

# How to Work with Clients Who Blame

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

### Part 2: How to Reverse Black-and-White Thinking That Drives a Client's Blame

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## How to Reverse Black-and-White Thinking That Drives a Client's Blame

**Dr. Buczynski:** How do we help people who only see blame as having one of two directions: either this way, or that way.

Have you seen this in your practice? A situation where either someone *else* must be to blame for the problem, or the client has to admit that *they* are the ones 100% in the wrong. And that would feel terrible.

For these clients, there's no gray area in how the blame gets assigned. And it's this kind of rigid thinking that can lead to so many problems.

**Ms. Lyons:** When a parent is in front of me and I start talking about a parent's role in the anxious child's behavior, that's where I'll get that. That's that black-and-white thinking that comes up. It's sort of, "So you just think I should not do anything? Is that what you're saying? Okay. Everything I'm doing is wrong – right?" You know, that sort of presentation.

I just sort of sit back and will say, "Well, no, that's not what I was saying, so let me try that again."

**Dr. Buczynski:** That's Lynn Lyons. And she's describing how crucial it can be to language your thoughts in a way that won't be triggering for people with rigid thinking.

**Ms. Lyons:** Very gently and slowly [we] say, "You know what? I totally expect this response because I just made you feel so defensive. Let me back up. You heard me say you're doing it all wrong; but one of the things we're going to work on is that black-and-white thinking that you're either to blame or it's somebody else's fault."

**Dr. Buczynski:** By bringing careful awareness to her language, Lynn is normalizing the client's feelings and rebuilding trust. But if you'll notice, she's also modeling for the client the exact skill she wants to help them learn: taking responsibility without taking blame.

You see, clients who fall prey to this kind of black-and-white-right-or-wrong thinking can often struggle with reactivity.

And one of the things that can set off this defensiveness is the subtext that may be behind the blame. In other words, "If I admit I'm at fault, I might be seen as someone who makes purposeful choices that harm others."

**Ms. Lyons:** The other concept I really want to work on is the idea that *responsibility* doesn't mean *intent*. You can do something wrong, make a mistake, own up to it, and be responsible for that, but it doesn't have to go with blaming.

**"Responsibility doesn't mean *intent*."**

With your kids, if I'm going to say to you, "I really need you to let him do more things on his own" and you come back at me with "So now I shouldn't even be a parent – right? That's what you're saying? Yes, just let him do whatever he wants. How about we get rid of bedtimes too – right? Is that what you think?" There it is. There's the black-and-white thinking.

“What I’m saying to you is, the fact that your child right now is sleeping in your bed and he’s ten, this is going to be your responsibility to fix. You didn’t do this with intent. You didn’t set out nine years ago to say, “You know what I want? I want an anxious kid that can only sleep in my bed.” Let’s talk about what you’re responsible for *and* what your child’s responsible for, but let’s get rid of the blame in the intent. A lot of things happen like that.”

**Dr. Buczynski:** That can be a crucial differentiation for our clients to make. For some people, responsibility and blame are interchangeable. But in reality, nothing could be further from the truth.

“You can do something wrong, make a mistake, own up to it, and be responsible for that, but it doesn’t have to go with blaming.”

And this could be one area to help clients start to shift away from a blaming mindset. Instead of “this is your fault” or “you’re to blame”, we can help them move closer to “This is your responsibility.”

**Ms. Lyons:** I think that can be a tricky line to walk, but when I’m working with parents who are going to feel defensive, particularly when I say, “Look, if it’s nature, it’s you; if it’s nurture, it’s you with this anxiety thing. We’re all in it together,” they feel defensive. I want to help them differentiate between responsibility and intent. I want them to *parent* with that thought too. So that does seem to unhinge it a little bit.

**Dr. Buczynski:** Now, there’s one more principle that goes along with this idea of intent versus responsibility. And that’s how a client owns up to a mistake when they’re at fault or have some accountability in the matter.

See, blamers aren’t always known as being great with apologizing. They can sometimes see an apology as a kind of personal failure.

Lynn sees this as an area to put in some work.

**Ms. Lyons:** I’ll say to people, “Apologizing is an enormously helpful skill to have, and per all reports you haven’t developed it very well yet, which was no fault of your own. I don’t know why you don’t know how to apologize, and maybe nobody modeled it for you, but here’s the good news: let’s figure this out. Let’s work on that.”

What’s somebody going to say? They’re not going to say, “I am not willing to learn how to apologize,” you know. Except for those [with] personality disorders where [they’re] like, “Well, nothing’s my fault anyway so why should I have to learn how to apologize?” That’s when you sort of sit back and take a sip of tea.

**Dr. Buczynski:** Ok, let’s just quickly review Lynn’s **three areas of focus when working with blame**:

1. Try to disrupt rigid black-and-white thinking.
2. Help the client see the difference between responsibility and intent.
3. Help the client learn how to apologize.

You can hear more from Lynn when she joins Dr. Christine Padesky as they look at how to work with blame when it’s linked to obsessive compulsive disorder. Again, that’s in the bonus section of the program so I hope you’ll check it out.

But right now, I want to broaden the conversation a bit on this idea of responsibility versus blame.

So here's Dr. Kelly McGonigal, with an alternative way to think about this.

**Dr. McGonigal:** What I was thinking about was not so much parenting, but how often people feel resentful when they have to take responsibility for something when it technically isn't their fault.

This is something that I'm more likely to hear in terms of trying to activate positive change, say, in your life or in an environment.

One thing I find useful to think about is who should take responsibility for something is not always who *was* responsible for it in the past, but if you *choose* responsibility, as sort of an act of self-empowerment, either because you have the resources, you are the one in the situation who has the resources to effect positive change, or because you are the one in the situation who most wants the results.

**Dr. Buczynski:** That right there can make the difference. By voluntarily taking on responsibility, the client could be setting the gears in motion to bring about more positive change.

When it's put that way, owning responsibility can be less about owning blame and more about finding effective ways to promote healing.

**Dr. McGonigal:** This can actually be very empowering for people, where you can look at the situation and say, "I shouldn't be the one who has to do this. I shouldn't be the one who has to speak out. I shouldn't be the one who has to spend time on it. I shouldn't be the one who has to clean up other people's messes."

"Even if you aren't the source of the issue, there are a lot of situations in which you can be the source of positive change because you're taking responsibility."

But then think, "Do I have resources and do I want results?"

Know that in a lot of situations, even if you aren't the *source* of it, there are a lot of situations in which you can be the source of positive change because you're taking responsibility, and to use your resources so that you can produce results.

What's great about that is, even if it's in a situation like a relationship, where you're doing this and it *doesn't* work out, or, say, you're doing this in a workplace setting and you're trying to take responsibility and you don't get the change you want, you've now practiced a way of being that.

So, when you find yourself in the next environment or the next relationship, you've actually practiced being proactive and trying to create the types of relationship or the types of processes and norms that *you* want to see in your own sort of world around you.

It's like a "Be the change you want to see in the world" mentality, towards taking responsibility rather than assigning blame.

**Dr. Buczynski:** I like that way of looking at the issue: be the change that you yourself want to see in others.

And sometimes, just taking action can help the clients shift away from a focus on the content of the blame. That way they can better focus on effective solutions.

"It's like a *Be the change you want to see in the world* mentality, towards taking responsibility rather than assigning blame."

To help drive this point home, Dr. Joan Borysenko will often share a story with her clients. It's a Buddhist teaching tale called "Who Shot the Arrow?"

**Dr. Borysenko:** The Buddha used this tale when somebody wanted to criticize him and blame him for not giving certain teachings.

He said, "What if a man was shot by a poisoned arrow, and before he let the physician come and look at him, he had to know who shot the arrow, how old they were, where their parents came from, what they were after, what color their hair was..." - you know, all of these things. Before he figured out all of these circumstances that caused the shooting of the arrow, he'd be dead already from the poison.

And so the idea is, "What do I need to do, practically, that will bring this situation to the best fruition?" And in the Buddhist case, he's really asking somebody, "What do you need in order to be free inside and to feel kindly and compassionate toward yourself and others?"

***"What do I need to do, practically, that will bring this situation to the best fruition?"***

And I think this is a great thing to ask people: "How do you feel in that kind of situation? And based on your own experience, is it helpful when someone blames you? And what's a better, more practical way to do things so that it doesn't matter who shot the arrow; it doesn't matter who's to blame – what matters is what can we do now, to create the best possible situation?" And people will often understand that very well.

**Dr. Buczynski:** As we've heard, there can be a lot to gain for the client if they're able to take on some ownership of the problem. It can often lead to feelings of empowerment which can help reduce the blaming of the self and of others.

In the next module, we'll hear from Terry Real who will look at this in a slightly different way. He'll share how to help clients who can get bound to a very unhealthy kind of hope. And this will lead us into a new set of expert strategies to help break the patterns that can lead clients to blame.

That's next, in module four. I'll see you there.