

How to Work with Clients Who Blame

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

Part 3: The Missing Skill That Can Keep a Client Frozen in Blame

with Marsha Linehan, PhD; Michael Yapko, PhD; Rick Hanson, PhD;
Kelly McGonigal, PhD; Ron Siegel, PsyD;
and Ruth Buczynski, PhD

National Institute for the Clinical
Application of Behavioral Medicine





How to Work with Clients Who Blame:

How to Work with Clients Who Externalize Their Blame

The Missing Skill That Can Keep a Client Frozen in Blame

Dr. Buczynski: When clients see all their problems as other people needing to change, it can fill their lives with so much pain and aggravation.

But as Dr. Marsha Linehan points out, before a client can effectively release their blame, they need to make a very important distinction.

Dr. Linehan: Sometimes it's *true* that other people need to change. You're in a job somewhere and you're being mistreated, for example. In those situations, the job of the therapist is to try to determine whether other people are engaging in behaviors that really are problematic for you, versus you're thinking anything that goes wrong is the other person. I've had both clients: I've had clients who say, "All problems are the other person," and I've had clients who think the problem's the other person, when it actually *is* the other person.

*"Sometimes it's **true** that other people need to change."*

Dr. Yapko: It requires a discrimination. Sometimes the problem *is* the other person, and sometimes the problem *is you*.

But if you are global in your thinking and you reflexively blame other people, such that it never occurs to you to ask the question, "Is there something that *I'm* doing that's contributing to this?" and that's obviously a gaping hole in your awareness.

Dr. Buczynski: That's Dr. Michael Yapko. Both he and Marsha see this inability to differentiate as a core reason why people can get overwhelmed by blame.

Dr. Yapko: To start to talk to people about the fact that anytime you're in a relationship with another person, you're 50 percent of that relationship, and to think that somebody else is 100 percent responsible for something they're only 50 percent part of is convenient, it's a convenient distortion, but it isn't really going to help you any if you blame the other person at times when they're really not to blame.

Dr. Linehan: We have a skill called *Wise Mind* which is that all people are capable of wisdom. We tell clients all the time: "Ask Wise Mind, 'Is this really the case or not the case?'"

And when you ask Wise Mind, you can't answer for it; you have to listen to the answer. You'd be *amazed* at how many people come up with the correct answers when you don't let them decide what the answer is. If you decide, who knows what you would say.

"Is the problem the other person or is the problem that you can't tolerate something they're doing that you don't like?"

It's important to evaluate "Where really is the problem? Is the problem the other person or is the problem that you can't tolerate something they're doing that you don't like?" which is very different than them being the problem.

Dr. Buczynski: That last point can be an important qualifier when we're trying to help a client work through the issue. Sometimes the client can simply be angered by another person's behavior or actions and this can lead to a sort of mis-applied blame.

And this is a good place to address another vital distinction that may need to be made. Once we get all the facts of what the other person did to receive the blame, we may need to establish some sort of standard by which to evaluate them.

Dr. Hanson: Sometimes I'll find that clients are way overestimating the horribleness of what the other person did, in my opinion. Then I have to be careful about that it helps to sort of create standards outside the client and me, because sometimes the client really has a head of steam about how horrible that other person was, and if I move into, "On the zero-to-ten of horrible scale, that's more like a two than a thermonuclear-warfare, kind of ten."

But that is not always so appropriate to say; it doesn't always go over well, especially if the person is heated there, so you bring in other standards.

Dr. Buczynski: That can be a key point to keep in mind. We want to be careful when it comes to minimizing the other person's behavior.

But not every client overestimates the other person's fault. There's a flip side as well.

Dr. Hanson: In fact more often than not – the client is actually *underestimating* the inappropriateness, the sustained mistreatment they're dealing with, or the impact on other people.

"More often than not, the client is actually *underestimating* the inappropriateness they're dealing with."

We can err either way – overestimating or underestimating – but often people are really served by the therapist helping them appreciate, "No, this is actually really a big deal, and you've got more rights here, actually it's reasonable for you to claim them for yourself."

I'll just finish there and just say that I find this territory of exploring third parties to be a critically important aspect of therapy, and also one we've got to be very skillful and careful with.

Dr. Buczynski: Ok, so there's a situation where the client may be justified in their blaming and we need to help them apply a reasonable standard to the offense.

But to get back to Michael's point, some clients simply aren't able to properly assess their own role in these matters.

When this happens, a client can often default to blaming others. They can then get very committed to this viewpoint. It becomes impossible for them to take any agency in the blame because they see the problem as a zero-sum game.

Dr. Yapko: This too requires a discrimination: how do you know what you're responsible for and what you're not responsible for? The reason that's such an important question and it's such an important discrimination to make is how often self-blame or blaming others is at the heart of the problem.

So, for example, with depression, if you look at the criteria for diagnostics for depression, one of the criteria is if you have excessive or inappropriate guilt.

Well, guilt presupposes responsibility, and to define guilt as excessive or inappropriate is a very clear statement that you can be distorted about where the responsibility is.

Dr. Buczynski: Responsibility. Michael has touched on an important piece of the work involved in the way we approach blame. And in module 3, we're going to take a deeper look at the role that responsibility plays in a person's blaming stance.

But back to the main point, when a client is struggling with self-blame or with a blaming of others, we may want to focus on two key patterns.

Dr. Yapko: One, the person isn't aware of where the responsibility actually is and I need to help them learn how to make that discrimination.

Secondly, the blame comes, the anger comes when they have inappropriate expectations but don't realize it.

You know, if you were to ask the premier relationship experts, John and Julie Gottman, what single factor predicts satisfaction with relationships, they will tell you it's entirely dependent on your expectations: that when your partner is doing the things you think they should do, you're happy with them, and when they're not doing what you think they should do, you're not happy with them. But it misses the question of "are your expectations realistic in the first place?"

Dr. Linehan: I had a client who always believed a person should invite her to their birthday party when they were way, way out of town. I would say, "Now, how is it you would expect that person to invite you when you live here, and they live all the way across the universe practically? How is it that you came up with the idea that they *should* have done it?"

That's different. That's when the person puts a "should" on the other person. "They should do what I want."

I mainly tell the average client that "Nobody *should* do what you want. It's just that what you want you want; and if you *want* it, we have to figure out a way to get it. Saying, 'You *should* do it' usually doesn't help. Seeing a person and saying, 'You should have invited me to your birthday party,' I guarantee you is not going to help your life."

"The word *should* is probably not a helpful word in your life."

That's sort of the "you should" phenomenon: "You *should* do this. You *should* have done that," et cetera, et cetera. I guess I'm kind of always telling them, "You know, the word *should* is probably not a helpful word in your life."

Dr. Buczynski: I imagine you've come across the "you should" factor in your work with clients. Dr. Kelly McGonigal has seen this in her training work as well.

But Kelly has found a unique way to turn these "shoulds" into something less blameful and a little more useful.

Dr. McGonigal: This is going to sound cheesy, but you change a *should* into a *could*, to change your perspective on this. When the *shoulds* start coming out, "Somebody else *should* have done this or *should* do this," say, "What *could* you do?" and really start to think about what your options are.

"When the *shoulds* start coming out, say, what *could* you do?"

You *could* choose to change your perspective on it – "Would that get you what you want? You *could* choose to confront this person about it – would *that* get you closer to

what you want? You *could* choose to take action on your own rather than wait for someone else to do it – is *that* a better choice?”

Think about what all the *coulds* are in your situation so that you feel really empowered to make a choice that gets you closer to what you want, or that maybe would change the relationship.

What’s great about that is there’s always more options than when your focus is stuck on what somebody else *should* do and your inability to make them capitulate or make them angrier so that they do it.

Dr. Buczynski: As Kelly said, that “could” be a better way to approach the issue of blame.

So let’s just quickly review what we’ve just heard.

To effectively work with clients who blame others , we may want to:

1. Determine whether there’s actual mistreatment of the client by the person they’re blaming.
2. Determine whether the blame is based on an actual problem or if it’s more of an intolerance for the other person’s behavior or actions.
3. Help establish an appropriate standard for evaluating the other person’s behavior.
4. Help the client discriminate where the responsibility lies for the problem.
5. Help the client discriminate whether their expectations are realistic or not.
6. When a client is stuck in a “should” pattern, help them shift from what “should” the other person do to what “could” I do.

Now, as we’ve heard, blamers can often struggle with this whole idea of needing other people to change.

So it may be worth asking the question: can we *really* make other people change?

This question could be a healthy part of the overall discussion you have with your client. And it could lead to some helpful ways to maybe start to bring about change in the client’s relationship with blame.

Dr. R. Siegel: I really like the work of Michele Weiner-Davis. She’s got this “Divorce Busters” program and I was once in a seminar with her– I don’t know where. She invited us to think of exactly the behaviors we know will bring out the worst in other people. You can do this – it’s different for each “other person.” If it’s a family member, what can you say or do that’s going to bring out the worst in that family member? If it’s a romantic partner or a business partner, “What’s the thing I can do that can bring out the worst in them?”

She pointed out that if we have the power to bring out the worst in another person, perhaps we have the power to bring out the *best* in the other person as well. [We should] begin reflecting on what might we do to try to bring out what we like to see in the other person.

“If we have the power to bring out the *worst* in another person, perhaps we have the power to bring out the *best* in the other person as well.”

This I think is a very elegant way to work with the challenge of somebody who’s always blaming others. You say, “They’re doing this horrible thing – how might you get them to do this?”

Dr. Buczynski: That's an interesting way to approach this idea of changing others.

But now let's go at this from a different angle. How do we work with this blaming of other people when the client feels that the other person will never change, that they're just not going to budge.

Dr. R. Siegel: If a person comes to the conclusion that, "There's no way *at all* that I can influence this other person and they're going to continue to be the same," then we can move into another realm which is, "So, how might you work with your own automatic reactions?"

Begin to help people see that their own reactions come out of their personal history, our shared evolutionary biology, and our wiring as mammals. If we can help people see their *reactivity* as what's causing their grief, as opposed to just the other person's *behavior*, then we've got some wiggle room there.

Dr. Buczynski: Bringing a little bit of focus on the client's reactivity could be a helpful way to start to improve that situation. Like we talked about in module one, some of the roots of blame are hardwired into us.

"At a certain point it's about working with our reactivity to the circumstances."

Dr. R. Siegel: Look for ways to modulate that hardwiring with the goal of eventually getting to this Tibetan saying which I love very much: "Seeking happiness by trying to rearrange external circumstances is like seeking sunlight in a north-facing cave."

It's very unlikely any of us is ever going to be able to rearrange circumstances to make ourselves always happy, so at a certain point it's about working with our reactivity to the circumstances.

Dr. Buczynski: In Module four of this program, we're going to hear from Bill O'Hanlon who will continue with this approach for working with blame. You'll want to be sure to catch his four practical strategies to help clients promote change in others.

But right now, we're going to move the dialogue into a bit of a different area when working with blame.

Up next in module three, we'll take a closer look at how to work with clients when the blame is turned toward them. I'll see you there.