

# How to Work with Clients Who Blame

## Module 4: Practical Strategies to Help Clients Break Blaming Patterns

### Part 2: Helping Clients Avoid Blame Traps

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## How to Work with Clients Who Blame: Practical Strategies to Help Clients Break Blaming Patterns

### Helping Clients Avoid Blame Traps

**Dr. Buczynski:** How do we help clients see the true consequences of their blame? And how can we help them avoid those costs by changing their behavior?

Dr. Kelly McGonigal uses an interesting technique that she adapted from behavioral economics. And she's found it to be quite effective at reducing a person's reliance on blame.

**Dr. McGonigal:** It's called "Finding the hidden zero." This is when there's some behavior that you engage in that does have some payoff – whether it makes you feel good in the short term, or makes you feel important, or whatever – there's some benefit, short term.

Often, when we're making the decision, when you're looking at that calculation and you think the choice is, "Do I get this payoff – or do I get nothing?" actually you're giving away something when you make that choice. There is a cause, but it's a hidden cause, so it looks like a zero. But it's actually something you're giving away.

**Dr. Buczynski:** You see, every time we blame someone else, it might make us feel better but it can also cost us something.

Now to help clients really home in on what they're losing by sticking with the blame, Kelly suggests asking a few key questions.

Questions like: What is the cost of this behavior? What are you sacrificing? And, when you choose this, what are you saying you are willing to give up? You can also ask the client: What are you putting in jeopardy with your choice to blame?

**Dr. McGonigal:** "Maybe the outcome hasn't happened yet, but when you choose, say, to blame your partner, what are you putting at risk? And what are the harmful side effects or aftershocks? What's not necessarily the immediate outcome, but have you seen an outcome later on that maybe you're not really paying attention to?"

Then, you can make that list and really ask yourself, "Does the benefit that you're getting outweigh the costs or the harm of what you're putting at risk?"

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**Dr. Buczynski:** What Kelly has found in the research is that even if someone's behavior doesn't change immediately, if they go through this process, it starts a shift. It starts to subtly change the decision-making process.

And the hope is that later on, the client will be more likely to make the decision that is consistent with what they value most.

**Dr. McGonigal:** The brain is always making these calculations, sometimes outside of our conscious awareness, so you need to give your brain a sort of a better evaluation of the choice that you're making.

**Dr. Buczynski:** I thought this was an interesting way to get underneath a client's focus on finding fault with others.

You see, some clients can see the benefits they're getting from their blame, because it's often an immediate result. You know, "It makes me feel more in control" or "it keeps the other person from criticizing me."

But that's where the idea of Kelly's hidden zero strategy really comes into play.

You see, clients aren't always aware of the real-world costs that are attached to their blame. Like, they might be shrinking their social circle when they blame others, or their partner could end up shutting down more and sharing less in the relationship.

Or their blame could even be costing them customers. This was the scenario with one client who was working with Dr. Zindel Segal.

**Dr. Segal:** People would come into his store and be very demanding, and his first tendency was to blame them or to say, "Look, I don't need your business. Just get out of here. We're done" – sometimes a little bit harsher than that.

**Dr. Buczynski:** Zindel's client, for all intents and purposes, was a very nice guy. And that was the problem. You see, people would sometimes take advantage of his niceness.

This client ran a printing company. And what would often end up happening is customers would make requests that he wasn't always prepared to fulfill.

And this would lead him into some pretty strong feelings of blame and resentment.

**Dr. Segal:** They would have people who would come in and be very, very demanding and often agreed to a certain proof of an invitation but come in and then say that "I didn't agree with this," and this person would need to reprint invitations. It became a little bit, you know, the customer service function that he was able to provide really started to degrade because he felt that people were taking advantage of him.

**Dr. Buczynski:** What Zindel discovered in their work together was that his client had a certain blame pattern that led to a lot of problems in his life.

See, not only did it affect his business, but it affected his other relationships as well.

**Dr. Segal:** Initially when he was dating he would be a very nice guy; he would be very accommodating, very chivalrous, but then eventually the relationship would sour and he would end up blaming or being very castigating of the people that he was sort of close to, feeling like they'd taken advantage of him. So there was some consistency in different situations.

**Dr. Buczynski:** Zindel's client was stuck in a cycle of blame and he didn't have the tools to break out of it.

What ultimately helped him to make a shift was a practice that has helped so many people gain control of painful emotions like blame.

I'm talking about mindfulness.

But Zindel knew that if mindfulness was going to help in this situation, it was going to require dedication.

“We were able to develop this kind of joint capacity for observation and for noticing.”

**Dr. Segal:** He wasn't a big fan of sitting meditation but he enjoyed walking meditation. So he treated it as a formal practice.

In the morning or at lunch he would find a place where he could walk for about 20 minutes – not in bare feet but in stockinged feet in his warehouse. He used that to start to train his attention, focusing on the body, focusing on the movement of the mind away from the body. And so we were able to use that to develop this kind of joint capacity for observation and for noticing.

**Dr. Buczynski:** Once the client was able to build up that capacity, he could then start to use it in his interactions with others. Instead of exploding with a “I don't need your business!”, he could now allow the anger and resentment to come in. He could stay with it a little bit and start to take notice of his sensations.

**Dr. Segal:** He would often describe a kind of feeling of flushing in his face, a little bit of heat; he would have thoughts passing through his mind related to people trying to take advantage of him; he's not going to be able to make money if he has to continually reprint invitations that cost him; *why are these people not satisfied?*

**Dr. Buczynski:** But then came the breakthrough. Through his mindfulness practice, Zindel's client made a discovery. He realized that his resentment often rose up because he wasn't able to properly convey boundaries. He was stuck in the space between wanting to produce a high-quality product and not wanting to constantly give in to demands.

**Dr. Segal:** Once he was able to clarify what for him was a threshold of integrity that he felt he was able to get behind, it made it easier for him to deal with a lot of these requests coming through his workplace because he felt like there was a business ethic that he could evoke for himself and his behavior versus feeling that what people were asking of him was a personal request to continually submit to what they wanted.

In some cases he was able to be cooperative and to work with people to change things; in other cases he felt like he could say, “You know what? This is really the best that I can do for you,” and felt okay about making a decision on that basis.

**Dr. Buczynski:** Zindel's client was able to create a set of boundaries, a professional threshold that kept in line with both his ethics and his need to run a successful business.

This helped him to define the “red line” that he wouldn't be willing to cross. He could now feel like he had more agency in his reactions, like he didn't have to give in to that “all or nothing” point of view that was feeding his blame. And there was an even greater benefit to this change.

**Dr. Segal:** It also was helpful because it allowed him to ally himself with some values, and those values were something that he generated, that he could then feel a little bit more of a consistency in trying to live by.

**Dr. Buczynski:** When clients can establish these kinds of boundaries in life, basically what they will and will not accept, it can help bring down their tendency to blame.

In the next video, we'll look at four practical strategies that can unravel blame when the problem actually IS the other person.

I'll see you there.