

How to Work with Clients Who Blame

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

Part 2: How the Loss of Mentalizing Fuels Blame

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Dr. Buczynski: How do we help clients who are only able to see other peoples' fault in difficult situations?

Some might see this issue as a breakdown in a process known as mentalizing.

So just for a quick review, mentalizing is the ability to attend not just to our own experience, but also to the mindset of others, including being attuned to another person even when we're in conflict with them.

Dr. Fonagy: If you mentalize, good mentalizing is owning, is having agency and owning one's imperfections, and owning what happens to one.

Dr. Buczynski: That's Dr. Peter Fonagy. And when it comes to issues of blame, Peter will often turn his focus to the place where mentalizing was lost.

Dr. Fonagy: For me, the critical issue is that mentalizing exists across a number of polarities, and the polarities are basically between self and other, internal and external, between emotional and cognitive, and between explicit and implicit.

"Mentalizing exists across a number of polarities."

These are what I expect from an individual to be able to move comfortably between. When they get stuck and they talk *just* about the other, that's an extreme external focus: "It's everyone else's fault. It's not my fault." It's my job to balance that. So, the aspect of mentalizing has found itself no longer present in their discourse is the internal focus.

"I try to move them from a uniquely external focus to a partially internal focus."

So, I try to move them from a uniquely external focus to a partially internal focus. It doesn't mean that they have to just talk about themselves; it means that I'm getting them to move between external and internal.

Dr. Buczynski: Fostering that shift between those two areas of focus is key. For some clients who struggle with blame, this inability to shift focus could be the core issue.

And we can often see how this issue plays out with clients who get locked into a position of the other person being at fault.

Dr. Fonagy: So, the person comes along and says, "Look, I mean, I've got a real problem with my other half. I don't know what you'll think about it, but I'm sure that you'll think that he has got a problem. He wants..." that can be too much sex, too little sex; "He's never satisfied with this. Never satisfied with that. He doesn't work hard enough. Works too hard." And, you know, "Everything would be fine if you sort that out. What can you do with a person like that?"

Dr. Buczynski: Have you heard this kind of thinking in your work? Well, the true reveal is in that last sentence: "What can you do with a person like that"?

Peter believes that *that* statement reveals a failure in his client's ability to mentalize.

You see, the client is wholly focused on their own position. Maybe it doesn't even occur to them to try and look at the problem through the other person's eyes or consider why that other person might act the way they do. But the point is, it's this failure to mentalize that can keep people stuck in that cycle of blaming others.

So what happens is, when a client can't mentalize, they can often default to blaming the context or the environment. Peter says this action can also come with a high level of certainty, where the client treats the mental as if it was the physical. The client can become convinced that what they *think* has happened actually happened.

Dr. Fonagy: If you try and debate this with the individual, you're "not understanding them" – because it's not up for discussion, because "You don't understand. You don't have to live with this person. If you had to live with this person, then you would know exactly what I'm having to live through here."

So, you know, it's – the strategy with this is very similar for the kind of strategy that we use. It's based around the idea that you have to/you can't work in that zone. So if you start addressing that very issue, you are undoubtedly likely to go wrong. You have to rewind – what we call you have to rewind – into a mode where there was mutual understanding and where it was lost.

And that has to happen in a sense in the person's imagination, as they're working with you in the room, but it has to actually move, as it were, out of the rather unhappy domain that you're in.

Dr. Buczynski: So let's look at an example of how Peter would "rewind" the situation to find out where mentalizing got lost.

In the scenario we just heard, where the client came in and started blaming her husband, Peter will try to steer the discussion away from the blame itself.

"You have to rewind into a mode where there was mutual understanding and where it was lost."

With this particular couple, the original argument was over their children's education and whether they should hire a tutor.

So what Peter will do is try to bring the couple back to a place where there was a mutual understanding of the issue. Because it's in this moment where you can often find traces of healthy mentalizing.

In this case, Peter began by addressing the wife.

Dr. Fonagy: "You started talking about what/how you should deal with the children's educational challenges and whether you should have a tutor or not. And something happened there, in that discussion, that didn't go quite right, that then led to all these things.

So, he said that it was because you and he were not able to put in the time to work with the children in the evenings that you needed to bring a tutor in. And that's when things, it sounded to me, they started to go wrong. Now, would you agree with that, that that was a moment...?"

"Of course it was. But he won't do his bit. I do my bit. He won't do his bit. So of course he says that we need a tutor, so that he doesn't have to do..."

"Now, hold on. Hold on. Now, let's just go back there. So, when he says that you two are not doing enough, what did that – just about that – what did that make you feel? What did that make you feel?"

Dr. Buczynski: It was at this point that Peter made a discovery. There was a twinge of a hurt feeling. See, the wife felt a little bit of criticism coming her way from her husband's statement.

And this was the thread that Peter was able to follow to find one of the reasons that mentalizing may have collapsed.

Because it was in this moment that emotions began to rise up, which then took over the ability to think clearly and the couple got locked into a non-mentalizing interaction.

So Peter will try to find the part of the interaction right before the blame came in. And from there, he'll try to rebuild the client's ability to mentalize.

Dr. Fonagy: You rewind; you make a little bit of self-reflection, and then, as soon as they start talking about themselves, you then start exploring, "What do you think – what do you think your husband was feeling at the time?"

"You make a little bit of self-reflection, and as soon as they start talking about themselves, you start exploring."

Then if she's able to get through to how the husband feels inadequate, perhaps also in the face of the children's problems with mathematics or whatever it is, and just as she feels inadequate in relation to that need, it's suddenly you are in a domain where they are understanding; she is understanding him as a person with thoughts, feelings, wishes, beliefs and desires.

And she then is maybe – even more important – able to see him as understanding her as having thoughts and feelings. And once that relationship, in her imagination, becomes a mentalizing relationship, you're out of this domain where people get – it's always "them" and it's never the self.

Dr. Buczynski: I'm happy to tell you that Peter is featured in one of the bonuses in this program. You'll want to check that out because Peter gives a more detailed walk-through of how he helps reestablish mentalizing with a client who is stuck in blame.

Moving on, in the next video we'll look at how to help a client identify the true issue that's leading them to blame others.

I'll see you then.