

Working with Core Beliefs of 'Never Good Enough'

One Exercise to Shift Clients Out of a Self-Judging Mindset

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Dr. Buczynski: How do we help clients who struggle to see their value as a human being?

We've previously talked about the power of strengthening our clients' positive core beliefs—but how do we help clients not only build those beliefs, but also maintain them?

According to Dr. Christine Padesky, it begins by using one simple exercise that can completely change their perspective.

Dr. Padesky: This was a woman who was in her 40s, I think, when she came to me — late 40s — and her whole life she had felt not good enough.

And she had some experiences in childhood with an abusive parent who used to tell her she wasn't good enough in very stark, cruel terms. So, it was not surprising she developed that belief about herself.

And she developed a personality style — we call it *avoidant personality* — where she never revealed herself. She kept quite distant from people and all of this was fueled by this idea that *I'm not good enough*.

When I was working with her and asked her how she would like to see herself, she would have preferred to see herself as a worthwhile human being, and so we began to work on this constructing a new core belief, *I'm worthwhile*.

The first thing we did with the continuum is I drew a continuum, a line from 0 to 100%, and I said, "On this continuum, where do you see yourself?" And she put herself at zero.

Now it's really important in continuum to work with the positive core belief.

We could have had, *I'm not good enough* and *I'm worthwhile* on opposite ends of the continuum, but then if she moved a little bit from 100% *I'm not good enough*, she'd still be in the not-good-enough range.

So, I just make a continuum of the *positive* core belief from worthwhile, from 0 to 100%.

Next, what I frequently do is I have people define what it means to be worthwhile.

What qualities would you have if you were worthwhile?

We then define 100% of those qualities and 0% – and I have her rate herself on what I call *the criteria of worthwhile*.

What's interesting is, when you get people to get more specific – like a worthwhile person is kind to other people – then we would have 100% worthwhile as someone who is always kind to every person on the planet, every minute of their life vs. 0% worthwhile, as someone who never, ever, ever is kind to anybody, no matter what, even if they're in great need.

Then, people are going to come out more in between.

So, we have people construct these criteria, and then they come out more in between, and then it's not a *I gotcha!* exercise – it's really to help people see how core beliefs operate, and I say to them, *what do you notice?*

And they'll say, "I notice that even though I see myself as 0, I see that I'm actually doing a lot of worthwhile things."

And I'll say, "Isn't that interesting. How do you think it gets from, 'I'm doing a lot of worthwhile things,' to 'I'm 0% worthwhile'?"

And then she talked about how any mistake she'd made, she'd go to 0.

So, you can use different metaphors.

With her, we just said, "It's kind of like you're playing a game. You can get points, but any time you make a mistake, you lose all your points. That's going to be a hard game to win."

Then, this sets up the idea of using a core belief log where, in order to begin to maintain and create a container to hold these experiences, I have people start a special diary where, every day, they're going to write down things that are evidence that— in her case — she was worthwhile as a human being.

Now what was interesting – and common – the first week she comes back, she has nothing written down in her diary. Because if you don't have a core belief, you can't see those experiences.

So, then I would interview her about her week, and as she was telling me stories, I would say, "Oh, you said you went out to lunch with a friend to help them out. Do you think that's something a worthwhile person

would do? Could you perhaps write that in your diary?"

And then I would help her develop categories. I would say, "Today we noticed being kind to a friend or helping a friend out is worthwhile. Maybe we should put some questions in your dairy. Like, 'Did I do anything to help someone today? Was there anything I did that expressed good values?'"

And we add various criteria. And we put questions in her diary.

Over the first month or so, she struggled each day, but she would eventually, every week, start coming in with things. And the number of things she was able to see gradually started expanding. And each week, we'd write on the continuum how worthwhile she saw herself.

Usually after about a month, people will rate themselves at 5% or so – a very small change, but significant. After two or three months, they'll rate themselves at close to 20%, and usually by the end of four, five, six months of this focus on what you're doing that is evidence that you're worthwhile, people will see themselves 60, 70% worthwhile.

And I stop the work then because that's pretty good.

"Once the core belief is developed, the client becomes stable. They never lose it; it's theirs for life."

Most of us, probably if we're honest, probably we don't see ourselves 100% worthwhile all the time. At that point, it becomes stable. That's one of the things I've learned from clients. They never lose it. Once that core belief is developed, it's theirs for life.

With this particular woman, the nice coda to the story is that she turned 50 shortly before we ended therapy, and she sent me a birthday card on her 50th birthday, and she said, "I'm sending you a card because I turned 50 today, but I actually feel like I'm just beginning my life. And this is the first year of me as a human being feeling totally worthwhile, and I'm so excited about that."

I love doing this kind of work because it is so humanly touching to have that opportunity.

Dr. Buczynski: As we saw, by helping our clients reframe the way they measure their worth, it can have a tremendous impact on their life.

Now, with more ways to build and maintain positive core beliefs, here are Dr. Kelly McGonigal and Dr. Joan Borysenko.

Dr. McGonigal: Yeah, I really liked the concreteness of a lot of Christine recommends. And I was thinking about other ways to make this concrete, this practice of trying to build up the positive core belief.

One positive experiment — I don't know if this would always work — but if you have trouble identifying in yourself evidence that you are worthy, that you are doing good things, one possible way to build up that strength is to have an experiment of looking for that evidence in other people.

I sometimes do this as an interdependence exercise, to go out and notice things you don't always notice about how deeply connected we are as human beings, and who is necessary in your world, and all of the millions of ways that other people support your daily experience of life.

I think if you really lower the bar, and you're just out there looking for evidence that somebody is contributing to your ability to have your life, you start to see how teeny tiny things can make such a contribution to the fabric of life.

So that's one possible exercise.

But another exercise I wanted to share, and I regret that I don't have a physical example of this, but — one of my colleagues has created a bracelet called "Compassion It" that focuses on trying to help people realize that compassion is an action you can *do* — you can compassion it! — rather than a trait that you *have* or you *don't have*, that you're either compassionate or you're not.

"Help people realize that compassion is an action you can **do**, rather than a trait that you **have** or **don't have**."

The bracelet has two sides that say "Compassion It" on it. And one of the exercises that I've given people sometimes is you put the bracelet on. You flip it when you do one kind act to someone else, and you have to flip it back by doing one kind act to yourself or one act of self-care.

And if you're looking for ways of encouraging people to identify very concretely, "Yes, I'm a good person," that's a really nice exercise to do. One thing of value to other people, one thing of value, of kindness, towards myself.

The other thing that I wanted to say, just another concrete idea — Christine talked about how it was like the client was losing all of everything that she'd built up, all the points that she earned every time she did

"If you have trouble identifying yourself as worthy, one way to build that strength is to experiment by looking for that evidence in other people."

anything wrong.

I thought, wouldn't it be nice to have a glass jar where you got credits and it was visible, and it never got empty?

If you were doing this core belief log, maybe there's a visual where you place some sort of beautiful stone in a glass jar so you could actually see this accumulation of the evidence of all the good that you do for yourself or for others.

Every time you do anything you would be self-critical of, you have to smash the jar and throw all the stones out. You can't take that away. It's not lost. The effort is never wasted.

Dr. Borysenko: First of all, I think her idea of a positive continuum is terrific.

The idea that even if you make 1% of progress on worthiness, it's great, and you're on the worthiness continuum, instead of saying, "Oh, over here is unworthiness, and over here is worthiness," so that you're always working on worthiness. You're always there to some degree.

I've mentioned this before, I think – Last week I talked a little bit about the VIA strength survey (VIA, Values in Action), which is a wonderful contribution of Marti Seligman and his positive psychology.¹

And if I didn't mention it last week, I'll say if you go to www.authentichappiness.com, the website, and just sign up, and there are many psychological tests, including the VIA Strength Survey, that one can take.

And what is terrific about giving it to a client or taking it yourself is that it tests for 24 character strengths, and it's very clear. Everybody has all 24 strengths in some order. And you're looking for your five signature strengths.

Within a minute of taking it, the computer gives you a print out and says, "These are your five signature character strengths."

"Everybody has all 24 character strengths in some order. You've got to look for your five top signature strengths."

And then a person who didn't think they had any strengths can look at it and say, "Wow. I am curious. Curiosity is an amazing signature strength." Or like, "Wow. I do really orient to things that are beautiful, and I have a tremendous character strength of appreciation," or whatever their five strengths may be.

But that can be *real news*, as you say, Ruth, to someone who thinks they don't have any character strengths.

And then, of course, you can begin to work with those in any situation: How can you use and call upon your signature strengths? I think that's very, very important.

Another thing that came up for me around this question . . . I was thinking and I was saying, you know, nobody can do their best all the time because the truth is, everything we do follows a kind of law of nature and that is the Gaussian distribution.

So, the U-shaped curve. And we're somewhere.

Sometimes, I've given talks that were the low end of the U. I was not myself, or it was the wrong talk. I gave a talk recently on burnout for a group of bankers.

It was a flop like you wouldn't believe, and it was an excellent talk.

It would have been fabulous if they were a bunch of therapists. But what I learned is you've got to approach bankers a different way.

So, I say, "Oops, that talk was a flop, but I learned a lot from it."

"We're all going to be somewhere on that continuum—sometimes you're really not going to be good enough; sometimes you're going to be much better than you are; and usually you're somewhere in the middle."

Then at other times, you're somewhere in your sweet spot and once in a while, you're on the, "Oh my god, I was in the flow. This was like by divine guidance. This was the best talk in the universe. Hooray, hooray!"

But we're all going to be somewhere on that continuum, and sometimes, you're really not going to be good enough. And sometimes you're going to be much better than you actually are. And usually, you're somewhere in the middle.

And I think it's very helpful for people to realize there is that Gaussian distribution, and we're always somewhere on it.

You can't always give the talk that's at the 100% time. And thank God you don't give the talk that's near the 0% point all the time either.

But at times, you're going to hit both ends of the spectrum, and that's call normal and a good way to normalize.

Dr. Buczynski: We've listened to many different insights and perspectives on how to help clients who feel like they're never good enough.

I hope this course has added to your strategies for working with this population and has given you some new tools to use in your practice.

Please be sure to also check out some of the bonuses that we've included in this program.

I think you'll gain some valuable insights there that will further enhance your work with clients.

Enjoy this final thought on working with feelings of unworthiness, and thank you for being a part of this program. I'll see you soon.

Dr. Siegel: When they put people in a functional MRI machine and they have them look at their Facebook posts and the number of likes or dislikes they get, they see that it's the very same achievement-oriented centers are getting activated here, and that people rapidly get addicted to getting more likes and become phobic of the experience of dislikes and the feelings of inadequacy that goes with it.

I see it as a pretty serious problem clinically, that people are constantly getting messages about all the accomplishments and delightful and exciting experiences that their peers are having — the great party, the wonderful Caribbean vacation, the great time with the girlfriend, the boyfriend, the spouse, the kids.

How many people post on Facebook, "Woke up anxious again, had the runs, thinking maybe my boss is going to fire me, and my girlfriend or boyfriend is going to break up with me"?

Yet how many of us wake up with some variation on this?

That's not what gets posted.

I think I once mentioned this before in this series — it's like you're comparing one country's travel brochure to another's poverty and crime statistics.

We live with our poverty and crime statistics. We see other people's travel brochures. It's a real set up for these feelings of failure.

1. Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 5-14.

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