

How to Work with Clients Who Blame

Module 3: How to Work with Blame That's Protecting a Client From Shame

Part 1: How to Work with Clients Who Fear Self-Blame

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How to Work with Clients Who Blame: How to Work with Blame That's Protecting a Client From Shame How to Work with Clients Who Fear Self-Blame

Dr. Buczynski: How do we help clients work with the fear that may be driving their blaming mindset?

Picking up on our discussion from the last module, we know that a client who blames others can often be trying to avoid pain.

But the thing is, it's not always easy to work with these angry blaming parts. Because not only are they protecting pain, these parts could also be trying to protect a very deep fear.

For some clients, there can often be this internal struggle between the blamer and the inner critic.

Dr. Schwartz: Often you have another kind of polarization, but this time between that critic who says, "You're terrible. You're the problem. It's all about you," and the part who says, "No – it's not about you at all. It's about all these people that are doing these things *to* you."

They're both trying to protect exiles, but they're doing it in this polarized-opposite way. And a client like that has become dominated by the one who blames everybody else, but still has that critic in the background.

Dr. Buczynski: That's Dr. Richard Schwartz. And he's looking at the interesting struggle that sometimes takes place between internalized blame and externalized blame.

Richard's approach here is based on his model of Internal Family Systems, in case you didn't know. And for this discussion, he's looking at a client with grandiose, narcissistic personality traits.

Ok, so how do we help the client pull back their blaming of others without them taking on more painful feelings of self-blame?

First, Richard tries to approach the dominant blamer, the part that's blaming others. He wants the client to get curious about this part. And then Richard will ask this part a very specific question.

Dr. Schwartz: "What are you afraid would happen if you didn't blame everybody else?"

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First the younger will say the usual, which is, "I blame everybody else because they're really at fault."

"Okay, but what are you afraid would happen if you didn't allow him to look at himself at all?"

And it will say, "If I did, he might be suicidal/he might go drink again.

Sometimes terrible would happen because he would feel so bad about himself if I ever let him blame himself."

And so I would say, "Okay. I get it. And we're going to be real careful with that, and we're not going to invite you to change until you're clear that that's not going to happen. But would you give us permission to work with some of these other parts that can make him feel so bad, so that that isn't such a danger?" So, some

version of that.

Dr. Buczynski: At this point, Richard turns his focus toward the inner critic.

Now, Richard says there's a good reason why you should approach these protective parts first before approaching the other parts, the parts that are hurt. If we just try to go directly for the shame or the pain or the terror, it could trigger a backlash from the protector parts.

That's why it can be critical to get permission from these protective parts first.

Dr. Schwartz: In this case, I'm going to start with that "blaming everybody else" part, get permission from it to go to the critic, do some work with the critic, and then get permission to go to what *it* protects, heal that, and then come back to those two and help them depolarize.

Sometimes in the depolarization I'm going to have those two talk directly to each other while the client becomes almost like their therapist in a couples session, having them have a better dialogue than they usually do as they try to work things out with each other and find a way to cooperate rather than to fight that way.

Dr. Buczynski: That's an interesting way to look at how to treat the emotions that give blame its power. The client as therapist, guiding these protective parts into a more understanding relationship.

To quickly review, **when a client is struggling with this kind of a push-and-pull between an inner critic and a need to blame others, here's one way to approach it:**

1. Ask the blaming part what it fears would happen if it didn't blame others.
2. Ask the blaming part for permission to work with the inner critic.
3. Work with the inner critic and get permission to approach the parts that it's protecting.
4. Work with the hurt parts that are being protected by the inner critic.
5. Come back to the blaming part and the inner critic and help them to find a better, healthier way to work together.

Now, as I mentioned, the example Richard used was of a blaming client who also had grandiosity and narcissism. Dan Siegel also touched on narcissism when he looked at the brain science of blame at the top of this program.

So I felt this was an issue we should specifically look at, especially in how it can relate to blame.

Because what can often be the case is that clients who struggle with narcissism can also be heavily invested in blaming others for their problems.

So what are some other ways we can work with this?

According to Dr. Christine Padesky, there's a certain twist to how you treat this population that can have very effective results.

Dr. Padesky: People with narcissistic personality disorder generally only come to therapy when they're depressed, when

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something's broken down in their system of success or, you know, where maybe their marriage has fallen apart, or they've been booted out of a job or something like that. So they've usually had some kind of crash in their life and that's what brings them into therapy: they're feeling depressed – they want to feel better.

Dr. Buczynski: Now, just an interesting side note about something Christine has found in her work: She says that you can often work best with narcissistic personality disorder when the client is also in a depressed state.

Ok, getting back to the narcissism-blame connection, Christine relates a story of one client who presented this particular issue in their session.

Christine's client was a salesman. And when I say salesman I mean very "Glengarry Glen Ross". His goal was to always be "numero uno" and leave everyone else in the dust.

Dr. Padesky: He would come into the session; one day he came in and said, "Wow – I really knocked it out of the park this month. I got the best sales records. No one in my company will ever meet those records. I am just – those other people are such idiots – I'm such a good salesman."

And as a therapist, what do you do with that?

A very helpful thing to do with that is to align with it and say, "Wow, that's great. That's so good that you did that. Maybe what we should talk about today is how you can handle it when you're *not* on top and when you're *not* the best – because I know when things are going your way, everything's okay for you. But since I'm here as your therapist, let's talk about how hard it is for you when you're *not* on top."

Dr. Buczynski: Did you catch that? That simple suggestion is the small twist that can help break the way narcissism fuels a blaming pattern.

So why is this strategy so effective?

Dr. Padesky: People with narcissistic personality get very annoyed when you do this because they don't want to think about those times when they're not on top. But if you persist to it, you can get them around to it.

"Underneath narcissism is a deep sense of worthlessness and this drive to be on top."

What's going on here is often, underneath narcissism is a deep sense of worthlessness and there's this drive to be on top because there's a sense "If I'm not on top then I'm a flop."

So what you want to do is activate that system where they might feel worthless, because a goal, a long-term goal in the treatment of narcissistic personality is to help them feel good about themselves based on internal satisfaction rather than on external praise. And so you need to keep bringing them back to that point.

Dr. Buczynski: That right there is the crux of the issue. When a client can shift their sense of well-being so it's being fed internally rather than by others' approval, it can lower their tendency to blame.

So one way to make this shift happen is to first align with the client when they're showing signs of narcissistic thinking. Then we want to help them to understand that most people aren't going to praise them all the time or give them constant recognition.

At the end of that part of the work, we would then want the client to take in a really important message.

Dr. Padesky: “Wouldn’t it be nice if you could feel good, and relaxed, and happy with yourself even if other people weren’t recognizing the good things you did, even if other people weren’t praising you? That would give you so much more freedom, because right now in a way you’re a slave to other people’s feedback; your mood goes up and down depending on how they’re seeing you.”

That is an appealing message, and actually clients who are in therapy who have some openness to doing therapy, who are narcissistic, once you get them to acknowledge and begin talking about this inner worthlessness that they feel, they actually can be quite good clients and can work quite hard and make changes that lead them to, by end of treatment, not be narcissistic anymore.

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Dr. Buczynski: And when the narcissism goes down, the need to blame others can go with it.

This strategy can help a client feel more comfortable with turning their focus inward. And that’s important because again, clients with narcissistic tendencies are often overly-focused on the external.

Christine will be back to share another practical strategy for working with blame when the client has Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. Be sure to check that out in the bonus section of this program.

Now in the next video, we’ll look at how rigid thought patterns can keep a person stuck inside a blame spiral. I’ll see you there.