Next Level Practitioner

Week 86: Advice about Our Role as Practitioners

Day 5: Critical Insights

with Ruth Buczynski, PhD; Ron Siegel, PsyD; and Kelly McGonigal, PhD

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Critical Insights

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Critical Insights

Dr. Buczynski: Hello everyone and welcome back. This is the part of the week where we're going to focus on synthesizing all the ideas from this week.

Let's start out by talking about what stood out to you this week.

The Lessons We Can Learn from a Good Mentor

Dr. McGonigal: I was struck by the gratitude that people were showing toward their supervisors and mentors and people who had given them advice, and the way that words might carry.

When you're the person saying it, it might feel almost like a throwaway, or maybe it feels really obvious – but in that relationship, there is such a receptivity of the "mentee" or whatever the right noun is.

It made me renew my enthusiasm about mentoring and my desire to be really intentional about it, and also sense my *own* gratitude.

It's really nice to hear people express this kind of gratitude because I think we can all resonate with being in both worlds – the receiver and the one who offers the advice.

Dr. Buczynski: Would either of you mind saying/naming one of your mentors?

Dr. McGonigal: One of my mentors is James Gross. He was my supervisor in graduate school.

In many ways it was more modeling than specific advice, but I realize that one of the things that he modeled was something that many of my other mentors had modeled – when to really look at an individual and try to figure out who they are and what they had to offer.

That was really a great gift, to see him doing that with many people.

Dr. Buczynski: How about you, Ron – would you be willing to say who was one of your mentors?

Dr. Siegel: I've had a number in different kinds of mentoring.

I'm thinking of a couple of senior psychoanalysts who were mentors of mine: Stan Moldawsky, Morrie Goodman – these were both people who taught my graduate program in New Jersey.

> "There was this attitude of relentless curiosity and awareness that people are fantastically complex."

The big mentorship there was this attitude of relentless curiosity and awareness that people are fantastically complex. How to develop a sense of sort of "walking through the woods of the mind and heart" with them and noticing all the things that happened.

Another mentor in an *entirely* different direction – a guy called George Goethals. He was less a clinician and more of a researcher at Harvard.

George simply mentored by helping his mentees and his supervisees to believe in their own judgments. He would just help me to *trust* the thoughts and feelings that came up in me and use them as data. A very different kind of mentoring.

> "George simply mentored by helping his mentees believe in their own judgments."

It's interesting; they've come in different forms.

Dr. Buczynski: I've had a lot of good mentoring as well, and one that stands out is Laura Perls.

Dr. Laura Perls was the co-developer of Gestalt therapy. She and her husband Fritz Perls came from Germany and were very influenced by the concept of Gestalt from a perception-psychology point of view way back when, and then fled Europe during the Nazi pre-World War II and so forth.

I had the chance to go into New York City for one Saturday a month for year, in a small group and be mentored by her. It was *really* a privilege and an outstanding experience.

When Advice Is Good in One Practitioner's Situation, But Not in Another

Dr. Buczynski: Ron, what stood out to you this week?

Dr. Siegel: Well, first how diverse meaningful advice can be – it doesn't center on one particular theme. We've heard so many different themes this week.

Second – just how profound sharing our perspective might be.

It might sound like a throwaway line to us at some point but if, at that particular moment, it was particularly relevant to the person who's hearing it and they were open to it – if it's falling on fertile ground – it can be enormously powerful even though we're not thinking of it as a big deal.

> "What may seem like profoundly useful advice in one situation for one person might actually be ***not*** so useful advice for somebody else in another moment in another situation."

Then thirdly, it struck me how what may seem like profoundly useful advice in one situation for one person might actually be *not so* useful advice for somebody else in another moment in another situation.

I was particularly struck by Pat Ogden here when she felt so supported by Ron Kurtz when he said that she should enjoy her work and not get sucked into the morass of depression of her patient.

One of the most useful supervisory counsels I ever got was when I *was* getting sucked into the morass of depression and my supervisor helped me to point out how useful that was for my patient – they actually felt understood; they had finally defeated me in all of my attempts to be therapeutic and they actually felt that I was with them in this moment.

We noticed the pattern where the patient would actually come in looking better and feeling better after these most dismal sessions where I was ready to quit the field and drive off a bridge.

So, interesting how – and I'm not doubting that it was useful advice for Pat at the moment there, and that mine was useful advice for me at *that* moment – but it's just how *complex* this is, in working with people: what's going to hit the mark at a given moment.

Dr. Buczynski: Of course you could see your therapist *could* frame it as a strategic – you know, a Gregory Bateson type of style of responding . . .

Dr. Siegel: Yes, right, yes. Joining/seeking a paradoxical response but it wasn't that; it was actually me getting depressed *with* her was actually what was happening.

Dr. Buczynski: What – you're saying it wasn't strategic?

Dr. Siegel: On my part.

Dr. Buczynski: But it may have had the effect.

Dr. Siegel: That is certainly correct, yes.

Strategies for Helping Clients Find the Answers Within

Dr. Buczynski: Let's stay with the idea – let's stay with the story Pat talked about. Essentially, she's talking about helping her clients find the answers inside themselves instead of providing the answers for them. Kelly, can you share some strategies that can help clients tune into their own answers?

Dr. McGonigal: First, one of the examples Pat gave is something that I use *all* the time in trying to help people make decisions: Imagine you've actually made the decision in a certain direction and then check with your body.

Love that exercise.

I was thinking, what are some other exercises that are like that, that really help people tap into their own intuition or their own insights?

> "What are some other exercises that help people tap into their own intuition or their own insights?"

It reminded me of some studies that involve trying to embody other people who might have really good perspectives on this problem.

For example, there is a study done by researchers at the University of Maryland where they wanted to help people become more creative.

They had some people imagine that they were an eccentric poet, and then gave them the creativity task.

Other people imagined that they were a librarian (apparently the stereotypes are librarians aren't very creative; that is an inaccurate stereotype, but anyway).

When people were imagining themselves as an eccentric artist or poet, they were much more creative.

They even did it within subjects and between subjects; you can get more creativity within an individual by having them flip roles.

The idea is that you have these different aspects inside you – why not creativity; it could be wisdom; it could be courage; it could be *any* quality. You could ask someone, *well, who do* you *think would have really good advice on this matter?* – whether it's a spiritual mentor or a historical figure.

The other study I wanted to mention uses virtual reality. This is a study that was done at the University of Barcelona where they had people talk about a psychological problem.

In one version, they'd talk about it almost like a two-chair situation where it's always themselves. So, I'm saying my problem, and then I'd switch chairs and I talk as myself to myself.

In another version, they had them pretend they were Sigmund Freud – who, again, stereotype great psychologist; I'm sure we could all come up with better examples.

When people were responding to themselves, imagining that they were Sigmund Freud, they ended up feeling a lot better afterward than when they talked to themselves as themselves.

Both of these studies point to the value of that same kind of strategy, where you ask people to imagine an archetype of who would have insight on this. Then, to imagine, "Okay, for a moment you *are* that person – what would you say?"

It's a fun exercise to do. I have done versions of that myself.

Dr. Siegel: Yes. Broadly, you see this in a lot of spiritual traditions, of trying to contact your "higher self" in some sense. It seems like a very skillful way to facilitate that.

Dr. Buczynski: And some people even say, "What would Christ do?" as a way of thinking about wisdom and so on.

The Importance of Cultivating Sensitivity to Create Safe Relationships with Mentees

Dr. Buczynski: Laurel Parnell brought up an interesting story and she was talking about how certain facts about her – like her gender, her age, and her cultural background – might trigger a response in someone.

What if our physical attributes pull out a negative response from someone we're working with? How might we proceed with our work if that kind of thing happens?

Dr. Siegel: This is a very important question. In psychodynamic training, this used to receive a great deal of attention. Now, as we've become more sensitized to the opportunities to do gross and minor injuries to one

another around all sorts of issues about identity and how we're seen, I think it has become more delicate even and more difficult to find respectful and useful ways to talk about this.

I've run into challenges many, many times in the role of the supervisor around this, trying to figure out what would be most skillful.

If my supervisor, let's say, demographically, is similar to me – I don't know, a white guy of around my age – I might start making the assumption that, "Well, I know what his sensitivities are, and I know what his stimulus value might be, from my own experience of having a certain stimulus value."

But that could be off because of course these things are quite individual.

It becomes *more* complicated if I'm working with somebody – a supervisee, let's say – who's from a very different demographic than mine. *I* may have some assumptions about what his or her stimulus values are – which may be right, or may be wrong in terms of the client's experience.

But even worse, to talk about *my* assumptions is to really reveal that this supervisee has this stimulus value for me.

Let me make it less abstract –

Let's say I'm working with a supervisee who is a particularly attractive young woman, and she's doing a therapy with a heterosexual guy of an appropriate age for her. I'm sitting there imagining that he's fallen completely in love with her and that's a big part of what's going on here.

To begin to explore my assumption about that is to communicate that I think she's somebody who's very easy to fall in love with – right? It begins to communicate something that could be quite uncomfortable and could reduce the sense of safety in the relationship. Even going near the topic becomes challenging.

Similarly, if my supervisee is of a different racial, ethnic, or other identity group than I am, if I talk about how the client may be thinking or feeling this or that, well, it's revealing my *own* stereotype reactions again – the person's stimulus value to me – which is additionally problematic.

> "How do you deal without injuring one another in the conversation and making the space feel unsafe?"

The question is how do you deal with this topic – which is a *really* important topic because we really *do* have powerful stimulus values for one another – without injuring one another in the conversation and making, in this case,

the sacred supervisory space feel unsafe?

I don't really have a great answer to this.

My best attempts have been to ask the supervisee – "How do imagine that your client views you? How do you imagine your client responds to who you are as a person?"

But, even going there of course enters into this topic.

So, it's an area that could use a lot of exploration. And when we explore it, it's important to really be aware that we don't know what other people's experiences are like on *all* levels.

We don't know what the supervisee's stimulus value might be like for the client; we don't know what the supervisee's own sense of going through the world with their stimulus value has been like; and we have no idea if our particular assumptions, reactions, stereotypes are broader than our own.

There's a lot of uncertainty, so we have to go into it with that and then somehow be curious – invite the conversation and invite people to tell us how they feel about the conversation all at the same time.

I'm very interested in either of *your* thoughts about how to pursue this skillfully.

Dr. McGonigal: Yes, I mean, I was thinking about this from a different perspective.

When I realize that I'm triggering something in another person, usually it's something that might not be helpful.

To me, it's sometimes a little too easy to take advantage of when you're triggering the right thing, or when you happen to be the right face or voice for a message for a particular person who's going to connect with you.

"When I realize that I'm triggering something in another person, usually it's something that might not be helpful."

I often have the experience in the opposite direction, where I'm probably *not* the right face and voice to resonate with a particular individual. And I often find myself retreating to the kind of thing that you were describing – *Pull Back, Listen More, Talk Less.*

How much less can I make this about me?

See if there's still something of value in this exchange, and assume that whatever my stimulus value is,

sometimes it's just not the right fit.

I know we've talked about this before, from a clinical point of view too, of when do you let a client go when the match isn't right?

I experience that often in other roles, as a teacher or a writer.

Dr. Buczynski: One thing that your colleague Chris Germer shared once that I thought was particularly wise is the acronym WAIT – and it was *Why Am I Talking?*

Sometimes just being there, and I think also going back to something Kelly said about how humility can be really important too.

How Advice that Feels Wrong Can Help You Find What Feels Right

Dr. Buczynski: Steven Hayes shared a shocking piece of advice which was, "Life is empty and meaningless."

He explained, however, that it's not as surprising as it might seem. What advice have you received that seems surprising or strange at first, and how did you come to see the truth of it?

Dr. McGonigal: Oh, well, I would say my favorite type of surprising advice is advice that surprises me because I instinctively know it's *wrong*.

That has only happened a few times in my life. But I wanted to describe it because we've been talking a lot about the best advice you've ever received, and I'm very clear that the two best pieces of advice I *ever* received were advice that was *wrong*.

> "The two best pieces of advice I ever received were advice that was ***wrong***."

I felt it somatically and it changed the direction of what I was doing because it was almost like a slap in the face.

One was when I got the advice for the undergraduate school that teaching was a waste of time. I was encouraged to turn down an opportunity to teach psychology to undergraduates when I was a graduate student because it would take away from my research.

I just *knew*, like in every cell of my body, that that was the wrong advice for me, and I doubled down on teaching.

The other piece of advice I got that was even more shockingly, obviously, wrong to me – I was giving a talk at one of the Silicon Valley companies (I won't name which one, but one of the lead Silicon Valley companies), and the person who was my host for this event mentioned that I had done something with Oprah Winfrey very recently.

She looked at me and she was like, "You have to be careful who you talk to and what audiences you speak to. If you're out there talking to that type of audience, really important people are going to value your message less."

I was *so* angry – I probably gave a *terrible* talk that day! I have never received worse advice that was so clearly inconsistent with my values.

I made some changes. That became the basic rule now for deciding whether or not to do something – whether it was listening to that advice or listening to this advice.

Anyway, that would be my encouragement to folks. If you feel that, check in with your values. It can be *so* good; bad advice can be such a good source of advice, actually.

How to Help Clients Find Meaning Despite Meaninglessness

Dr. Siegel: I want to go a little bit sideways with the question and talk a little bit more about Steve's advice. I think this particular piece of advice is so counterintuitive that it could be useful, and yet it's one of the kinds of advice that I play with in therapy a lot, so I want to explore this.

People who are interested in meditative practices may know that, in Buddhist monastic traditions in certain cultures, there's this practice of meditating at the Charnel grounds – the places where bodies are either burned or are left out to be eaten by animals, depending on the culture. It does not seem like a very upbeat thing to do, but it's about meditating on impermanence.

There are these various teachings – things like imagining your bones or your body on the day of your death; what it would look like a week later, a month later, a year later, five years later, as we go into skeletons and dust and the like.

They are quite graphic in their descriptions of this.

It's interesting that Steve is harnessing this as a piece, as a therapeutic intervention, not just as advice to fellow therapists.

I've been experimenting with the same thing, but realizing that when you *do* try this kind of advice, you really have to be careful to try to figure out where the person's zone of tolerance is. While, yes, there is real liberation from narcissistic preoccupation that can come from *really* getting it, that "from dust to dust" is a big message and it's *very* hard for most of us to really incorporate.

I'll often go a lot lighter, with things like, "Do you know who the King of England was in 1378?"

And most of us say, "Er… no."

"Well, a lot of people in 1378 did." They were very important at the time.

Try to get perspective on that sort of thing. Or even perhaps what happens, it's all going to be gone.

But then from this to say, "So, how *do* we derive meaning?"

That I think becomes very, very interesting. The kinds of things that feel meaningful to us are things that are hardwired to be meaningful.

"The kinds of things that feel meaningful to us are things that are hardwired to be meaningful."

It seems that what derives meaning – connection to loved ones, caring for others, helping the group in some way (assuming we have food and shelter, otherwise food and shelter get very meaningful) – all that stuff's meaningful to us because we're a cooperative species; we're a social species – we're *made* to care in this way.

Then the question becomes, so, what's getting the way of this? Of the biological things that incline us toward meaning – what's getting it so that we don't feel those, so that we're not feeling the connection, we're not feeling these what I think are hardwired sources of meaning?

So, anyway, I appreciated very much Steve bringing this up.

"Surprising advice like this can be useful if it's useful at the time."

It certainly *is* a very surprising piece of advice, and surprising advice like this can be useful if it's useful at the time.

It might not be useful at the *wrong* time – and then *where do we go with it?* I think becomes another very important aspect.

Dr. McGonigal: Yes. There was something that he said, and I can't remember exactly how it was framed but it was *what if it's not intrinsically meaningful but what if we matter about it?*

I don't know what exactly the language was, but there's something about the shift in frame; it's not – the advice isn't *life is meaningless;* the advice is *to become someone who makes meaning out of life.*

Dr. Siegel: Right – how do we make meaning out of life.

Dr. McGonigal: That language – that was such interesting language: *to matter about it* or something like that. Like, yes, that's *our* job: we follow those biological impulses of pleasure, meaning, connection, curiosity.

You could just follow that thread instead of feeling like you have to figure out the meaning.

Dr. Buczynski: Thank you. That's it for us for this week.

We'll be back again next week where again we'll talk about and synthesize ideas of the best advice people got from their mentors. Thanks very much, everyone.