

How to Work with Clients Who Blame

Module 4: Practical Strategies to Help Clients Break Blaming Patterns

Part 1: How to Disrupt Blame in Rigid Thinkers

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How to Disrupt Blame in Rigid Thinkers

Mr. Real: “You’re on a seesaw. You know, everybody is on a seesaw. They’ve got 3000lbs of weight around their waist and they’re saying to the therapist, ‘Could you get that person down from up there? I don’t know what she’s doing hanging up there.’ And your big news is, ‘Why don’t you take off some of the weight on *your* belt and see if that changes not *her* but the seesaw – the interaction between the two of you.’”

Dr. Buczynski: How do we help clients get curious about the patterns that could be supporting their blaming of others? And then, how do we help them reverse those patterns?

You just heard Terry Real. Now, Terry often sees blamers as having a core flaw in their way of thinking.

As Terry sees it, it often boils down to one person holding an essentialist point of view of the other.

Let’s pull that apart a bit.

When a client sees a problem in an essentialist way, they believe that it’s *who* the other person IS that’s the problem.

In other words, “my wife is just this kind of person” or “my husband was raised to be this way”. See, it’s the essential nature of the person that’s to blame for all the problems in the relationship.

This can also reveal a lack of understanding of what some call Dependent Origination. This is where we look at all our behavior as being based on factors and forces.

Dr. R. Siegel: When I’m blaming you, I have the implicit assumption that if I had your DNA, and I had your exact learning history, I wouldn’t have done that. But of course if I had your DNA and your learning history, I’d be *you* – so of course I *would* have done that.

There can be a time – and of course we have to do this delicately and not just go in in a heavy, intellectual way – but a way to start coaxing people toward seeing, “What are the factors and forces you think might have made this other person who you’re blaming so much do what they did?”

Dr. Buczynski: Again, this can take time because it can be very difficult for essentialist thinkers to wrap their heads around this concept.

By only looking at the effect and not the cause, essentialist thinkers can easily set themselves up for difficult patterns of blame.

Mr. Real: A guy comes in and goes, “My wife won’t have sex with me.” “Why won’t she?” “I don’t know – she’s just a frigid person. You know, her mother’s cold. Her grandmother was cold. She’s just a cold person.” That’s an essentialist position: “She’s essentially cold.”

I bring the wife in: “How come you don’t want to make love to your husband?” “Well, he’s a terrible lover. He won’t talk to me about sex; he just does what he does and then when he’s finished he rolls over. I mean, *you* wouldn’t want to make love to him either.”

Dr. Buczynski: So we can see how this “essentialist” viewpoint can trap someone in a blaming stance. This point of view can make it difficult, if not near-impossible for this type of client to believe that anything they do could ever make a difference.

So how can we help the client see otherwise? Sometimes it just takes an appropriate dose of reality.

Mr. Real: Then I bring the guy back in, I have her say all this, and it’s like, “Knock, knock. Here’s the news: *you* have something to do with this.” And it’s *news!* And it’s often *shocking* news to the person. But it’s also hopeful news: “You have something to do with this. If you change your behavior, maybe the dance will change between the two of you.”

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Dr. Buczynski: That right there is an important part of the work. It’s demonstrating to the client that yes, they have a role in the problem. But it isn’t simply about re-assigning blame or even re-assessing responsibility.

It’s much more about fostering hope.

And this can make a real difference because it’s a kind of hope that’s unlike the kind of hope that the client may have been currently living with.

“We all have *relentless hope*: we think that we’re going to be healed when the son of a gun gives us what we didn’t get from our parents.”

Mr. Real: We all have what Martha Stark a psychiatrist here in Boston called *relentless hope*: we think that we’re going to be healed when the son of a gun gives to us what we didn’t get from our parents – right? That’s what we want: we want to *get* it out of them. And when they don’t give it to us, it’s *their* fault.

Real healing comes not when I avoid the old drama, but when I find myself in the old drama and *I* do something different in it – *Real* healing comes not when I avoid the old drama, but when I find myself in the old drama and *I* do something different in it –

because “I can do it now. You’re not my mother. You have resources my mother didn’t have. And I’m not that little boy; I have resources that little boy didn’t have. And if *I* do something different, then lo and behold *you* do something different.” And that’s the real healing. That’s the real mysticism of marriage. You have to swallow that bitter pill that says, “You know what? I’ve met the enemy It’s not her!”

Dr. Buczynski: Of course, some of this work with blame can take time, especially when the client has a deep blaming history in their family. Or if the blame is fueled by shame or the client feels that there’s been a boundary violation.

And this can get even more complicated when the client also presents issues of grandiosity.

Mr. Real: Most therapists do not deal particularly effectively with issues of grandiosity. Put it on the table: “Look – you’re blaming. This is called blaming. You’re saying that your bad behavior is her responsibility. It is completely laid on her doorstep. Let me tell you something about that: that’s nuts. You can’t do that and have a healthy relationship.”

This is how I talk to people. I’m very straightforward. “Who taught you how to do this growing up?” And I guarantee you, 99 percent somebody will say, “Oh, my God. It was my mother. She blamed my father till the cows came home.” “Okay. Well, that’s your template for how to handle yourself in a relationship. It’s going

to burn out your relationship. Let's see if we can change it."

Dr. Buczynski: Ok, so sometimes it can be helpful to just call out the blame. Be real straight with the client and show them how their blame may be impacting their life.

Then from there we can move into treatment.

Mr. Real: First, I name it. I confront it with love and respect. Then I talk about the negative consequences if they continue to do it. Then I go back in the family of origin and find out where it came from. Then it's that same separation: "Look; you're a decent person. You know, this blaming thing that you've fallen into because you learned it from your family, that's not you. That's not the best of you. You can do better than that. Will you let me help you extricate yourself from all of this blame and learn how to do this differently? Speak from the 'I'; speak about your *own* feeling. Take responsibility for yourself and don't shift responsibility onto your partner. Come on – you can do this. I'll teach you. I'll stand with you every step of the way."

Again, people do. "Fine. I'll do it. Teach me how to do it." It's about shifting some of these grandiose behaviors from being egosyntonic – something the client is comfortable with, to being egodystonic – "Oh, God – I don't want to do that." Once they say that, they're yours.

Dr. Buczynski: If we can help shift the client out of essentialist thinking, we can begin to help them think more systemically. And this can start to shatter those old patterns of blame.

In the next video we'll look a little deeper at the true costs of blame and how to reduce the consequences to the client.

I'll see you there.