

Working with Core Beliefs of 'Never Good Enough'

How EMDR Can Reprocess the Felt Sense of 'Never Good Enough'

with Ruth Buczynski, PhD; Laurel Parnell, PhD;
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Working with Core Beliefs of 'Never Good Enough': Laurel Parnell, PhD

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Dr. Buczynski: How do we help clients who struggle with familial messages of self-worth?

Dr. Laurel Parnell had a client who lived with such a deep sense of inadequacy, he would sabotage his own success—but when Laurel reprocessed the stickiest parts of his pain, he could finally see an opportunity for change.

Dr. Parnell: There's so many different places that this can develop. It can be from parents who have really high standards.

And what we were finding in Singapore, where it's so deep in the culture – the standards are so high, it's very hard to ever feel like you're good enough – it has to be an A+; an A isn't good enough.

So in some cultures and in some families, the standards are so very high that the child never feels like he or she can match that up.

Let's say they have a sibling who is really a star in some area, and they can never be as good as their really smart brother or their really smart sister. So, you have this.

It's societal. It's certainly in the society. You know, there are these models for it.

But it very often comes from the family.

And then you've adolescence, and then you've got schools. So it can come from a teacher who was really punitive and very critical. Or a boyfriend, girlfriend, friends, any of that kind of stuff.

“Everybody has different strengths and weaknesses; come and know ourselves as we are.”

What's important for all of us is to come to, what are our capacities? Everybody has different strengths and weaknesses; come and know ourselves as we are.

And then, it's coming back to, if the belief is really "I'm not good enough. I can never be good enough" – I want to look at, where did

that come from? Where in the past did that develop?

And I always take a good developmental history with a client in terms of what were the circumstances around their conception, their birth, all the way up. And then I'm listening for where some of these themes came in.

It may have nothing to do with the parents. Maybe it had to do with, as I said, a teacher. It could have to do with their religious background. Maybe there is some ideal that they're trying to live up to.

So, I'm looking for, where did that come from? What can they tell me?

And then in terms of the treatment of this, I'm going to do the resourcing where we go to our peaceful place — nurturing figures, protector figures, and the wise figures. I think it would be really important to have this team.

And then, with the EMDR, going back and targeting and reprocessing those places in the past are linked to the "I'm not good enough."

“ Do the resourcing where we go to our peaceful place — nurturing figures, protector figures, and the wise figures.

Maybe it's the father criticizing the client — "You're not living up to what you could be doing."

Let's say they were a skinny adolescent boy who just wasn't good in sports, and he was really put down for that. — So this feeling of "I'm not good enough" . . . where did that come from? Maybe it was a coach or something.

That would be how I would do it with the EMDR.

I had a man some years ago — it was a long time ago now — and it was interesting. I was going back to my notes.

He came in specifically for this: it was a deeply engrained feeling of "I'm not living up to my potential. I can never do it well enough. I'm not good enough."

And he really had a very harsh, punitive, inner critic that would really put him down so much.

And a lot of this was linked to his father who was a medical doctor and a humanitarian, who was very good at what he did, but was also very punitive.

And he was from a particular religious tradition that also had very high ideals.

And this client had an older brother who was a big success; and then the brother had a psychotic break and completely collapsed probably, in part, because of the pressure on him.

In our work, we would target and reprocess some of these places from childhood with the father. We worked developmentally – working on the early stuff with father and with brother.

And then he had some so-called *failures* in his life in terms of businesses, where it just felt like it reinforced that view of himself. So those were also targeted and reprocessed.

So we were doing that, and then the other side of it is we would go in and we would focus on times when he felt successful, times when we felt like he really was enough. He even had some ecstatic times. And we would focus on those. We would add bilateral stimulation.

And it was the traumas and also focusing on the successes and the times when he did feel like he was enough. He was good enough.

We had one session that was really wonderful where he recalled a time in high school or college where he was playing football. And it was a time where there's that synchrony of everything coming together. You're completely in the zone. You're in the zone with your teammates. And there was a pass. He caught it. I think he made the touchdown. Whatever it was, it was in a complete flow.

We tapped that in, and there was a sense of synchrony, of flow, of ecstasy in that flow of all of that. Because part of what he was doing was he would not let himself be successful either. He was afraid of success. So he'd almost be successful, and then he'd sabotage it in some way.

This was helping him connect to a body memory – both the imagery but also the *physicality* of being successful, of completing something – and how good that felt.

So, we used bilateral simulation with this, and it was amazing. That helped kind of fill it in.

But I think ultimately what's so key is that we come to "I'm enough as I am."

As I am.

It's not about the outer. It's about that sense of wholeness inside.

And he came to that also.

With EMDR, with kind of straight EMDR, what happens is you start with a trauma. You reprocess a trauma, and the positive naturally arises.

It's really helpful with performance enhancement — so for creativity and performance enhancement — to do both of those things, to focus on the blocks to performance but also to recall times when you were successful or to imagine being successful, to doing what you're wanting to do — writing, sports, whatever it is. It's very common in kind of those performance protocol. Yeah.

Dr. Buczynski: By recalling a felt sense of positive emotions, Laurel's client could overcome the repressive thoughts that held him back.

Laurel talked about helping clients develop an accurate sense of their strengths and weaknesses. I wanted to hear more on this idea, so here's Dr. Ron Siegel and Dr. Kelly McGonigal.

Dr. Siegel: I think this topic of having an accurate sense is really important when we look at self-esteem issues because we certainly all agree that having an accurate appraisal is useful on a practical matter.

Now, I don't know how to do brain surgery, so I'm not going to attempt that. It's useful to have that information. And we see how problematic it is when people don't know what they don't know.

On a societal level, the kind of anti-science zeitgeist that we have going in some parts of the population is sort of part of that, of thinking, *well, it's my opinion, and my opinion is as good as anyone else's*, and not valuing and, *well, actually the peer-reviewed opinion may hold a little bit more weight*.

It's certainly problematic to not know what we don't know or what we can't do.

But it's quite problematic to have the opposite.

I think of a patient of mine – a really, really bright guy had been Pre-Med years ago as an undergraduate. He wanted to go to medical school, but he thought, *no, I can't take the MCAT. I can't take the exam you've got to take because I don't think I can ace it* – despite the fact that he had done perfectly well as an undergraduate and, I'm sure, would have done fine.

So, these underestimations cause all sorts of problems as well.

So certainly, it would be helpful to have an accurate estimation.

But the larger question for me is, does that touch the I'm-good-enough/not-good-enough issue? I think

sometimes it does, but it's not going to heal these injuries. It's not going to heal the sense of hurt and vulnerability that stays frozen with the feeling of not good enough from moments like the ones that Kelly was talking about earlier that several of our presenters have talked about.

An accurate sense of my abilities won't help a person to see this sort of addictive trap of trying to enhance self-esteem, the way in which, *oh, it feels so good to have a win and to feel successful or loved or whatever that is and so bad to have the opposite happen.*

It won't necessarily free somebody from that, so I thought it's a necessary component of freeing us, but other things are probably needed too.

Dr. McGonigal: Most people probably listening to this are familiar with the VIA from Positive Psychology, the Values in Action Strengths Finder.

One of the reasons I really like that approach to strengths is because you're really asking people about their values versus their achievements. And I think sometimes it's like getting a good sense of your strengths versus your weaknesses.

If it's connected to not feeling good enough, it's going to reinforce that achievement mindset — the determinant of your being good enough is your achievements. Whereas the VIA points people in the direction of what they want to offer the world, what they enjoy doing, how they contribute and how they experience life.

And so, I would throw that in too. If you want to get an accurate sense of your strengths and weaknesses, that even how you define strengths can make a very big difference in whether the process is beneficial.

Dr. Buczynski: The values versus achievements model can be an effective way to help clients assess their strengths. Now, just to circle back to Dr. Laurel Parnell again – she also spoke of the cultural differences in educational standards.

For some further thoughts on how this can affect feelings of 'not good enough', here's Bill O'Hanlon and Dr. Joan Borysenko.

Mr. O'Hanlon: I think that the two things come to mind for me is this Carol Dweck work on mindset that she wrote about in her book *Mindset*.

She's an educational psychologist and studied what helped kids thrive when they had initial troubles with a

subject — like math, or art. Maybe they don't think they have any abilities in that.

Well, she did some experiments, and she was able to convince some kids that art or math is a muscle, not an in-born skill.

So, that's one thing — Think of it as a muscle. And if you're not good at it, you can exercise that muscle by doing problems that are slightly hard for you — not overwhelmingly hard, but slightly hard.

And I think the other thing — this is the thing we've talked about before because, Ruth, you and I, we were in a program, and this stuck with me so much. The guy who ran the program said: "Never compare yourself to other people. Only compare yourself to yourself" — and use where you were a month ago or six months ago or a year ago.

Because sometimes I get discouraged and look at other people and think, *oh, they're so much farther than I am.*

And I thought, *well, if I thought of myself a year ago, if I'd been able to do this a year ago, I would have been jumping up and down, and now I'm sort of down on myself because I'm not where I want to be three years from now."*

So, compare yourself to where you were and how much progress you've made.

And even if it's incremental progress, as Milton Erickson, my teacher, said, "If you fall on your face, at least you're heading in the right direction." You've moved just a little in a good direction.

So, I'd say don't compare yourself to other people.

And those societies — I've been to Singapore as well — the high standards they have, they're always comparing you to something else or someone else.

I say compare yourself to you, and if you had an A last time, you can get go for an A+. If you had a C last time, you can go for C+.

You just compare yourself to yourself, and the other one is a losing game. Because there's always going to be somebody who's way better than you, and that will make you discouraged because you think, *Oh, I'll never get there.*

Dr. Borysenko: You know, this whole question of Singapore captivated me because they've done such a

terrific job with their educational system and their healthcare system, while ours are both going in the wrong direction.

Remember that book *Tiger Mom*? And how is it that we're supposed to raise our kids to succeed? I think this is a very vital question, Ruth.

Recently at a conference, I met a woman who is noted in the field of positive psychology and that's Caroline Miller.

Her newest book is called *How to Develop Grit*. And there is a very interesting riff in there that looks at what's happened in schools and in sports in America, where, if you have done nothing good at all, you still get the trophy; even if your team loses — I saw my grandchild's team — the losing team all got a trophy this big.

“In American schools and sports, if you have done nothing good at all, you still get a trophy. You think that raises self-esteem, but it's effecting their ability to be resilient.”

It turns out that way of raising a child, thinking that's raising their self-esteem, does *not* work at all because they grow up without resilience.

And what happens is the first time they have a challenge in the real world, they don't know what to do. They thought that we're always perfect in every way. So, it's like the reality testing gets impaired.

So, I look at a system of education like Singapore, and I think it's very, very important for kids to actually get feedback. We've been talking about feedback. What did you really do? How can you really improve?

And I agree. Comparing yourself to others doesn't work. You *have* to compare yourself to yourself.

I'll give you a couple of analogies just from my own life.

I remember very well my fifth-grade teacher, Mr. Wolfson. He was an English teacher, and I loved his class.

I remember we studied Greek mythology, and we actually had to write a satire on one of the myths, and then we had to turn it into a piece of performance art.

He was a highly creative teacher, and I loved it. And English has always been my forte. We all have different strengths for sure, but English was always a strength. I was always later in advanced placement courses and won the National Council of Teachers' English Award for the state of Massachusetts, and things like that.

But Mr. Wolfson gave me a B. And I thought, "How did I get a B? These other kids who didn't nearly do as well as I did got an A."

And then he called me into his office, and he said, "Joan, you were by far the best student that I have ever had. But in fact, you could have done a much better job because this is your forte, and I did not grade you relative to other people or you would have gotten the highest grade in the class. I graded you relative to what I think you could have done, and I think you could have done even better. And this is how . . ."

And then he gave me the feedback for what I needed to develop.

I look back on that, and I was a really sensitive child and kind of easily hurt, and I wasn't hurt at all because he definitely did what we hope we'll all do with clients, with students, and with others. And that was – he wasn't criticizing me.

He was giving me feedback on the output of things that I could do where I did them better. That's important.

And then I think about how we all have different gifts and talents.

For example, I think many kids, just the way their brains are developed — you'll hear this over and over — they're really, really good at geometry but not algebra, trigonometry, calculus; they might be able to pass a course, but they're not going to be a mathematician. That's not going to be their forte.

And I think it's very, very important for people to realize that.

My forte was English. Somebody else's forte is mathematics, and it's so important that we recognize somebody else's forte may be art, and that's fine.

We can all do, perhaps, better in the various subjects, but there are some that we will excel in, and we have to play to our own gifts and talents.

But we need feedback, and we don't need to be given awards for things that we never did. I think that's really killing off a lot of potential in our children.

Dr. Buczynski: As Joan pointed out, helping clients compare themselves to themselves is a much healthier comparison model.

In the next video, we'll look at how to release procedural memories of unworthiness. I'll see you then.

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