Next Level Practitioner

Week 93: How a Client’s Criticism Can Strengthen the Therapeutic Relationship

Day 2: One Thing You Should Assume About Your Client

with Sue Johnson, EdD and Ruth Buczynski, PhD
Dr. Buczynski: We all know that making assumptions about a client can easily lead us astray.

But according to Dr. Sue Johnson, there is one thing we should assume when it comes to why our clients are critical.

Here, Sue explains how starting with one key expectation may help us field a client’s critique.

Dr. Johnson: In EFT, what we generally teach – and what I think I can do more and more, and what I’m able to do most of the time – is that I see people finding fault with me, and it's unfair; but I do not expect people to be fair.

“It's not the client's job to validate me.”

It's not the client’s job to validate me. They're all caught up in their own attachment fears and these dreadful dances with their most important people in their lives that keep triggering their fears.

They're all caught up in that, and they don't know me. They've often been let down by other mental health professionals. So why should I expect them to be fair? And why should expect them to have a clear, safe image of me? They don't often.

So, I come in from the place where I expect them to be off balance. I expect them to be desperate for help and not trusting me. Why should they trust me?

“If you work with trauma survivors, or if you work with incest survivors who are now in a marriage that's falling apart, I always feel quite humbled when I work with them.

They have no reason on earth to ever trust another human being, and certainly not a stupid therapist that they only see once every few days.

Dr. Buczynski: And so if one of those people finds fault with you, how do you approach it?

Dr. Johnson: I stay with it; I stay with the present process. "Could you help me? I'm hearing that you don't feel like I'm listening to you. Could you help me? What I'm getting from you is I'm talking to your husband,
and you're right. I have been talking to your husband for the last four minutes or so. Right? And so what you're telling me is that you don't feel like I'm listening to you and hearing your point of view. Am I getting it?"

And she'll say yes. And I'll say, "I hear that."

There's a tape called “EFT in Action” where I'm actually doing this with this agitated lady. I put my hand on her arm to help her feel safe. I assume there's a threat there, and I've become part of the threat. And that helps me a lot.

I don't assume they're aggressive or trying to prove me wrong. I say, oh, this person doesn't feel safe with me. So I say, "Could you help me? You're worried that I'm not going to listen to you too. I really understand that."

I validate it.

Then I try to be transparent about the process – which, again, is very EFT, because EFT is collaborative. I say, "I hear that, and I might feel that too in your position because you want to know that I'm going to listen to your point of view. You're in a lot of pain here. I hear that. And so, what I want to tell you is I am talking to your husband. I'm talking to your husband about how he dances with you because I want to help you guys become more connected."

What am I telling her? I’m telling her, “I have you in mind and your goals in mind, even when I'm talking to him.” And I say, "But, and I don't need to talk to him, and I hear that's hard for you. But I want to assure you that I remember the things you said in the beginning of the session. You said, 'I have no place to stand here.' I get the message, 'I'm completely unlovable, and I can't bear it.' And then you get enraged. That's what you told me."

I reassure her. I'm saying, I heard you.

We teach in EFT how to tune in to those emotional handles and hold on to them. I write them down on a piece of paper so I've got them.

I say, "I'm listening to you, and I will get to you in a moment, and then I need to hear from your point of view. I'm going to get to you, and I'm going to go between the two of you. I'm going to get to you. Is that okay?"

I come from an English working-class background where I touch people all the time. So I feel safe about
touch, so I usually reach out and touch her. It’s not a very personal touch, but it’s there. And what I’m saying is, "Yes, it's okay. I'm going to help you feel safe." That's what we do.

But I'm helped in that. I'm helped in that these days because I trust the model, and I expect it to work, and I have this confidence in the model. It's hard for people to make me feel incompetent these days.

If you have a model that you really trust, and you know you can always go back and do this EFT Tango – reflecting on present process, going for the underlying feelings, creating new interactions, helping people process those interactions, reflecting back the change they've made right here in the session – if you're always doing that EFT Tango, you have your feet in the session.

I dance tango. That's my other big passion. I dance about eight hours of Argentine tango a week. Hey, you want to touch vulnerability? Learn to dance a very difficult dance – and not in your 20s, but when you're getting exceedingly old and find out that nobody wants to dance with you because you can't dance. It's interesting. It was a real growth experience.

But these days, if somebody on the tango floor — and hey, somebody did it to me last night. My partner said, "We're not connected. We're not connected. You're going too fast."

I thought, it's classic. It's just like a couple. We turn to the person and say, You're dancing wrong.

In the past, I might have thought, Oh, my goodness. Maybe I am. Oh, my goodness, maybe I am.

But when you get more confident in EFT or on the tango floor, you don't get defensive.

I said, "Hmmm . . . maybe. But we're losing connection. You're right. Let's just not talk about it. Let's just try and find it again when this happens."

So, I just stay with the process. But I consider it.

And then later in the evening when I danced with him again, he does it again. And I say, "No. I'm not sure that it's me going too fast. Have you noticed that you're pushing on my hand really hard? My shoulder is hurting, and it puts me off balance."

I didn't blame him, but I'm confident in my own way of understanding tango.
If you’re confident in your model as a therapist, you’re not so easily threatened.

Clients threaten us. That's why we really lose our balance.

Hey, we’re doing an amazing thing. Sometimes I think we lose our sense of what we’re trying to do as therapist.

People come in to you and they say, “I've never trusted anybody in my life. Really, I've had a terrible history. I don't know how to connect with anyone, and I've been practicing this terrible dance with my partner for 16 years, and I'm in all this emotional chaos. Would you please sort it out and give me a solution? I'd like it in about 10 sessions. Thanks very much. And thanks very much because I don't have much money. And solve my emotional issues, my interactional issues in a whole new way . . .”

If you really think about that, a sane person would say, "Actually, I'd rather be a dentist. I get Fridays off.” – but we don't.

Therapists say, "Yes. Let me try to go into all your chaotic life and help."

We do something huge, and we haven’t had many models that make sense in couple's therapy. Then we beat ourselves up because we do lose our balance in the dance.

Hey, we’re entitled. We’re entitled.

Well, it depends on how you look at therapy, I guess. If you think the therapy is about just coaching some skills, then maybe you’re not entitled. You should be able to coach skills. You should be able to learn that from a manual.

But if you believe that therapy is about going and standing beside people while they face huge existential issues about can they commit with another human being, can they feel safe in the world, and are they alone in life – then yeah, you’re entitled to lose your balance.

**Dr. Buczynski:** As Sue explained, feeling criticized often comes down to feeling threatened.

So, with increased confidence, we can focus on the good work instead of the harsh feedback.

Tomorrow, we’ll explore one way to build trust with a client who is critical.
But right now, I’d like to hear from you: How will you use what you just heard in your practice today?

Please, share your thoughts in a comment below.

I’ll see you tomorrow.