

How to Work with Clients Who Blame

Module 2: How to Work with Clients Who Externalize Their Blame

Part 1: How to Help Clients Move from Blame into Self-Acceptance and Kindness

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Dr. R. Siegel: I've been pondering this question of "How do I work with people who tend to see their problem as changing other people?" and what comes to mind most robustly for me is – *because they're not the easiest folks to work with in therapy*. It brings to mind for me the distinction that was discussed a lot in my early days of training between neuroses and character disorders.

The idea was, in a neurosis, a person is conflicted in some way and as a result is making themselves miserable. In character disorders, the person is conflicted in some way and is making *other* people miserable. It's harder to work with character disorders than it is with neuroses, so this is difficult.

Dr. Buczynski: As Ron said, working with blame can be difficult. Especially, as we heard in module 1, if the person is predisposed to blaming because of their neurobiology.

That's why an important first step can be to help shift a client's perspective of the problem. That way, when they're externalizing the issue, we can avoid anything that may appear to be challenging their blame.

Now one way to foster this shift is through empathic resonance, to align with the pain that's lying underneath the client's blame. If you remember from the last module, this is one of the five aspects of empathy.

But this isn't always easy. I mean, how do we generate this empathic resonance when the client is angrily listing off all the bad things that other people have done?

Dr. R. Siegel: I'm listening for "What hurts for this person? Is there some gentle way I can begin to talk about what hurts?"

It's usually in the form of how my client or patient has been injured by the so-called *bad behavior* on the part of the other. Carefully I do not weigh in on the guilt and innocence of the other person, or my client's guilt and innocence, but rather [seek to] understand how it feels to be hurt.

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Then, I gently move to the next phase of why they might be particularly hurt by this other person's behavior. It can be something like, "Well, given the way you were unfairly accused as a child so often, I could understand why this other person being unfair to you now would be particularly painful and difficult" – again not voting on the guilt or innocence but trying to attune the person to that.

Dr. Buczynski: You'll hear this one perspective come up often in this program, so it's worth repeating: a critical part of the work with blame is to stay away from the client's guilt or innocence in the situation. At least initially.

See, if we focus on the evidence of who's really at fault, it can create defensiveness in the client. And this can put the therapeutic relationship at risk, which may prolong healing.

Dr. R. Siegel: I've found that, remarkably, if I stay away from the guilt and innocence, I stay away from the "Who's to blame?" Staying with the pain, sooner or later people feel gratified, like, "My pain actually can be

touched here in a loving way and that's going to be okay."

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Of course, it has to be titrated because we don't want to flood a person with more pain than they are able to tolerate at the moment.

Dr. Buczynski: Metering out the pain is an important part to consider. We want to be able to help the client sit with their pain, to open up to it.

That way, we can help them to let go of some of the unhealthy emotions they may be using to cover those painful feelings. And when it comes to emotions, there's usually one that's a go-to when it comes to blame.

Dr. Germer: Basically, when we blame others, we are angry. The reason we're angry is because we've been hurt, and anger is a natural effort not to be hurt again.

This is not a crime; however, it is not possible to get over useless or counterproductive anger. It's not helpful unless we can feel the pain or open to the pain. When people try to forgive others or themselves for things and they can't do it, it's because they haven't opened to the pain.

Dr. Buczynski: That's Dr. Chris Germer. He's looking at the fragile connection between anger and pain that can keep clients in a blaming gridlock.

But here's the thing. Sometimes clients simply can't open up to the pain because they don't have the strength to do it. Or maybe they're afraid to do it because they haven't been resourced to handle that kind of hurt. And this is often how clients can settle into a pain-blame-more pain cycle.

So how can we use empathic resonance to help disrupt that cycle?

Dr. Germer: The first step is to name the anger and the second step is to validate the anger by validating the pain; in other words, "This hurts," or, "You were hurt."

Once that's validated, then actually people can begin to work with it. The reason I say this is, as long as we feel threatened, we cannot work with emotions because any emotions we feel are in the interest of *avoiding* emotion.

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But if our anger is validated and we can admit that we are hurt, then we can actually begin to "peel back the onion" and get to the heart of the matter... in other words, *how I was hurt*, and then bring kindness to that place.

Dr. Buczynski: Ok, so to begin we have to name the anger and then validate it. Once the client feels validated, we can then help them open up to the pain. And from there we can get into the deeper work.

Now, often when we're working with anger that's tied to blame, we'll find softer feelings underneath. Much of the time we'll find that the anger is really hiding feelings of shame or grief, or even loneliness.

Dr. R. Siegel: It's a defense against our feeling of shame for whatever our role might be in the difficulty; and it's a defense against recognizing that we're all saints and sinners.

One of the ways to ward off feeling like a sinner is to think of oneself as a saint, but usually it doesn't hold so well. We're all a mixture of both, and there's usually some tremendous threat to our self-esteem that's involved in giving up righteous indignation because it would mean, "I'm just a regular human being" also.

Dr. Buczynski: So this is where our empathy for the client's pain can be so useful in creating some space between the pain and the angry blaming that's covering it.

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And oftentimes, once we start exploring the feelings that are hiding behind the pain, we can get to the "unmet need."

Dr. Germer: The unmet need inevitably behind anger, bitterness, or resentment is the need to be seen. It is the need to be heard, to belong, to be connected, to be special (that's not a crime – every human being wants to be special), and ultimately to be loved.

Dr. R. Siegel: It's a really nice framing to use the word *need*, because when we say it's a need – for example, the need that everybody just wants to be loved, everybody wants to be acknowledged, everybody wants to be treated with respect or fairness, everyone wants to be included and accepted in that way – by calling it a *need*, it really says, "Okay. This is built-in. This is something built in to our wiring as an organism."

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We don't condemn ourselves for wanting water, because we assume, "water's a basic need," so it's okay if we have this longing.

That first level – how we frame it – has *such* an important impact on whether we can develop some acceptance and kindness toward ourselves when we're experiencing longing.

Dr. Germer: When we can say, "I'm so angry because, as a person, I just want to be loved/I just want to be respected," and if we can disengage and disentangle from the storyline enough to be able to say *that* after having validated the pain, everything begins to change. We actually open ourselves to kindness.

What we discover is – and this is the *amazing* thing – we can begin to give ourselves, in words and deeds, the same kindness we've been desperately [seeking] from others including spouses, parents, and friends. We can do this for ourselves.

Dr. Buczynski: That can be a very powerful outcome when working with a client's blame. If we can get beneath the client's blame and empathically resonate with their pain, they can begin to fulfill their own unmet need.

Ok, let's take a quarter turn now and look at another one of the five aspects of empathy that can help resolve a client's blame.

In the next video, we're going to focus on empathic imagination or empathic understanding. Specifically, we'll get into how a break down in the ability to mentalize could be setting a client up for blame.

I'll see you there.