

# How to Work with Clients Who Blame

## Module 5: Blame and Relationships

### Part 1: How to Work with Blame That Poisons Intimate Relationships

with Stan Tatkin, PsyD, MFT; Ron Siegel, PsyD; Richard Schwartz, PhD;  
and Ruth Buczynski, PhD

National Institute for the Clinical  
Application of Behavioral Medicine





## How to Work with Clients Who Blame: Blame and Relationships

### How to Work with Blame That Poisons Intimate Relationships

**Dr. Buczynski:** How do we neutralize the sort of angry blaming that threatens to tear apart our client's relationships?

See, when a couple gets caught in a blame cycle, it can be very difficult for them to get out of it.

One of the reasons for this is that people can often see the other person's behavior as more of a symptom that just needs to be fixed.

**Dr. Tatkin:** The wanting to change another person is diagnostic.

For one thing, it shows a developmental delay and a lack of social-emotional complexity. Perhaps it shows a problem with insight and being psychologically minded. *Worse* than that, it's a sign of poor theory of mind.

The theory of mind is a function of the orbital frontal area, the temporoparietal junction, and the insula. There are a lot of areas involved here and they may not be working properly; or there may have been an environmental deficit here in terms of theory of mind, meaning the parents didn't have one.

Theory of mind means that *I* have a mind and I'm curious about it, which then leads to recognizing that *you* have a mind and I'm curious about *your* mind.

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People without theory of mind cannot do diaries. They cannot imagine what it's like to be another person, and they can't put themselves in the other person's shoes. This is not a defense, this is a deficit. They never could do it and that could be a big problem.

**Dr. Buczynski:** Now real quick, theory of mind sounds similar to the idea of mentalizing, which we covered with Peter Fonagy in module 2. Yes, they're both metacognitive processes, but they do have differences.

For one, mentalization looks more at a person's ability to understand emotional and mental states in both themselves and in others. While theory of mind can be seen as more focused on understanding internal states as they relate to things like beliefs, intentions and persuasions.

With couples, we assume that they know each other well enough that they would have some ability to have this deeper curiosity of mind.

**Dr. Tatkin:** Ruling that out, we have regular old immaturity of people not being able to tolerate their own pain, not being able to see themselves, and operating in an insecure fashion where "It must be good for me and if it's not good for you, sorry." So that is the case with people who are in pain.

When we're suffering, and we're suffering in a relationship, we tend to come up with our theories. Our theories tend to be pro-self and not pro-relationship.

**Dr. Buczynski:** That right there can be key to understanding how blame can start to cause decay in a relationship.

The formula is simple. See, I'm in pain so I blame you. You probably blame me back. And then the problem becomes more about me getting my pain soothed and less about us repairing our relationship.

And this focus on the self can be expressed in two different ways. It can either be "you're the problem, I'm annoyed, you should change" or it can be "I'M the problem, I'm a terrible person, you should leave me".

Either of those scenarios are unworkable. We become *victims* of crime instead of *partners* in crime.

The trick of course is to get the client to be more relationship-focused. We want them to see how the behavior is affecting the relationship and what might be some ways to fix that.

So what would be some ways to fix that?

**Dr. Tatkin:** Partners who are in therapy, and individuals who are blaming each other or wanting the other person to change, have to be seen first as acting out possibly. If there is acting out, you can't do therapy. You have to confront the fact that partners are not collaborative with each other and especially that they are not collaborative with you, the therapist, or the therapy. They don't understand the task of therapy which is to work on the *relationship*, not *each other*. So that's vital.

"If there is acting out,  
you can't do therapy."

Therapists often don't recognize acting out and try to do workarounds or runs around that. It makes them feel and look incompetent because what's center-stage is not a therapy issue, it's a "We don't seem to understand why we're doing this" issue and "How this works and that we have to be on the same page with regard to task."

**Dr. Buczynski:** This is an important point that ties into the two different focuses on self and relationship.

See, there's often a simple confusion that can come into play here. People can confuse what they don't like about the other person with how they both are able to function as a unit.

So what you can get is two people who won't change, or can't change. And that's fine. But what they may need to change is the way in which they work together.

**Dr. Tatkin:** People in couple relationships biologically - *psychobiologically* - should be in each other's care, not their own; therefore the best way for me to influence, seduce, persuade, and cajole you is through attraction and knowing you better than I know myself.

I am a Ruth whisperer. That's because I study you. That's because it's important. That's because I pay attention, and you do the same with me. We can shift and change each other because we're good handlers - good managers of each other.

**Dr. Buczynski:** This can help explain why some couples get stuck in a blaming loop that never seems to unravel. To get right down to it, they're often just inept at dealing with each other. They're simply not good managers of each other. And there can be several reasons for this.

**Dr. Tatkin:** One, they don't pay attention and never found the "baby" in their partner. The reason is because they don't care. Nobody ever did it with them and they never thought they had to do that, so they don't do it. They want it *done* to them, but they don't do it. They don't figure out the other person.

“Most everybody is predictable.”

Everyone’s predictable – most everybody. There are some people who aren’t, but most everybody is predictable. Most everybody suffers from at least one or two, but never more than three, areas of vulnerability from childhood that will never go away.

I always felt like I was stupid. Even as I get older I have enough evidence to show I’m not stupid, but yet around people that are very important to me I’m back to feeling stupid again if I’m ineffective.

That never goes away. My partner knows this, and she knows how to run interference. She knows how to maneuver me if I do a shame spiral – right? I know what gets to her. We’re experts on each other; we’re good at each other. That makes us feel more loving, trusting, and accepting of each other because that’s irreplaceable.

**Dr. Buczynski:** Ok, so when couples are blaming each other, it could be that there’s an underlying relationship-management problem.

To sum up the way Stan looks at this issue, let’s just review his three theories on working with blame and relationships.

**Dr. Tatkin:** One, people don’t change. Two, if they are going to change, they don’t do it at the end of a gun, ever. People only change when they’re resourced. Resourced means out of secure functioning which means “I accept you as you are.” So there we are back again.

Then there’s this common problem of “When I’m in pain, I don’t think of the relationship as a problem – I think it’s you. You’re the problem.”

“People only change when they’re resourced.”

**Dr. R. Siegel:** I thought Stan put it quite nicely; he said, “We rarely change when a gun is pointed to us, at our head. We tend to change when we feel sufficiently safe and resourced so that we can risk changing a little bit.”

In many ways it’s like an individual therapy, only we’ve got to think of two people’s needs simultaneously: “What’s going to make *each one* of these people be able to feel held and be able to feel safe enough so that they would risk moving toward their pain?”

This has to do with normalizing it, normalizing the wish to be loved – we talked about it – and also making sense out of it historically. To actually literally ask, “When in the past did you not get what you needed? When in the past were you in a situation like this where you were afraid it wouldn’t be forthcoming?” Or simply, “When in the past did you have a feeling like this feeling that you’re having right here and now?”

And often that will lead to the childhood referent for it, or some other peer interaction or family interaction in which the person really had this feeling of, “Oh” – this desperate longing not being carried for them.

**Dr. Buczynski:** Now, I just want to circle back for a minute to something Stan said about childhood vulnerabilities. And I want to tie that in to some of the parts work that we got into with Dick Schwartz in module 3.

The backstory of Dick’s case study is that he was seeing a husband and wife who were suffering through a lot of misery in their relationship. The husband had a narcissistic personality and he just heaped blame onto his wife throughout their marriage. The wife, at this point, had completely shut down.

Dick could see that the husband was giving himself over to a protective part that was fueling all his blame. So he decided to work with him separately.

“I’m getting him in a more mindful state in which he can not only observe it, be separate from it, and observe it the way mindfulness does, but also begin a dialogue with it.”

Now keep in mind what we covered earlier about the symbiotic relationship between narcissism and blame. So when Dick got to the point where he asks about the role of the protective part, the husband gave him a very interesting answer.

**Dr. Schwartz:** He was willing to focus on that part and he liked it. It wasn’t a matter of getting parts he hated to step back. When I asked him how he felt toward it, he said, “I like it. I depend on it. I would feel very weak without it. I use it at work. It has a way of intimidating people and I like that. Maybe it’s not the best thing for my marriage.”

Then I had him ask the part who liked it so much and felt so dependent on it to step back too, so he could get curious about it.

We’re talking like mindfulness now. I’m getting him in a more mindful state in which he can not only observe it, be separate from it, and observe it the way mindfulness does, but also begin a dialogue with it.

**Dr. Buczynski:** An essential part of these types of interventions is to get the client in a more mindful state.

Because only then are we able to bring more awareness to the part that’s causing so much havoc.

Once that’s established, Dick has more runway to be able to ask the all-important question: “What are you afraid would happen if you didn’t blame everybody else?”

**Dr. Schwartz:** . It pointed to times in his life when he was being constantly berated by his father and hit with a belt and felt powerless. This part, during that time, decided he was never going to be powerless again. It took on some of that blaming energy of his father to protect him *from* his father. When he was an older teenager he would get into physical fights with his father – coming from this part. This part had sworn it would never let anybody dominate him again.

**Dr. Buczynski:** So it was this childhood vulnerability that had followed him all his life and had taken over all his adult relationships.

As Stan Tatkin shared with us earlier, this can be a big part of the recipe for a distressed marriage.

Ok so now that we’ve gotten to the underlying vulnerability, it can be critical for the practitioner to make something very clear. They need to make sure the client’s protective part feels very appreciated for the job that it thinks it was doing all this time.

Once the client feels validated, we can then move to the next step: updating the client’s protective part.

**Dr. Schwartz:** One of the things we’ll often ask these parts is, “Ask the part how old it thinks you are, Rick.” Generally, the answer is in single digits; these parts think you’re still eight years old. When I had him say, “No, I’m not eight years old anymore, I’m actually 52 and run a company,” the part was amazed. It had no idea.

Just that updating of it ... and it doesn’t have to keep protecting him now [because] he’s not under the thumb of his father anymore. It doesn’t have to keep doing this with anybody that is in any way a threat to him. [This] really helped that blaming part relax more. Then we could go to the boy who was still stuck in the scene of being beaten with a belt, get him out, and help him heal. Then this blaming part sort of started

taking a backseat to his self.

**Dr. Buczynski:** A lot of the work that Dick is doing here is helping the client's self take back control from all the protective and hurt parts.

That way the self can become more of a leader, both internally and externally.

What this means is, at least for Dick's client, he could interact in healthier ways with both his wife as well as his employees. He could now lead from an openhearted place rather than from this one part that was always on the lookout for incoming blame.

**Dr. Schwartz:** When we do couples work we're striving to get people to speak from self to self, and to have self-to-self communication, rather than have these protective parts doing all the talking. I asked to be the "parts detector."

When they start to get into their protectors stop everything and have them ask those parts to step back then come back when you can speak when your heart's more open. I did that kind of practice with the two of them. I still see them, but they're doing much, much better now.

**Dr. Buczynski:** So this is one way to help couples work through issues of blame.

A takeaway here is that sometimes a hurt or vulnerable part can really gum up the gears in a secure functioning relationship. If we can help to heal that part, we can help improve the way a couple works together.

In the next video, we'll look at how to work with the body to help a relationship that's stuck in blame.

I'll see you there.