and I just kind of say, "Look, what's happened just then? You know, you said something really sad, but, you know, to me you sounded as if you were almost pleased about it. How come there are these two things?"

Now, the importance of it, again, is not the particular disjunction, but by finding disjunctions, I'm forcing my client to mentalize about their own reaction. And then tracing how it came about, trying to see if we can understand why it came about. All of these things are just enormously important, in my view, because it is what helps an individual develop a mentalizing attitude.

"I'm forcing my client to mentalize about their own reaction."

Dr. Buczynski: So as Peter watches and listens, he stays alert for inconsistencies in a client's narrative.

He then empathizes, he clarifies, and he explores. He identifies the client's feelings, and then he parses the subtleties of his client's experience in terms of the client's narrative.

Why?

Dr. Fonagy: Because that's what gets a little bit of mentalizing going.

"The really important part of it is really provoking curiosity in him about *why* he might be doing the things that he is doing."

The really important part of it is really provoking curiosity in him about *why* he might be doing the things that he is doing, to try and get his interest to come alive in his own mental states. It's incredibly important to validate, and to normalize, and to try and see things through his eyes, and to try to see what effect the experience has on them. So it has a structure, quite a detailed structure.

But on the whole, the aim of it is really very, very simple, and that

actually makes for a very rapid, sometimes very limited therapy

I'm not there to sort out every single problem that this person has; I just sort it – I'm there to be respectful, to be positive, to be hopeful, to be questioning, but to be naïve, to be unknowing, to be puzzled, to be a bit like Inspector Columbo in – if you remember back, that TV series: "Oh, I wonder why there's..." in order to invite the person I'm working with to be forced to help me by mentalizing themselves.

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Then, always to check back, to keep them onside with me: "Did I understand that right? Now, come on, help me here. I might have misunderstood."

With this young man I was just talking about, I do that a *hell* of a lot because he's *incredibly* – he wants to please and he's incredibly likely to agree with me, so just nod me through my little speeches and then it's kind of water off a duck's back; he didn't really internalize anything I said.

So I go quite slowly. I always check back whether he really understood; I get him to repeat it to me. And then I say, "What's the effect of that? If you think about it, how does it change how you feel?"

It's not for any particular reason, other than it's encouraging his mentalizing. If I feel he's mentalizing, I praise; I'm filled with admiration, and try to get him to see the difference, the improvement that occurs if he sees things genuinely in terms of his girlfriend's stance on something as opposed to his assumptions about his girlfriend's stance, as he's always too quick to attribute that.

Dr. Buczynski: So how might we language such praise with a client?

I asked Peter to give me a snapshot of how he does this. Here's what he said to *this* client . . .

Dr. Fonagy: "You know, I think this time you *really* managed to understand what went on between you. Now, it struck me like that. Did it strike you like that? Good. Now, did it make a difference? Because I think you did fantastically well – but did it make any difference for you? Did it make it feel any different? Did it make it feel worse?"

So then he goes home and tries to kind of "live the dream," as it were, and does mentalizing with his girlfriend. He comes back and says they talked about, you know, what she thought at the time, that she felt she was answering this person's text too quickly, which meant that he didn't matter, that the conversation between him and her didn't matter as much as this person's text mattered to her.

She then explained that actually she was very worried about this other person because they were upset about their girlfriend doing something.

And I said, "Okay. How did that feel like? Did you feel any better when she explained that to you? Did you feel any better about it? Because I thought it was really good, the way that you actually made sure that you had a good understanding about her. Do you think *she* felt better, for being able to explain it to you?"

"You know, I think it's really good that you can make her now feel good about conversations with you, because before, it was so often that you'd get into a conversation with her and you'd explain how you felt, and it just made things worse. But I think that now that you can listen to her better, I think you're doing so much better."

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relation to non-mentalizing.

So, when he talks to me about the assumptions that he makes about what she thinks or what she – you know, I can say, “Look, you know, it’s so easy to make these assumptions. But how often do you check those things out with her? Do you check them out every – how – you’re so often convinced that you’re right. But, you know, if you were *so* right *all* the time, you’d be an extraordinary person because, you know, none of us can read each other’s minds.

“So I would be much happier if you told me about times when you got her mind *wrong*, because then I’d know that maybe the times when you say that you got her mind *right*, that had a fair chance of being true. But if all the time you’re right, I can’t help feeling I don’t know that you’re right that many/that often, and I just don’t know when you’re right and when you’re wrong.”

So, you know, I’m quite confrontative, not letting people get away with non-mentalizing. And if – I hold myself to task here – so if he comes back, “Yes, I did it. I did exactly what you said – and it didn’t help at all,” it was, “I’m really sorry. Obviously, if it was of no practical value to you, it was wrong. That was my fault and I apologize. Something I did wasn’t quite right. But let’s, together, try and be sure that next time it doesn’t go wrong. What happened? Let’s go into what happened,” and then we go into how it happened.

Dr. Buczynski: I think Peter’s story is so important. Not only does it lay out the exact steps for helping clients mentalize. Not only that, but it also helps us see how mentalizing could be especially useful in working with clients who are prone to blame.

It’s one powerful way to start shifting a blamer’s focus, while still taking care to keep the therapeutic alliance intact.

Now coming up in the fourth and final bonus, we’ll get into how the practitioner can guard against getting caught up in a client’s blaming stance.

I’ll see you there.