

# Working with Core Beliefs of 'Never Good Enough'

How to Repair an Attachment History that Fosters Loathing

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## How to Repair an Attachment History that Fosters Loathing

**Dr. Buczynski:** How do we help clients who grow up feeling so deeply sub-par that it hinders their ability to forgive themselves?

Dr. Sue Johnson had a client who wrestled with core feelings of worthlessness after an extramarital affair – but once Sue helped her reframe her experiences, her client was finally able to face the pain of her past.

**Dr. Johnson:** We decide who we are when we look into the eyes of the people we love.

And where did this start?

We start talking about her narrative – that she always felt that way in her family. She had four siblings, and her father was the big figure in the family, and from her point of view, her other four siblings got all kinds of support and caring from the dad. They made mistakes, and they got all kinds of support. But she was an athlete, and he wanted an athlete. And for her, the standards were different.

“We decide who we are when we look into the eyes of the people we love.”

And even though her dad's old now, and she's actually had this conversation with him, and he agrees that for her the standards were different, she felt she could never please him, ever, ever, never please him.

She talked about doing sports events where she could come second, which was an enormous shift for her, and he would basically say, "What was wrong with the first place? Couldn't make that, eh?"

And she would go into this dreadful thing of being angry on one level, but also in this dreadful thing of, "I can never please. I'm not good enough."

And then she marries a man whose family speaks another language most of the time, and she feels shut out. And when she explains to the family and him that she's shut out, basically, the message she gets is, "Well, you should just learn this language because we're going to talk in this language around the dinner table at all these family events."

And her husband is quite shutdown anyway. And she gets, again, that she's not acceptable. She's not worthy.

And so, she gets enraged on one level, but then she goes into this dreadful feeling of, "There's something

wrong with me. I'm not good enough. I can't learn this language. I tried, and I can't. I'm never going to belong. I'm never going to be accepted."

And of course, people are very vulnerable in that place.

And in that place, she met this person she had the brief affair with, who sounds like somebody who's very good at knowing when women are vulnerable and who's kind of a gigolo. And then she has this brief affair with him, and her husband finds out, and they separate.

And there again is, "There, you see. I've blown it. I'm never good enough."

So, in EFT, I would go into that emotional process with her as it's happening in the moment. And we look at all those emotions. We look at what triggers them.

She'll go to see her father, and he'll say to her, "Have you got back with your husband yet?"

It's a question. But what she hears is, "You've blown it. Are you going to make it better?"

And so, we talk about her triggers. We talk about how her body responds to that. She says, "I can't breathe. I feel this weight on my chest. I don't know what to do. I want to shout at him, but I don't. I go away."

And then we talk about what does she say to herself, the cognitive part. She says, "Maybe he's right. I should have got back with my husband. I should have learned the language. I should have been first in the sports thing. He's right. He's right. I can never be good enough."

And then she gets into all this grief and shame and feelings of aloneness and helplessness. So, we talk about that – the action tendency.

She doesn't actually go and get angry at anybody. She goes and ruminates by herself and goes into this place of, "There's something wrong with me."

So, we get clear about that. We catch it as it's happening.

We clarify it. We distill it.

And then I do the same, because I believe in the power of attachment, and attachment interactions really change how we see ourselves and how we see the world. So, then I will ask her to close her eyes and have imaginary encounters with these attachment figures.

You can start anywhere. Start with what's most real for the client.

I say, "So you talked to your father on the phone today. If you close your eyes, and you see your father's face, what would you like to say to your father? Now we've had this conversation about what happens to you emotionally and how you hurt and how you've never felt seen and validated and valued and held. What would you like to say to your father?"

It's so interesting because we think it's too removed. But attachment, longing, and fear is so strong that it comes straight into the room, no problem.

She closes her eyes, and she says, "I can't say it to him."

Cognitively that makes no sense. He's not even there. But emotionally . . .

I say, "Ah, okay, this is too hard. Let's slice it thinner. What would you say about not being able to say it?"

And then she closes her eyes, and she says, "Dad, I've never been able to tell you . . . I can't even do it here sitting in this therapist's chair. I can't imagine telling you how much I've longed for your approval." And she starts to weep. She said, "I so wanted your approval. Just one look, and it's like you'd never give it to me. You'd never give it to me. I don't understand why wouldn't you give it to me."

Then she weeps, and we start to help her clarify that message, and I stay there with her. This time I'm supporting her, helping with her emotion.

And the conversation goes with her father, and she gets to the place where she's got more of her emotional balance. And she says to him without being overwhelmed, she says, "I worked so hard. I worked my whole childhood and adolescence for one smile of approval from you, and it so hurts you didn't give me that. And it doesn't really make any difference now when you're old, and you turn and say offhand things like, *yes, I think I was probably harder on you than the others.*"

She said, "That doesn't work, Dad. That doesn't work. I hurt, and I longed for your approval, and I started to think there was something wrong with me. And I don't want to feel that way anymore."

Same with couples. She comes out. She can order her emotion, regulate it, and come out and engage in this drama, even though it's imaginary. And then it starts to shift.

In another session, it's her husband, an attachment figure she talks about. And I say, "Can you imagine

“We talk to our attachment figures all the time in our minds.”

phoning your husband and telling him about how you're in a panic because you just saw this man you had an affair with?"

And she said, "Oh, no. No. I couldn't do that because I don't deserve that because I did this dreadful thing, and so I can't call my husband and ask

him for support because I deserve . . ."

So, then we go into that. We walk around in that emotion. And then we turn it into a new interactional dance in her mind, because we talk to our attachment figures all the time in our minds. We spend most of our life engaged in these attachment dramas, actually.

By the way, I do this with religious partners, with God as well. God's an attachment figure.

But she ends up being able to say to her partner, imaginary, "I can't ask you. I'm still shutdown with you even after six years. And I know you want us to get together. But I can't open up the door because I don't deserve your caring. I don't deserve it. How can I ask you for help when I hurt you so badly? How can I ask you?"

And then I say, "And what does he say?" So, you play the other part.

And she looked surprised. Look at how alive these dramas are.

She says, "Oh, he says what he said to me the other night."

I said, "What's that?"

She said, "Oh, he says you had the affair because I was so distant, and I understand that now, and I don't see you as a bad person."

I said, "Oh, that's what he says to you?"

She says, "Yes."

And then you see the block. "Can you take that in?"

"No."

"What gets in the way?"

She can't move into self-compassion. She's stuck. What am I going to do with that?

"What gets in the way?"

"How could I have done that? I went against all my principles. I'm a religious person. How could I have done that? How could I?"

I say, "Let's look at that. You just told me how you could do it. You were hurting. You were alone. You were desperate."

She gets stuck there. So, I use me. I say, "You told me your story. Can you look in my face right now? You told me, *I was so alone and desperate, someone smiled at me, and I reached for them.*"

Now I've put it all in attachment terms. "And you just told me that. And what do you see in my face?"

And she looks, and she looks, and she looks, and she says, "I don't see any disapproval."

I say, "What do you see?"

She says, "You look sad."

I say, "Yeah. I feel sad for you. I can't imagine. From your story, you felt disapproved of and alone and rejected for, like, 35 years. And then someone smiled at you, and suddenly the sun came out, and you just reached out your hand. Yeah. That feels so sad for me. I can so understand that."

And she weeps.

I give her the approval and acceptance that she can't give herself. And then she starts to move into that.

So we work with "never good enough" from an attachment frame. We work with the fact that we're human beings. We never outgrow the need for validation and to be seen and accepted in our vulnerable places, in all our places, by someone we love. And if we don't have that, we've only got so many other ways to cope.

And this is in complete antithesis to what our profession has actually taught and what our society believes, which is that once you reach the age of 12, you're not supposed to need anybody's approval. You're supposed to be this little, contained, self-defining, individuated, separating, independent autonomous little being, which of course is rubbish. I've never met a human being like that.

"We work with the fact that we're human beings. We never outgrow the need for validation and to be seen and accepted in our vulnerable places, by someone we love."

You'll find them in textbooks. You'll find them in psychologist's books, but I've never met anyone. We all need that approval.

**Dr. Buczynski:** As Sue shared, when a client is unable to feel self-compassion, it can really lock in their sense of 'never good enough'.

In the next video, we'll explore ways to keep clients out of the social comparison game. I'll see you then.