



Next Level Practitioner

Week 133: How Abandonment Fears Can Rob Clients of a Sense of Self

Day 3: How to Foster Secure Attachment in the Face of Abandonment Fears

with Richard Schwartz, PhD and Ruth Buczynski, PhD

National Institute for the Clinical
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Week 133, Day 3: Richard Schwartz, PhD

How to Foster Secure Attachment in the Face of Abandonment Fears



Dr. Buczynski: How do we work with a client who is so terrified of abandonment, that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy?

I'm talking about someone who obsesses over their partner abandoning them, and how that can end up actually pushing their partner away.

Here, Dr. Richard Schwartz will show us how the IFS approach can help to de-escalate a client's anxiety and foster a more secure attachment.

Dr. Schwartz: One of the ironies of life is that a lot of clients have protectors who will generate what they fear. I've worked with clients who are so afraid of being abandoned and betrayed that their protectors - their managers - wind up trying so much to control their partner. They monitor their every move, check their email, and snoop around, and their partner gets fed up and abandons them. When that's the case and when it's been the case, I'll have them focus on that protector and ask what it's afraid would happen. It'll give up the fact that it's terrified of being abandoned, and that's typically an exile.

“A lot of clients have protectors who will generate what they fear.”

Then I'll negotiate permission with it to go to the part that's stuck someplace in the past where they were abandoned. I won't say that, I'll just say let's go to the part that's so afraid of being abandoned. Often they'll see a child, but not always. Sometimes it's another image. One of the distinctions of IFS, as opposed to other part systems that work with parts, is that rather than just listening [the self] becomes the good attachment figure to the part. This is attachment theory taken inside, where the client's self becomes the good attachment figure to these inner children who attach to the self.

“This is attachment theory taken inside, where the client's self becomes the good attachment figure.”

Once I can get the client to go to that child and earn its trust, first by witnessing how bad the original abandonment was and then by being with it in a loving way and getting it out of there, that child now trusts that self is going to [take care of it]. Then a lot of the fear of being abandoned goes away, because in essence you become the primary caretaker of your own parts.

Most of us come out of our families with these raw exiles, and we're looking for a partner to take care of those parts for us. We get infatuated with the person who seems like the one who can do that for us. If you protect them or make them feel like they're not worthless, it's such a relief to have that curse lifted. But it doesn't last because they're still stuck back there and because we're often picking somebody who resembles the person who hurt us initially and they wind up hurting us in a similar way. When that happens, all our protectors go crazy in different ways.

Once I can get my client to become their own primary caretaker of their own exiles, then all the stuff I was saying earlier goes away. Now you don't

“I want to get my client to become their own primary caretaker of their own exiles.”

“This idea of helping people become the primary caretaker of their own exiles is a big deal.”

have to monitor your partner's email and watch their every move because if they do leave you, you're going to be okay because you got yourself. In general, that's typically how we work with that.

I guess what I would say is this idea and aspect of the model of helping people become the primary caretaker of their own exiles is a big deal. It actually creates what a lot of other systems have been striving for which is individuation and a sense of having boundaries. This allows

people to be far more self-led in relationships.

Dr. Buczynski: As Dick just explained, the overarching goal here is to help clients become the primary caretaker of their exiles. But within this same model there are 3 other goals as well.

Dr. Schwartz: The first is what I call the liberation of these parts from the extreme roles they're stuck in, so they can be who they're designed to be which is always valuable. Then the second is what I call the restoration of trust of the parts in the self's leadership. Then the third is the re-harmonizing of this inner system so the parts get to know each other, and cooperate with and love each other, rather than being so polarized. Most of these systems come to you quite polarized with parts that hate each other, like what I was saying earlier with the addictive part and the critic. It all maps onto larger human systems.

As I said earlier, particularly once you get a lot of very vulnerable exiles, protectors will tend to polarize with each other. The analogy would be to a family where they have a very vulnerable child or a child is very sick. Both parents are very scared. One becomes very hard-arsed to try and get the child to be taught and handle the world because they're too sensitive. The harder that one becomes, the softer the other one becomes because it feels like he's being so tucked up on my son. Then the softer she becomes, the harder he has to be, and so on.

It's the same in this inner system. Protectors will polarize when there's a lot of vulnerability. One way to work is often have a client go to each side of the polarization first. In the case of, for example, the addictive part and the critic, I would have them go to the critic first and try to get to know it. While they're doing that, the addictive part and other parts that hate the critic are going to be interfering because they don't want the client to side with it or listen to it or believe what it's saying. Just like when you work with a family and there's a big polarization; when you try to talk to one family member the others will interrupt to try and counter what it's saying. We have to be very clear that everybody is going to get a turn; we're going to listen to this one first, but you're going to have your day in court too.

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I have my client listen first to the critic, empathize with it, and see if it's willing to talk directly to the addictive part. Then I have them go to the addictive part, listen to its story, empathize with it, and see if it's willing to talk directly to the critic. Then I'll say, “bring these two parts together and *you* be their therapist; have them talk to each other and try to keep them respectful of each other while they do it. Just remind them that each of them has the well-being of the whole system as their goal. They have that in common.”

“I'll say, *Bring these two parts together and you be their therapist.*”

Many of them have no clue that they are both trying their best to protect the system, but in opposite ways, again, just like in a family. The client will see sometimes these two parts come together and sit facing each other, or just sometimes sense that, and

then they do monitor the conversation. Just like in a family when parts finally start to talk to each other they realize, not always but often, that the other one isn't what they thought; they aren't so bad. Then it might go well if they cooperate a little bit. That would be how we do it.

Dr. Buczynski: As we just heard from Dick, when we help clients acknowledge their vulnerable parts, this can often help them begin to self-regulate.

Tomorrow, we'll take a look at what to do when trauma is behind a client's fear of abandonment.

But right now I'd like to hear from you: How will you use the ideas from today's session in your work with clients? Please leave a comment below – and maybe take a moment to read some other comments and write replies to those. That kind of engagement is what makes our community so great. I'll see you tomorrow.