

How to Work with a Client's Resistance

How the Practitioner May Be Perpetuating Their Client's Resistance

Part 1: What Can Happen When You Resist the Resistance

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How to Work with a Client's Resistance: Rick Hanson, PhD and Bill O'Hanlon, LMFT

Part 1: What Can Happen When You Resist the Resistance

Dr. Buczynski: How do we deal with a client who participates in the therapy but resists any attempt at change?

Dr. Rick Hanson had one such client.

After years of spinning his wheels, Rick was at a loss with how to proceed.

Until Rick made this one game-changing decision.

Dr. Hanson: I'll call this person Bob, and he was one of my most difficult clients ever. I started working with Bob fairly early in my career.

I was a well-intended young therapist – I was just going to bang on situations and try to create change as fast as I could.

Bob was not going to have any of it, yet he kept coming in week after week and I kept wondering, "Why are you coming back?"

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He told me how unhappy he was, how it wasn't going well in his relationship, and how he would shrug ruefully at his wife's very reasonable complaints about him. He knew her complaints were reasonable – I could see that they were reasonable – I had met with her a couple of times.

There's a term for this from James Masterson's work on different personality types, and based on this, Bob could be described as schizoid.

"His was not a classic schizoid personality disorder; he was more schizoid—someone who maintains an optimal distance, who never breaks free in full autonomy and self-expression, and never fully lands in intimacy."

His was not a classic DSM IV or V schizoid personality disorder, but he was more schizoid – someone who maintains an optimal distance, who never breaks free in full autonomy and self-expression and never really fully lands in intimacy with another person.

A term that describes the inner experience of being with that kind of person is "Witness at the execution." They want you

to know how bad it is, but they absolutely don't want you to change anything or help them.

This is a form of resistance and learned mode of relating, which includes a lot of internal fear, and in his case, not allowing me or anybody else to have enough efficacy, influence, or power in his life to affect him.

It was alarming to him to get nudged out of – you could put it in terms of complex systems theory – this strange pit that he was stuck in – he was very unwilling to budge.

This went on, easily, for two and a half years – that's a hundred plus sessions, and it was the same script. I could have written the script, and I bet many people can relate to what I'm talking about here.

Finally, with a combination of getting fed up and a little light bulb dawning of wisdom, I realized we were getting nowhere. I was resisting his resistance, and in a classic line, what you resist persists.

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I just gave up. I gave up internally. I didn't make a big speech about it with Bob. I didn't give him a whole rant and rave about why I was justified in giving up. I just gave up.

I still was unconditionally and positively regarding of him. I was still present. I didn't start reading the newspaper as he droned on, tempting as that might have been occasionally – I was just there with him.

As soon as I gave up, Bob started to change. Bob actually had some room to breathe in the office.

I think he had a sense of *how* I gave up . . . It wasn't as if I was disappointed in him, but I was no longer the person in the room who was most dedicated to a positive outcome for him – and he needed to move into that niche.

I think of the ecology of mind and different critters occupying different niches in the ecosystem of

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relatedness and larger systems, and when I stepped out of that – I was the-change-agent niche – it was like a vacuum had sucked him into this niche and he *had* to move in.

Then, what began to happen was a slow process of actual change, in which I had to really stay about a half-step behind him every step of the way.

If I let myself get a little enthusiastic about his progress, he would “turtle up” again and go back inside his shell.

Bit by bit, step by step, it actually was a very interesting process of change.

In many ways, the real evidence is when your partner notices something different. I occasionally met with his wife as well as with him, and she was noticing changes in him as well.

What a lesson that turned out to be – it was over 20 years ago . . . and I try to always remember it.

“If we’re having the same conversation again and again and again, an internal light goes off and I ask, *am I resisting their resistance and taking too much responsibility in the session for good things to happen here?*”

If I'm getting ahead of my client, and we're having the same conversation again and again, an internal light goes off inside and asks: *Am I resisting their resistance and taking too much responsibility in the session for good things to happen here?*”

Dr. Buczynski: As Rick shared, when we focus too much on results, it can lead to frustration for both us and the client.

Here's Bill O'Hanlon for another thought on this—

Mr. O'Hanlon: Yes; I had a client that came in years ago with what they call body dysmorphic disorder – she hated her body and wouldn't look in mirrors and things like that. You know, it's a difficult problem but it's a pretty straightforward problem.

But she happened to say in the first session, “Well, it doesn't really matter what we do about that – I mean, I'm suffering from it and I'd like some help from it, but,” she told me, “I basically believe that there are two kinds of people in the world or the universe. Some people are cursed, and no matter what they do – they could have good things happen to them – but in the end, they're cursed for eternity. And some people are blessed.”

And she considered *me* in the *blessed* category – that, no matter if bad things happen to me, it would all work out for me.

And this drove me *crazy*! I mean, it's just like, “Well, so why are we even in therapy? I mean, what's the point? If it's not going to work out, you can get a little better but it's not going to work out.”

And week after week I *really* worked with her to try and put a dent in that. And after about five weeks of she just buried every effort that I made to make any inroad to that, I finally said, "Okay. You're not here for that – but I just want you to know, that bugs me and I really wanted to see if I could change it."

She goes, "You're *not* going to change it – and that's okay. That's not what I came here for."

And then we made progress on the other thing. And I was just like – I found it *so hard* to give that up, partly because I'm psychotically optimistic, as I have said in other settings, but it just bugged me that someone would think their whole life was doomed – not just in this life, but for eternity.

And I found it really – that was *my* problem. She didn't have an issue with it; she was just like, "That's the way it is. These are my beliefs and I don't have any – I didn't come for help with that." She just happened to mention it offhand and it became prominent to me.

So, like Rick, I just had to let that go. It just wasn't doing either of us any good for me to push against that again and again.

And she went on with her therapy and we did fine; we ended the therapy and she was better about her body, and she went off with her beliefs about *cursed and blessed* and I never made any influence on those. It still drives me crazy years later, clearly!

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Dr. Buczynski: Bill clearly showed how our own intentions for our client can affect the therapy.

In Part 2's video, we'll go further into how to put a check on the practitioner's resistance.

I'll see you then.