Role Play #5: Engaging A High-Achieving, Anxious, and Angry Client

**Counselor:** Hi Jane, I'm Gary Margolis, Glad to meet you. Nice to meet you, finally. I've talked to you on the phone. Glad you are here. Yeah, sure. And I'm happy to listen to what brings you here today.

**Jane:** Well, I've had certain incidents that have happened to me. I have been very successful most of my life, I have an M.B.A. and graduated at the top of my class, and I have had problems with people really resenting my efficiency and my intelligence at work. Well, I raised issues about my concern with other people's inefficiency and inability to meet deadlines. It hasn't gone over well and I've lost four jobs in the last year and half and I just want to discuss strategies with you on how can handle the situation and how I can deal with those kinds of people at work.

**Counselor:** I'd like to learn more about that with you and to understand both what you've experienced with it and your feedback too. So maybe you could take one of those situations and describe a little bit more detail, kind of either what happened, what they were saying, and then also how you perceived it and how you experience it.

**Jane:** Oh, it really pisses me off to have to have this conversation. I was hoping we'd focus more on strategy and technique but if this can be helpful for you in what you do here I’m willing to talk about it.

**Counselor:** It will help me to understand a little bit more so together I can think with you about some new perspectives and ways of approaching certain things.

**Jane:** Yes, well in my last job well, I am between jobs right now, I'm in a managerial position and we really go through an intense period of working on accounting records and we have accounting deadlines when we really have to submit our report and as usual I beat my deadline by a couple of days and everybody else was going on until midnight, and I lost it because if they are really committed to their work I just don't understand why people should be there at midnight trying to beat deadlines. So, I told everybody off, I got really angry at how late everything was running and told everybody off and it didn't go over well. There were claims that this was a pattern of mine of interacting but when I think about it critically it's when people are not doing what they need to do and I told them what they need to do, how they need to do it and I was fired. It's they're loss.

**Counselor:** Even being with you right now and I hope it's OK for me to say this I can see the kind of the kind of intensity and frustration that that brought for you.

**Jane:** Yeah, I did want to go there, that's why I was more focused on the techniques and strategy because I felt myself going there right now but that's right, yes.

**Counselor:** In that situation, Jane, were there any in addition to how hard you were working? **Jane:** Yes.

**Counselor:** And the kind of competencies that you were showing.

**Jane:** Yes.

**Counselor:** And the hard work and doing things the right way for you. Were there also any other kinds of tensions or anxieties for you in terms of the outside kind of what was being expected or how that was communicated, or just for you as a person inside in that situation too?

**Jane:** Yes well, I did feel that if this project were not done on time, who would we blame? Who will be blamed? I am the one in charge you know, this group submits their reports to me and I take them over to the headquarters, just the feeling that, I would be held responsible if this deadline were not met and so just this uncontrollable feeling inside that you have to keep on going and going and going until the deadlines are met and I really hate that feeling, but if everybody worked the way that I did, we wouldn't be in that situation, you know.

**Counselor:** So I'm hearing with that what an incredible sense of responsibility that you feel to doing a good job and having a good job be done and I guess I'm wondering with that too, as we kind of think about some strategies, at the same time I've kind of wondering whether or not with that sense of responsibility to whether or not there were times for you in the past too where you felt I really have to do a good job, and I want to a good job, and other people aren't either recognizing or pitching in in the same way but I’m maybe scared or anxious that I can't let people know kind of what that really feels like for me and I just have to move forward. Does that ring any bells for you, or not?

**Jane:** Well, now that you talk about it, I certainly see that I was always expected to excel and failure was never an option for me. It's just not anything anyone expected and it seems like I grew not to expect myself ever to fail or to struggle and I hate that feeling of struggle. It's really hard for me when there is a struggle. We had this deadline, this is my first big project at work and they were struggling and then it was my problem, so that feeling was there again and it just really disturbs me, that feeling.

The feeling of? The struggle. The struggle. Of potentially not meeting the standards of being up to par and then failing. I can not even think about that.

**Counselor:** I can see how distressing that it is for you both in terms of what you can just going through in these job situations but just before too that sense of needing to work hard and to do as well as you can and the idea of that not happening is just really distressing, really distressing. So again, we've just met and you know I can hear that with you and hearing what you are asking for, so I want to share what just feels like a dilemma for us in some ways and see what you think. **Jane:** Sure, I really want to have a perspective on this.

**Counselor:** Which is that I may have some ideas to share with you about as we kind of explore this more being with that anxiety and or finding ways to have other ways to talk about some of those more distressing or anxious feelings so that there is more room for those feelings and they don't build in terms of tension. That then you carry with you perhaps into the job situation. So I may have some ideas to share with you about that, but if we put some strategies, some things to do, given what you're saying about how important it is for you to succeed I would want us to create those whatever these strategy's are going to be somewhat together so that necessarily they weren't being set up as if I do this strategy or this technique am I going to be succeeding or failing at that, so it becomes another you know another kind of task to perform or be very good at in some way.

**Jane:** Well you see I am good at tasks. If you gave me strategies I assure you that I will succeed. I will succeed at those strategies. I just want to find a way to get rid of this feeling, you called it anxiety, this trapped feeling that I have. I just want to get rid of it because I think it's a weakness and it's getting in my way.

**Counselor:** Yeah. The tension, the struggle, the anxiety to have that kind of experience, feeling experience, it feels like somehow you're not being adequate or that it feels like you're not being strong.

**Jane:** Yeah, no one would believe this but I've and fired from four jobs. Those kinds of things don't happen to Jane. You know I had to drive 20 miles to come and see you because I don't want to possibly see someone who might know I’m in therapy because I am not the therapy type. The kinds who comes to therapy, so I really want us to work on this because this is really, it's just an imbalance right now in my life and it's really bothering me.

**Counselor:** You’ve been used to feeling strong and successful.

**Jane:** Yes.

**Counselor:** And the idea of needing assistance, even this kind of assistance you know psychological or counseling help is not easy too.

**Jane:** It's embarrassing I don't know how you counselors do it but I'm not the touchy feely type, weak, help me, I can’t figure it myself so ironically I’m here but I'm hoping, I'm ready to do anything to make this work for me.

**Counselor:** Well I'm beginning to think about not only things that you might be able to do in a sense with that inside of yourself in terms of perspectives or in terms of ways of lowering anxiety but I'm also thinking about ways that you can ally and have allies even in your managerial position allies in your work situation that would be supportive to you in a particular way and in saying that I'm also knowing the culture that I grew up in and some of those attitudes and would want to learn more with you too about even that experience of having to do it alone you know kind of be able to just do it by yourself and succeed by yourself and whether or not actually in your family, in your growing up group or your larger culture whether or not connecting with others at the same time that you're really doing well and finishing a task is sort of what the style is or not?

**Jane:** You know, I have screwed up a couple of relationships I must tell you, in my last job one of my bosses was very supportive of me and I screwed that up because the junior accountants was delaying the projects and I also told off the manager because he had hired some of those people so certainly I think I may need strategies how not to screw up relationships that could work for me at work because that's another thing that I have done.

**Counselor:** So relationships in addition to finishing and doing well at the task.

**Jane:** Yeah.

**Counselor:** What do you tend to do with feelings of when you are feeling anxious, scared, concerned about how something is going to go whether it's in a relationship or work, are those the kinds of feelings that you have a way of acknowledging, sharing, showing?

**Jane:** No, I don't feel those feelings. I don't know how I know this, I don't allow myself to have those feelings I just do it, I just do it. So I know that at some point I feel a little anxious and scared and that is often the signal for me not to feel anything, so I just go on auto-pilot and I get it done. So I am a little concerned about being flattened by all those feelings I don't know if it will work or if it would make things worse because now I'd be feeling things and needing to finish a task. Some of those feelings might really work, I don't know.

**Counselor:** You see that's going to be important for us to be able to talk about both feeling experience and how it's related to anxiety and performance but that's just sort of one of my perspectives that may or may not be yours or may not be true for you but I would like to share a very quick strategy for lowering some anxiety in the moment if I can, is that OK?

**Jane:**  Sure, that is what I want.

**Counselor:** And is it OK to bring my chair next to you so I can show this to you and share this with you?

**Jane:**  Sure.

**Counselor:** Ok, so I'm just going to bring my chair over here and this is a strategy that you can use in almost any situation: relationships, work, other kinds of struggles as a away of just lowering some of that tension. OK?

**Jane**: Yeah.

**Counselor**: And it's called the “I see, I feel, I hear” strategy, OK can I show it to you?

**Jane:** Sure.

**Counselor**: So what I am going to do is when I say ‘I see,’ I'm going to pick out three things that I see in detail OK? So it might mean I see this chair, it has maroon, it has yellow in it. I see the curtain. I see the green with different shades of green. So I'm going to focus in great detail on what I see. Could you, want to pick out three things that you can just notice in detail that you see? **Jane:** I like the grains on this table and certainly like the black with the tissue box and the carpet has also got some interesting green stripes.

**Counselor:** Good, very good, and let's do three I hear. It might mean I hear my voice, I hear the hum of the fan and I hear a car outside. So just three things you hear. They could be the same or different.

**Jane:** I hear your breathing, I don't know if that's the phone and there's just a sound of activity. **Counselor:** Sound? Yeah. And lastly when we say I feel three things I feel. I fill my hands on my knees, I feel my butt in the chair, you know I feel a little twitch in my back. So I'm also going to also name three things that I feel and wondered if you can name three things that you are aware of physically feeling?

**Jane:** Do we have to do the feeling part?

**Counselor:** We don't have to do it at all because even hearing and seeing will be enough, will be enough.

**Jane:**  I could do it as long as we feel other things, what I feel.

**Counselor**: Sure. Do you want to try that?

**Jane:** Sure.

**Counselor:** Go ahead.

**Jane:** Well, I feel the different grooves in the grain of this table. Definitely feel the smoothness of the tissue box and the soft texture of the tissue. Yeah.

**Counselor:** Thank you. Ok, I'm going to move my chair back over here.

**Jane:** Sure.

**Counselor:** You named things that you saw, that you see, that you hear, that you can touch, and so I'm just wondering what it was like for you, that kind of practice experience of being in the present with things that you can literally sense right now.

**Jane:** It was interesting because I tend to block out sounds and all those things that I can really focus on what I need to do so that was interesting. I got a little cautious when we came to feeling part and I thought that you were going to ask me what was going on with me.

**Counselor:** Yeah, I know that's a special word for you and I was glad when you said “I'm not sure about that can I do some things that I can touch in that way,” so just to say as we’re kind of getting ready to end this session and I look forward to being able to continue to work with you because you know being fired from a group of jobs, feeling relationships that are in some distress too, I can see you as a person who wants things to go well, that you want those things to go well too. So if we can continue to kind both work on ways that will help to lower anxiety and tension in the present and was just kind of one experiment with that, at the same time we've learned more about what's brought that together too in a way, perhaps we can do both at the same time.

**Jane:** I'm committed to this and I certainly hope that of the next couple weeks I'll get something that can work for me it out of this process. Thank you.

**FEEDBACK/DEBRIEFING SESSION**

**David:** Well thanks very much, truly interesting and we'd love to hear some of your ideas about how you think all of this went and if you have any perspectives.

**Anne:** Yeah, I loved watching that session, I loved the way you two negotiated what was going to happen in your time together and I had sort of a question for you about that, it seemed initially like you weren’t quite sure if you wanted to go down the strategy route and you sort of explained why you know that maybe we would get into that rut of you know needing to do those perfectly but at some point you made it decision to go ahead and give her, offer strategy and I'm wondering what the thinking was about that?

**Gary:** That's a great question. You know Jane was clearly coming with distress and she shared the details of the distress both relationally and vocationally and also in being here really wanted something hands on that was going to make a difference and that was her lead request, so even though that wasn't necessarily the first thing I would go with when I really wanted to respect that and to find a way to both give her something that possibly could be useful in more immediately lowering anxiety but would also signal to her that I heard that and was open to bringing that together with her.

**David:** So kind of like you made a deal with her almost to teach specific strategies and then also look at the larger context here and so you give her something of what she was directly asking for but then you had perhaps some larger ideas about the situation.

**Gary:** Yeah, I think some of these strategies are very effective in terms of working with feelings, thoughts and perspectives that allow change and I also think that there's something magical about them too. Magical in the sense of there being a metaphor that says here is this strategy that indicates that there is hope and possibility of change.

**Anne:** I noticed at one point Jane said well she acknowledged that some of the way she was interfered with relationships and then shortly after that she said well everything is working for me and so I was wondering why you just didn't… because clearly the things weren’t working for her, but she...

**Gary**: I thought that was a very tender moment she started by talking about the work distress and then allowed herself to also acknowledge that and I actually wished that I had spent more time with that and would in the next session definitely want to go back and retrieve that and bring that forward too because that felt like a softening and tenderness and at the same time I still wanted to stay attended to finding some way to in this first session attend to the need of strategy or technique.

**David:** I found myself wondering at some point during the interaction if perhaps some of the difficulties in your work situation might have to do with cultural issues or maybe even some of outright discrimination, and I was wondering if those kinds of things were occurring to you?

**Jane:** Well certainly for me thinking as a woman of color knowing that the board is really high and that I have to work really hard to stand out in what I do and often many women of color who were successful in business or in academia seeing failure as not an option because of all the pressure so that is certainly something that was at the back of my mind and I was just wondering what you are thinking as a counselor when I talked about it.

**Gary:** I was wondering about that and that question of what your experience as a woman, as a woman of color, as a woman from Kenya how that experience was for you and what you were feeling in that environment too, and even specifically if there were other things, specific things, happening that represented to you different, being treated differently, feeling excluded, being evaluated differently, we could have begun to track those questions too and I think that they would be important to raise as we continued and at the same time you were wanting again some ways to in a sense to fell less distressed right now and raising that question has both powers to it. **David:** So certainly it looks like an engaging and a productive first meeting where you began to do some skills training I would assume that in the future some more of these kinds of things might unfold as you continue to explore the context and some of the feelings a little. She may be reluctant to go there, so do that sensitively obviously.

**Gary:** Yeah, as you kind of noted I wanted to keep asking Jane's permission has we proceeded to begin to kind of sit with her as or beside you know her as we than just kind of practicing this new and unexpected kind of technique and idea.

**David:** Always asking her.

**Jane:** And I certainly felt really respected and that you respected the borders that I was setting but challenging them a little bit but still respected them in ti initial session which worked for me and I would imagine what work for a client in that kind of situation.

**David:** Great. Thank you very much.