

# Working with Core Beliefs of 'Never Good Enough'

## 3 Tools to Help Clients Reverse a Sense of Worthlessness

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

National Institute for the Clinical  
Application of Behavioral Medicine





Working with Core Beliefs of 'Never Good Enough': Marsha Linehan, PhD

## 3 Tools to Help Clients Reverse a Sense of Worthlessness

**Dr. Buczynski:** So many people go through life believing that they're unworthy of love or respect. So, how do we help clients build a stronger sense of self-worth?

Dr. Marsha Linehan says that this can be a difficult challenge, especially when shame is involved. But as Marsha tells us, an important first step is to guide your client through a critical fact-check.

**Dr. Linehan:** Well, not good enough . . . of course, you have to find out – good enough for what?

In general, what clients are?

(1) They have shame.

(2) They're not lovable.

(3) They're terrible people.

All of that. The first thing you have to find out, especially if you said *not good enough*, you have to find out if it's true.

I mean, it may be true. It may be that I am not good enough to get that job. Or I'm not good enough to do this, or I'm not good enough to take care of my children.

So, if that's a realistic belief about yourself, if it's really true that you're not good enough for something, then the therapist has to teach the client how to do whatever it is that they need to be doing.

So, it's not that I would never think that that's not true, because it might be. And then you don't want to go around acting like things aren't true just because you don't want them to be true.

So, that would be step one: *you're not good enough for what?* And then you have to help them evaluate, *is that true or not true?*

Now I'm trying to think whether I have any client where that's really been the topic. Generally, my clients have shame. And they have shame and feelings that they're not lovable, feelings that they're stupid, feelings

that they're this, that, or the other – all the feelings which have nothing to do with reality. That's the most common thing that I have.

So generally, the first thing I do with people is ask them, "Was there evidence that it's true?"

“Feelings are not reality. They're not facts that you have to go from. You have to give up feelings and go to facts.”

And then in general, they'll then say that the evidence is that they feel that way.

So, I have to spend a fair amount of time on people — the feelings are not reality. They're not facts that you have to go from. You have to give up feelings and go to facts.

I've run into many of my clients who think that they're mentally ill if they start talking to themselves. I find this interesting, because how many people have said that they can't talk themselves.

So, then I have to do a whole thing on talking to yourself is *normative*. It's also a good idea, at which point I usually tell them all the ways I talk to myself, which is practically every day I'm talking to myself – *Come on. You can do this. You'll be good at this. – Don't worry. You're going to do it. – Okay, so you made a mistake. Let's not get upset about that. – Let's do this – Da-da-da-da.*

I have to spend a fair amount of time convincing them that talking to yourself is not psychotic, which a lot of my clients have thought, and therefore they won't do it. So, one thing is to teach them how to talk to themselves.

Now the other thing you have to do is see the reality of what some of them think. Like, I've certainly had a lot of clients who think, "I'm not good enough," mainly because they lose all their friends.

I have had clients who were incredibly good at making friends and terrible at keeping friends. Generally — this is my latest of my late, but I haven't put this in my book yet – I realized that the minute you think that somebody doesn't like you, you can get them to not like you by just treating them as if they don't like you.

So then I've done all this treatment now with clients saying, "You make good friends but you lose them and the reason you lose them is you start thinking they don't like you, or they're not treating you well and stuff like that. But the minute you do that, you start to lose them. So, we're going to practice exactly the opposite. We're going to practice from now on that anybody that you have ever liked, you're going to treat everyone as if they like you, and we're going to see what happens. So this is the deal – whoever you're around, you're

going to act as if they like you."

I had this stunning effect of people liking her.

And she would come in and say, "I can't believe it. I can't believe you were right, Marsha."

I say, "I know. I can't believe it myself." But it turned out to be very effective.

So, one thing is how to teach a client how to change themselves, how to change their lives, how to change this, how to change that.

When it comes to shame, I've had a lot of clients who have said things to me that were serious things that they had done. And so what I teach everyone is this:

Shame fits the facts if it's true that if other people find out about it, they'll reject you. The function of shame in humans is to get them to keep quiet about things that will make other people reject them.

A lot of my clients have shame that fits the facts.

You know, I had a client who raped a child. Not *raped* a child, but had done sexual – er, problematic things with a child. It wasn't really either of those but . . .

So the idea is to help a person see that there are a lot of people who disapprove of other people for reasons that we could both disagree with. And although your shame may fit the facts, a good example of that is not so much historically now, but it used to be that if you were gay and anybody found out about you, you lost your job.

So, shame fit the facts. In other words, keep your mouth shut.

I tell my clients all the time, for God's sake, do not go around telling everyone you meet criteria for borderline personality disorder because if you tell them that, they will judge you, and they will dislike you or they won't do things for you.

So what it means is that shame fits the facts, but then you have to tell them, "But it's wrong that society is like that." So then, what you have to do is exactly what the gays did: "You have to fight against it. You have to get groups. You have to get other people together, and you have to fight against this."

But the facts are, there are a lot of things in the world that aren't fair, and you have to recognize those

things.

But that doesn't mean that you're actually a bad person. That means that the universe thinks you might be a bad person.

And so it's helping people see that their feelings fit the facts, but the facts are wrong. In other words, they're problematic. They're unfair. They're mean. They're this. it's helping people see that their feelings fit the facts, but the facts are wrong

So, that's a lot of how I deal with these things.

Now with teenagers, it's a different story. Because the problem with all the teenagers we've treated is that they go online, and the mean stuff that is said online is absolutely unbelievable to me. It's kind of like, "I don't think you're very pretty. I mean, why don't you throw some gas or something on your face and then kill yourself? You'd be a lot better." You get that kind of stuff. I mean, it's not uncommon.

There's all this terrible stuff that goes on online with these kids and people say the meanest stuff. I don't know where the mothers are that are letting their kids say these mean things.

So, with that group, you really do have to work on, does it fit the facts? Are what these people saying fitting the facts or not fitting the facts?

But it's very hard with adolescents in particular, to get them to change, to be themselves, and to feel better about themselves. In a large part, you're going to get their parents to help them with it and also get them to stop looking at things when people say things like that. Or, I never tell anyone to put their own name in. I figure that would be a real big mistake.

But they also have to learn to fight against these things, that people say really mean things to other people. And then you have to learn to see that other people can be very mean, unfairly and, incorrectly, wrong about you.

And so that's when you want kids to have friends who they can talk to and say, "So-and-so said this."

And you say that to someone that you're pretty sure is going to say, "Oh, I can't believe they said that. I love you." Things like that.

"It's helping people see that their feelings fit the facts, but the facts are wrong—it's helping people see that their feelings fit the facts, but the facts are wrong."

So that adolescence in part — I'm surprised any of them make it through given all the mean things that get said. And you can't really ask an adolescent not to go online because that's sort of their life, is going online.

So that's when you get the parents involved also with seeing what is being said to their children. It's not that they have to keep them off. Some of the times they probably do, but what you have to do is find people who can give them a different take on themselves.

“You have to be open to finding out what's really going on. A lot of our problem is that we need to change our own behavior.”

So that's essentially what it is – teaching people how to talk to themselves, how to check the facts about themselves, and also how to change things that really are causing the problems.

It can often be the case that the real problem is you've got problematic behavior yourself with other people. The clients of mine who went around all the time treating people as if they didn't like

them because they didn't get invited to one thing.

You also have to sort of get your client to see *I am creating the problem that I don't want – and, I need to work on figuring out how to change that for myself.*

It's not that you have to treat both of those things. You have to be open to finding out what's really going on. A lot of our problem is that we need to change our own behavior.

**Dr. Buczynski:** As Marsha mentioned, and as we all know, sometimes healing can't begin until the client sees their own role in the problem.

Dr. Ron Siegel and Dr. Kelly McGonigal had some additional takes on two of the ideas that Marsha just shared.

**Dr. McGonigal:** What stood out to me was actually just one single thing that Marsha said. She said that often when you ask people, "What's your evidence," they say something that's, "I feel this way."

I just thought I would highlight that because there's so much research showing that people listen to their feelings and then construct a narrative or a justification for initial feelings, particularly in the area of fears or worries.

There's actually just a feeling of anxiety, and then the brain is like, "Wait. What do I attach to this? Because if I attach a story to it, maybe I can control it."

But actually, it was just a physiological sensation or habit first, and definitely with moral judgments, that often people have an initial feeling of disgust or unfairness, and it's not based on anything except perhaps some biases or maybe culture. But then all of a sudden, they start constructing elaborate intellectual explanations for why they're right when they're only real initial evidence was some unconscious emotional reaction. So it's an interesting thing to explore.

**Dr. Buczynski:** To add to your point, years ago in my practice, I would pay for supervision and drive maybe two hours to go to the person I really wanted to go to for supervision.

And I was talking about a case, and she said, "I would tell that person that she puts too much weight on her feelings. Yes, you feel that, but you're constructing this whole thing as if it's the truth."

**Dr. Siegel:** There's a recent book. I don't know if we've mentioned it in this series. I haven't read it, but I heard the authors on the radio. It's a Harvard psychiatrist and his daughter who is a humorist. Well, I don't want to be bleeped out, but the title of the book is *F--- Feelings*. Right? It's precisely this premise, that putting too much weight on them can be problematic.

**Dr. McGonigal:** I did not know that that is what that book was about. I saw that book, and I was like...mmm.

**Dr. Siegel:** Catchy title.

**Dr. McGonigal:** Maybe it's interesting, grounded in research.

**Dr. Siegel:** Well, it's actually right up your alley.

**Dr. McGonigal:** See? And I had an emotional reaction to that title that let me to construct a whole story about why I wouldn't like the book.

**Dr. Siegel:** Their main thrust is use values to orient your behavior, not feelings.

**Dr. McGonigal:** Yeah.

Self-talk is an extremely useful tool. So it's true that some people think that talking to themselves is like, "I can't talk to myself. That's what a crazy person does." I think that's what she was sharing. She shared the example, the abundant research that athletes use self-talk and that there are multiple types of self-talk that improve performance, motivation, emotion, and mood, that you can have informational self-talk where you actually are literally, you know what you're supposed to do, and you talk yourself through it — totally

applicable to therapy.

You remind yourself of what the steps are. There's motivational self-talk where you encourage yourself and support yourself.

And then there is also even what's called interrogative — like you're interrogating yourself, but that's not what it really is like — where you ask yourself questions that might guide you. Like, "Kelly, do you really want to do this, and why do you want this?"

And then you answer that question to yourself. These are all linked to things like professional basketball players making more of their shots or endurance athletes being able to go longer in excruciating weather conditions and also to people who are just trying to make ordinary changes in their lives. So I would share that this is what people do when they want to be their best selves.

Self-talk. Embrace it.

One of the things I find really interesting from the research on self-talk is how useful it is to talk to yourself in the second person.

So instead of saying, "I can do this. I'm going to do this," I might say, "Kelly, you can do this. Kelly, you are doing this."

A number of studies show that when you talk to yourself in the second person, it has a bigger boost on your mood, a more positive affect; it strengthens your motivation more, and it leads to better follow through with whatever the behavior or the intention is.

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And the way I think about it — I've never heard another researcher talk about it this way — is that you're basically harnessing the social brain.

We know that we're incredibly social creatures and that receiving the support of others or the guidance of others is extremely effective and powerful. And so when you use self-talk in the second person, you're basically just exploiting how social our brains are, and you're relating to yourself, and then you're the recipient of that inner mentor or that inner coach.

**Dr. Siegel:** Very, very interesting. I had a 10th-grade trigonometry teacher who, when people would be freaking that "I can't understand trigonometry," he said, "There's only three things you have to do. You have

to learn how to talk to yourself. Then you have to listen to what you've heard, and then you have to do what you've just learned."

And he said, "Just do this repeatedly with all the steps. You'll do fine."

**Dr. Buczynski:** That was an interesting angle Kelly had on the idea of self-talk – how you're harnessing the social brain.

In the next video, we'll look at how EMDR can transform feelings of "never good enough". I'll see you then.