How to Work with Clients Who Blame

Module 5: Blame and Relationships

Part 2: A Bottom-Up Approach to Restore a Relationship Shattered by Blame

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Blame and Relationships

A Bottom-Up Approach to Restore a Relationship Shattered by Blame

Dr. Buczynski: What can we learn from the physical patterns of people who are suffering in a blame-filled relationship?

One of the greater challenges of our work is dealing with relationships in distress. There's the yelling, the anger, the indignant blaming . . . We give a lot of business to Tylenol.

But no matter how hot things can get in that room, it can be helpful to pay attention to what's happening underneath all the blame.

Dr. Ogden: I think couples *always* come in angry and upset about the other person's behavior – not about their behavior but about their partner's behavior. When we start to tease that apart, not as a problem but as an implicit dialogue that is happening between the partners, then things start to percolate and shift.

Dr. Buczynski: That's Dr. Pat Ogden. And when she's working with blame, she's often looking for the patterns that the clients *don't* see.

Here's how Pat approached this work with one particular couple. We'll call them Calvin and Emily.

Calvin struggled with anger and he would often unload his anger onto Emily. It got to a point where Emily felt helpless because she felt that Calvin was unable to change.

Now, Calvin did try talk therapy. It helped but it also created a new problem. Instead of expressing his anger, he would now withdraw.

Obviously this didn't work any better for Emily. Of course she didn't want to be yelled at, but she also didn't want a partner who withdraws and isn't present in the relationship.

By the time they came in to see Pat, things were going downhill fast.

Dr. Ogden: They came in with the latest fight. She had come home unexpectedly and he didn't know she was coming home. She was upset that he had other plans for dinner. Why didn't he know and why didn't he talk to her about that?

He exploded. She said, "This always happens." He said, "You were already upset with me when you came home. You didn't even talk to me. You were already angry with me." They started to get lost in the content.

Dr. Buczynski: It was at this point that Pat hit the pause button. She had both of them just sit with their angry emotions. She wanted them to pay attention to their sensations, to what was happening inside of them.

What Pat was looking for was any bodily impulse that they were feeling in that moment.

Dr. Ogden: Calvin actually had an impulse to reach out for her, because deep down of course he just wanted connection. She couldn't respond. She said, "I can't respond to that." She said, "This has happened too many times." She said, "He reaches out – I can't respond."

This was not an intellectual conversation. I asked him to actually reach out to her, because he said he just wanted to connect with her. I said, "Make that gesture." Then *she* pulled back.

Dr. Buczynski: So there was a dialogue happening between the two partners. Problem was, it was coming from a lot of history and old wounds.

When Emily said that she couldn't respond to Calvin's reaching out, it brought up a particular sensation inside of him. And this was the key to undoing the blame cycle that was holding their relationship hostage.

Dr. Ogden: For him, he felt this tension in his belly when she said that. As he stayed with that he said, "This is like this part of me that just explodes all the time."

It was a child part. He was very volatile, couldn't regulate himself, and had these explosive rages. I asked him if he could connect.... if he could put his own hands where he felt that volatility - where he felt that child. He brought his own hands to his belly and right away said, "This is good. This is helpful." Because he could start to soothe that part of him himself that was so volatile and that would erupt with this anger.

Dr. Buczynski: Once Calvin was able to build a sort of centeredness in himself by connecting with that angry impulsive part, Pat asked him to reach out to Emily again.

And this time, Emily was able to reach back.

Dr. Ogden: But we still had some work to do with *her* as well, because what supported her in reaching towards him was her hands spontaneously came to her chest. Whenever the body does something spontaneously – when there's a gesture, or a turning away, or a change in posture – there's meaning there.

We usually think of meaning as being cognitive, but Ed Tronick has taught us there's so many different layers of ways in which we make meaning. In my work, the body is a

very powerful meaning maker.

When Emily's hand came to her chest, I said, "Oh, that's interesting what just happened. Your hand came to your chest. Something is important about that."

"We usually think of meaning as being cognitive, but the **body** is a very powerful meaning maker."

She said, "Yes, that feels good." I said, "We're going a little deeper. Let's find out about that. It's almost as if there's something about that touch that feels good."

Dr. Buczynski: Pat wanted to bring out the message that was underneath that gesture. She wanted to translate the meaning of that touch.

So she asked Emily a very simple question.

Dr. Ogden: "If your hand could speak, what's it saying to you? What's the meaning?"

I wanted it to come from her hand, not from her head.

I wanted her to be mindful and tune into her hand, almost as if she could hear its message. The message was, "It's okay to take care of yourself. You can take care of yourself."

She had grown up in a family where she took care of everybody else. She didn't take care of herself. For her, when one hand was on her chest with that taking care of herself, she could more easily reach back to Calvin.

What was so interesting about this was we all have, I think, these places inside that are wounded and hurt. We come to relationships, I think, sometimes hoping – implicitly if not explicitly – that the other person will take care of these parts of ourselves. That doesn't always work.

Dr. Buczynski: Now if you remember, Terry Real touched on this last part in module four, this idea of "eternal hope". Clients often want their partner to give them what they didn't get from their family of origin. And this can lead to a lot of hurt, fear and blame.

In this instance it was driving a deep wedge in Calvin and Emily's relationship.

Dr. Ogden: He was just allowing that little-boy anger to come out and never tried to soothe it himself. Emily didn't want to soothe it; she didn't enjoy that part of him coming out against her. She was very giving all the time. She didn't take care of herself, which repeated *her* childhood pattern. That didn't soothe the relationship.

With the gesture of her having her hand on the heart with her own sense of self and taking care of herself, and him having his hand on the belly soothing that volatile and angry part of him, they could then execute those proximity-seeking actions successfully.

Dr. Buczynski: This somatic approach started to instill some hope in their relationship.

They went from each wanting the other person to change, to connecting with the part of themselves that *they* needed to be with and change.

"We get there through little physical, emotional, verbal experiments that start to inform us about what's needed in the relationship."

And it was from this place that the two of them were able to meet each other, put aside the blame and work on the relationship.

Dr. Ogden: In sensorimotor psychotherapy we don't get there by talking about it; we get there through little physical, emotional, verbal experiments that start to inform us about what's needed in the relationship. The clients start to execute different actions – physical, mental and emotional – that can support the growth in healing.

Dr. Buczynski: As we heard in this module, a relationship stuck in blame can often have ties to a childhood vulnerability or an unmet need.

Also, to foster the healing process we may have to help the client shift from a focus that's pro-self to one that's pro-relationship.

In the next module, we'll get into how to carry this shift even further when we look at ways to change a blaming mindset into a growth mindset.

I'll see you there.