

Working with Core Beliefs of 'Never Good Enough'

How to Help Clients Heal from Deeply Internalized Judgment

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Working with Core Beliefs of 'Never Good Enough': Steven Hayes, PhD

How to Help Clients Heal from Deeply Internalized Judgment

Dr. Buczynski: Oftentimes, a client's self-worth issues can be traced back to some pretty old wounds. So, how do we help people get off the 'not good enough' treadmill?

Dr. Steven Hayes' approach is to find the origin of the injury; and when he does, *this* is how he helps reprocess the pain—

Dr. Hayes: If you really got people to speak honestly, the *I'm-not-good-enough* story is almost universal.

"The *I'm-not-good-enough* story is universal."

Sometimes in workshops, I will hold my hand up and start reducing it, and I'll ask people to stop me when I've reached the height you were when you first had the thought, *I'm different* – with a negative connotation.

Maybe I'm not smart enough. Maybe I'm not pretty enough. Maybe I'm not good enough. Maybe I'm not strong enough. Maybe, whatever the thing might be.

"Give me a little nod when I hit your height," when I hit your height. And I go down. I go down, down, and we're in three, four, five-year-old territory, and 80% of the crowd is nodding their heads.

So, if I have chronic *I'm not good enough* – (A) I think that really is the human condition; and (B) if it's chronic, it's probably old.

I tend to ask people, "How old is that? How young were you when you first remember that thought?"

After all, it's built in the human language and cognition.

Operate in classical conditioning, learning by contingency learning is half a billion years old. How do you know that? Every species since the Cambrian Period does it. None before.

If you're a jellyfish, a sponge, you don't do it. If you're a spider, a snake, or a horse, or human being, you do. What you and I are doing is not that. That's 200 thousand to 2 million years old. How do you know that's the bracket? The chimpanzees don't do it.

What is the it? The "it" is learning by symbols. Learn it in one, drive it in two.

That would take a bit of a story, but I think it comes from human cooperation.

If you had a characteristic name for an object (which many species do) – when you hear the name, humans, by the time they're 12 months old, orient towards the object. No non-humans do that. But the cooperative species, of course, you would.

If I had a name for an object, even before we had language, and I said the name, given how cooperative we are, it is very likely a listener hearing that would then provide the object.

“We're always symbolically relating things and putting them into networks.”

But going back to the core of this: what it means is, we're always kind of symbolically relating things and putting them into networks. It starts out just with the names of things, but then it goes into difference.

That happens really early on; you learn *same* and *different*. But then *really* early on, you begin to learn comparatives – first physically, but then it breaks free.

A classic example – it really breaks free by the time of kindergarten, let's say. If you had kids, you know this.

A three-year-old wants a nickel more than a dime. A five or six-year-old wants the dime more than the nickel. And what that is marking is that shift to comparisons where you can learn at one direction, drive it in two directions, put it into a network that changes what you do.

I did a Ted Talk on my 30 years of work on relational frame theory, and I took it down to four lines:

Learn it in one.

Drive it in two.

Put it in networks

that change what you do.

A little embarrassing to be able to turn 30 years of work into a ditty...

But you can do that with nickels, dimes, quarters, and pennies. You put them in this vast network of things. You need it to problem solve –

If I'm going to figure out what am I going to do, I need to say, "If I do this, I'll get that. If I do that, I'll get this."

And I've got to do it in my mind. Well, as soon as you do that, you can say, "You should have been like this."

Five- or six-year-olds can say a nickel is smaller than a dime. You're old enough to say, "I'm not good enough." Or, "This is not good enough." Or, "Life should have been like that."

If you want a marker of it, three-year-olds don't commit suicide. Six-year-olds do. Six-year-olds *do*. That's how primitive this thing. You can have, "I'm not good enough." Or, "This is not good enough."

The first ACT book has a little story in there of a six-year-old who threw herself in front of a train. The very first lines of the first ACT book: "A *New York Times* story that I happened to read that shocked me. A *six-year-old* threw herself in front of a train, killing herself. The authorities said her mother had died, and she wanted to go be with her mother in heaven."

I mean, you can imagine a world in which you're better dead when you're six-years-old.

"You are not going to escape judgment being applied to yourself because we evolved the ability to judge other things and problem solve *because* of that. We *need* to do it—*all of us*."

So, here's the thing – you are not going to escape judgment being applied to yourself because we evolved the ability to judge other things and problem solve *because* of that.

We *need* to do it –but that's a wild horse, and it's coming back at you.

And so *all of us* are dealing with, "I'm not good enough."

To come back to the clinical part of this – I'm not thinking of this as a problem. This is just natural human cognition. This is how it works, and it's very old.

And that knowledge allows me to sort of learn in on this, *how old were you...?*

A common thing for me to do would be to take the 'I'm not good enough' feeling; if I can dig it out and some

"Get their set of justifications, and then do a process to go back to how young they were when they first felt this."

of the thoughts that are linked to it because it's supported inside this network of "I'm not good enough because...", then there will be a list.

It turns out, if it wasn't that list, it would be another list. Because everybody has a different list, but they're all not good enough at something.

But what I like to do is then get that list, that set of justifications, and then do a process where I go back to how young a person was when they first felt different; when they first felt it didn't apply to them; that they weren't good, that they didn't belong here, that kind of quality.

“Push really hard to have the current statements be said in the voice of that child, out of that child's mouth.

And we'll spend a lot of time creating an imagination what he or she looked like at that age – sometimes even bring in photos, so you can remember it; the hairdo and the goofy shoes and all the stuff.

And then we walk into what was going on *inside* that child, and I push really hard to have the current statements be said in the voice of that child, out of that child's mouth.

There's usually tears that come with it. The things that we will say to ourselves about why we're not good enough, to that person in the mirror – you take it back to the form where that first took to you, where you first felt the pain of that judgment, before you internalized it and almost began to become the perpetrator of the criticism, and you put it in the voice of the child.

It pulls from you the sadness of the pain of that and the human condition. What the kid probably wanted was more of a hug rather than advice as to how to be good enough to no longer not be good enough. You see what I'm saying?

I'm thinking of a therapist that I worked with who was extremely competent, very well-thought of, very authoritative, dressed to the nines, always. This person looked like she was just on top of everything.

But behind the scenes, it was a constant "I'm not good enough,"- and in fact, most of those things like, *I need to prepare because I'm not good enough, or I need to dress well because I'm not good enough, or I need to know my stuff because I'm not good enough* – and it was all glued up because it was part of the story that had been there for a long time.

So, part of what I did was walk in to how old this is, and she could take it back to being just about six or seven.

And walking inside some of those first stories where peers made comments or her dad said some things to her that were quite critical. I'm not really sure. Some of that might have been change in memory. Because other things about her dad didn't really fit that story, but it penetrated her.

And we did this little kid exercise, putting her in the room. And what she realized when she had those words come out of herself as younger, I said to her, I said, "What does she need from you?"

"She clicked with this place in which the *I'm-not-good-enough* thoughts are not going to go away—so she needs to bring herself a sense of compassionate care.

And she said, "I wanted to hug her."

And I say, "And what does she need from you now?"

And she clicked with this place in which the *I'm-not-good-enough* thoughts are not going to go away. So, what she needs to do for herself is bring that same sense of

compassionate care. You wouldn't try to convince, necessarily, a five or six year old that they were wrong. I think most of us would know that's a fool's errand, and probably the kid will only feel smaller if you try to do that.

And so she was able to bring that same space into what do I do with the chatter within and just get a little bit of perspective and be able to see it the way you might see it if you were hearing that out of the mouth of a child.

I got a note from this person about three months ago about a new clinical project that she was engaging in that was very high level and challenging for her. She put something in there like, "I'm going to hug myself all the way" or something.

It was a little phrase saying, "I'm not driving achievement out to do this. I'm going to do this in a kinder way." And yeah, I want to achieve. I want to do things, but I don't have to do it inside the story that's the disprove that I'm not good enough, which is, is in way, just almost like a slap in the face of that little kid within.

You need something a little more compassionate.

Dr. Buczynski: When we help clients reframe achievement in this way, it can remove the self-judgment that holds them back.

For some further thoughts on Steven's inner child work, here's Dr. Kelly McGonigal, Dr. Ron Siegel and Dr. Joan Borysenko.

Dr. Siegel: Really, this gets to the heart of the matter – very literally to the heart of it. It requires head and heart, but the heart part is so important.

On the one hand, we need to begin inquiring about this experience of not being good enough as though it's a belief. How did you first start to believe it?

But more importantly, I think it's connecting to the pain so that we're not compulsively trying to escape it.

“It's about connecting to the pain so that we're not compulsively trying to escape it.”

So often, when people get near the pain of one of these self-esteem collapses, they either try desperately to have a win or to numb it out through drugs or distraction or something.

We try to escape it rather than move toward it and be with the moment-to-moment pain experience of a self-esteem collapse. It's actually the logic behind the self-esteem autobiography that I mentioned in my video segment, which is really, can you go through from the very earliest ups and downs and see what the feelings were at every stage and see what the criteria were, what the things were that we hung our self-esteem hat on at these different phases.

Because I think when we get close to it, on a heart level, it helps to heal it if we can feel it; and on a head level, it helps us to see how arbitrary these different judgments are.

I've mentioned IFS and Dick Schwartz before. It's really about talking with the exiled part, and it's part of all healing-the-inner-child kinds of treatments.

Just a brief clinical vignette this week's segment made me think of, because it happened when I was listening to it that I saw a fellow –

He's a very smart guy. He was very smart as a kid. But he's struggling about getting back into the work world, and the core fear is that he won't be smart enough. He has this image that really smart people have certainty about their decision and have certainty about their beliefs. But, he's aware of his profound uncertainty.

And he also believes that really smart people can solve complex problems on the spot whereas he feels like he has to think about them for a while and mull them over before he can say something intelligent.

And we really began a process very much like the one that Steve was suggesting. When did you first become concerned about being smart?

And he realized it happened when he was very young. First, there were comparisons to his older brother who was really smart, and then his mother who used to talk about the world as though it were divided between

smart people and stupid people, by basically pointing out how stupid that person is and how stupid that person is.

That set up this basic worldview that you've got to be in one camp or the other. And then when he was 10 or 11, he's short – and he was short then – and he started realizing that he was probably going to stay short. He wasn't going to be a tall kid at any point. And that made him double down on this idea, "Well, I can be the smart one."

It's interesting. Now currently we're working with this. So what does that feel like exactly when you feel like you haven't been so smart?

It's a sense of collapse and embarrassment and particularly a sense of being small in all meanings of the term. It's like somehow now I'm small in all the different statures. And it's been very rewarding work, though, because he's come to see that as he develops the courage to face what are essentially transient feelings of smallness and self-esteem collapse and doesn't die from them and then comes back up, and in fact, his mood comes back up afterwards, that he doesn't have to be so afraid of them.

The *less* people know and the worse they are, the more certain they are of their decisions and their opinions. The *more* people know and the smarter they are, the more uncertain."

And if he's not so afraid of them, then he's got all this flexibility because the worst that can happen is *I'll have another self-esteem collapse and I know how to do self-esteem collapse.*

So, it really is following what Steve is suggesting and it's very heartening to see it work.

Dr. McGonigal: Did you also share with him the research that sort of the more competent and experience you are, the less certainty you have?

Dr. Siegel: Yeah. In fact, we talked about that a lot.

Dr. Buczynski: Can you say that again?

Dr. McGonigal: It's a paradox. The *less* people know and the worse they are, the more certain they are of their decisions and their opinions. And the *more* people know and the smarter they are, the more uncertain.

Dr. Buczynski: It's easier to be certain when you don't know very much.

Dr. McGonigal: Yes. Exactly. I would take certainty as a sign to run away from someone who I was interested in hiring. I'd be looking for evidence of a little bit of doubt and holding open the possibility that one is wrong and awaiting new information.

Dr. Borysenko: You know, I learned an approach a good 30 years ago from Louise Hay, and she used to do it with AIDS patients at the very beginning of the AIDS epidemic. In that population, there was a lot of self-judgment, a lot of worry about being different, and a lot of worry about being ill.

And what she did was a meditation that went through the whole life cycle from different points in childhood right up to the present. And it's very, very powerful. I've used it literally hundreds of times, Ruth.

First you see yourself as a baby – and really, you know, it's good if a person has a picture and they can see themselves as a child, and then how beautiful that child is, how vulnerable, how authentic. That child is just themselves. And in the meditation, you look at that child, allow yourself really to feel those feelings, and then mentally tuck that baby into your heart.

And then you go to a time a little bit later in childhood and look at the child – and often, you know, you can see this is when something is starting: that people will choose a time when they were a child and they weren't accepted or there was something not quite right. And once again, look into the eyes of that child and then connect and take the child and put it in your heart.

And go through the stages of adolescence, the stages where these things really happened.

And then, finally, you're imagining your adult self and you're looking into your eyes and accepting yourself for the precious being that you are now, with having gone through all those layers of judgment and pain—and then *accepting* your adult self into your heart.

And it's a *very, very* powerful process.

Dr. Buczynski: Those were some helpful insights on the early developmental connections to a client's self-worth.

In the next video, we'll explore three ways to disrupt worthless feelings. I'll see you then.

“You're looking into your eyes and accepting yourself for the precious being that you are now, with having gone through all those layers of judgment and pain—and then *accepting* your adult self into your heart.”