

How to Work with a Client's Resistance

How to Work with the Resistance Inside Relationships

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How to Work with a Client's Resistance: Stan Tatkin, PsyD, MFT

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Dr. Buczynski: Often in relationships, there can be two competing presentations of resistance.

So, how do we work with this?

According to Dr. Stan Tatkin, you first need to introduce stress.

And then you turn up the pressure.

Here, Stan shares the overriding principle that drives his interventions, and the specific skills he uses to achieve it.

Dr. Tatkin: Every therapy approach has a therapeutic stance or a narrative.

In my work, my therapeutic stance is *secure functioning*. I expect couples to be *secure functioning*, which means that they are in a two-person psychological system, fully mutual and fully collaborative.

“Every therapy approach has a therapeutic stance or narrative—my therapeutic stance is *secure functioning*.”

It's a relationship based on fairness, justness and sensitivity, and they understand that they have to work together – in a sense, they're in a foxhole together, and my goal is to move them toward *secure functioning*.

Now, as I pressure them and push them, there's pushback. There's pushback in the form of, “I can't do this right now. I don't know what this is. I don't understand.”

“As I pressure them and push them, there's pushback.”

As a therapist, this is where I work. I move them toward where I want them to go – in this case *secure functioning*, which I believe is the only way that will work long term in a well-matched relationship.

As I push them, they're going to push back various times, showing me what they can and cannot do.

That's where we work, and we work through the resistance, by showing what is happening and getting both partners to feel the resistance.

Unless there's pressure – unless there is some kind of tension and some kind of pain – there is no interest in understanding why I'm resisting.

The therapist really has to maintain a certain amount of pressure and has to keep the heat up to a certain degree.

Unfortunately, without discomfort, without pain, there's no interest, and without interest, the patient is thinking: I don't care about the therapist's interpretation.

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“Without discomfort, there's no interest; and without interest, the patient is thinking: *I don't care about the therapist's interpretation.*”

So the therapist has to set up a situation where that patient or the partners want to know: “I don't understand why I can't do this right now.”

Let me give you an example. In this case, I have a couple who are in their early sixties and she is of that clinging type I mentioned before.

In this instance, she is oriented toward focusing almost entirely on her partner and not herself, and she has some developmental delays having to do with what we call *self-activation*.

Self-activation is the ability to stand up on one's own – and in this case, to be able to take responsibility, to move out in the world, and to see herself as an equal – as someone who can claim things and who feels like she has agency in the world.

I set up a situation between her and her husband in order for her to feel what is happening here. I give her what's called a *declaration*.

“*Self-activation* is the ability to stand up on one's own.”

This is a strategic “game,” so to speak, where I have partners look at each other at close proximity, and I might say to her, “As you look in your husband's eyes, I want you to say this: ‘I claim you.’ Go.”

Now, I choose that line because I suspect that it is in direct opposition to everything she resists in regard to the events in her life – she doesn't like to claim anything.

I suspect that she feels that she has to wait for everything to come to her. She can't go and grab what she wants – this is part of what creates an angry person throughout life: a feeling of, “It's never for me. I have to wait.”

I suspect that she is one of these people who is “in waiting.”

I want to challenge this and put her in a situation where she's going to feel some stress and come up against

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this, so I give her a line – a *declaration* which is pithy and gets very low in terms of the brain and causes a somatic reaction – so much so that she chokes on the words: “I - I - claim... Could you give me that line again?”

“I claim you. Go”

“I... God, this is hard. I...” We continue this and she says, “I don't know why this is so hard.”

Now, we *want* this to be hard – if somebody isn't at odds with their resistance in that moment, they don't care about the reason. They also never even know there's a problem.

I'm constructing a problem that they *know* exists, but it's one they've avoided throughout life – it hits this very area of self-activation, of individuation, of differentiation, of being a real person that goes out and claims things.

That repeated line creates an interest in her, and now we can start to explore maybe *why* she's resistant.

“I'm constructing a problem they *know* exists, but it's one they've avoided throughout life.”

Perhaps it's because if she claims him, she'll be letting go of an idea of herself, of being little, of being young, of being someone who's not *entitled* to claim.

That would be a very important revelation, and it has to happen through experience. I can't just tell her this.

It has to be there because she really wants to know, and I can add more than I did: “I claim you. You're mine.”

By adding in his first name, it really turns up the heat even more – when we say the first name of a partner, it becomes very real.

“*Declarations* are ego-clarifying; when we declare something, we become more real, more solid.”

Declarations are ego-clarifying; when we declare something, we become more real, more solid.

For those of us who are avoidant, we will avoid the declarations. We will avoid statements that clarify who we are and what we want,

because we're afraid of the consequences.

But if we don't clarify who we are, that creates a problem that Erik Erikson calls *ego diffusion*, which is: *I stop understanding who I am and who you are.*

"She became very interested in why her resistance was happening."

So, declarations are a very important theme to engender, and this is how I did it with this person.

Now, this was successful because she became very interested in why her resistance was happening. She started coming up with her own ideas.

She was able to say, "I claim you. You're mine," then I said, "Look in his eyes. Does he believe you?" We want to make sure that she can sell it – we want her body to feel it.

This leads to an integration of what we're trying to do – having her become more egosyntonic.

Instead of blaming her partner for not coming to her, which is ego-dystonic, she was starting to catch herself and claiming the behaviors she wanted of him.

For example, she would be sitting in a bus, and he would be walking on. She wouldn't even tap the seat to signal that he should sit next to her, so he would sit next to their kids and she was hurt.

"In working with resistance, we put more pressure on the couple to grow up and to be *secure functioning.*"

But from this point on, she knew she should signal to him what she wanted – to have him sit next to her.

This is how we worked through resistance in this case. **In working with resistance, we put more pressure on the couple to grow up and to be *secure functioning.***

With this kind of pushing, there's more resistance, and then we stop and we work with it.

Dr. Buczynski: As clients begin to take responsibility for their own healing, it can help them clarify their sense of who they are.

In the next bonus, we'll look at the vital information that's often hidden behind a client's resistance.

I'll see you then.