

Relationships with Abusive Narcissists - Part II

By Sam Vaknin

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Moreover, the narcissist is a man for all seasons, forever adaptable, constantly imitating and emulating, a human sponge, a perfect mirror, a chameleon, a non-entity that is, at the same time, all entities combined. The narcissist is best described by Heidegger's phrase: "Being and Nothingness". Into this reflective vacuum, this sucking black hole, the narcissist attracts the Sources of his Narcissistic Supply.

To an observer, the narcissist appears to be fractured or discontinuous.

Pathological narcissism has been compared to the Dissociative Identity Disorder (formerly the Multiple Personality Disorder). By definition, the narcissist has at least two selves, the True and False ones. His personality is very primitive and disorganised. Living with a narcissist is a nauseating experience not only because of what he is – but because of what he is NOT. He is not a fully formed human – but a dizzyingly kaleidoscopic gallery of ephemeral images, which melt into each other seamlessly. It is incredibly disorienting.

It is also exceedingly problematic. Promises made by the narcissist are easily disowned by him. His plans are transient. His emotional ties – a simulacrum. Most narcissists have one island of stability in their life (spouse, family, their career, a hobby, their religion, country, or idol) – pounded by the turbulent currents of a dishevelled existence.

The narcissist does not keep agreements, does not adhere to laws or social norms, and regards consistency and predictability as demeaning traits.

Thus, to invest in a narcissist is a purposeless, futile and meaningless activity. To the narcissist, every day is a new beginning, a hunt, a new cycle of idealisation or devaluation, a newly invented self. There is no accumulation of credits or goodwill because the narcissist has no past and no future. He occupies an eternal and timeless present. He is a fossil caught in the frozen ashes of a volcanic childhood.

TIP

Refuse to accept such behaviour. Demand reasonably predictable and rational actions and reactions. Insist on respect for your boundaries, predilections, preferences, and priorities.

Disproportional Reactions

One of the favourite tools of manipulation in the narcissist's arsenal is the disproportionality of his reactions. He reacts with supreme rage to the slightest slight. He punishes severely for what he perceives to be an offence against him, no matter how minor. He throws a temper tantrum over any discord or disagreement, however gently and considerately expressed. Or he may act attentive, charming and seductive (even over-sexed, if need be). This ever-shifting emotional landscape ("affective dunes") coupled with an inordinately harsh and arbitrarily applied "penal code" are both promulgated by the narcissist. Neediness and dependence on the source of all justice meted – on the narcissist – are thus guaranteed.

TIP

Demand a just and proportional treatment. Reject or ignore unjust and capricious behaviour.

If you are up to the inevitable confrontation, react in kind. Let him taste some of his own medicine.

Dehumanization and Objectification

People have a need to believe in the empathic skills and basic good-heartedness of others. By dehumanising and objectifying people – the narcissist attacks the very foundations of the social treaty. This is the "alien" aspect of narcissists – they may be excellent imitations of fully formed adults but they are emotionally non-existent, or, at best, immature.

This is so horrid, so repulsive, so phantasmagoric – that people recoil in terror. It is then, with their defences absolutely down, that they are the most susceptible and vulnerable to the narcissist's control. Physical, psychological, verbal and sexual abuse are all forms of dehumanisation and objectification.

TIP

Never show your abuser that you are afraid of him. Do not negotiate with bullies. They are insatiable. Do not succumb to blackmail.

If things get rough- disengage, involve law enforcement officers, friends and colleagues, or threaten him (legally).

Do not keep your abuse a secret. Secrecy is the abuser's weapon.

Never give him a second chance. React with your full arsenal to the first transgression.

Abuse of Information

From the first moments of an encounter with another person, the narcissist is on the prowl. He collects information with the intention of applying it later to extract Narcissistic

Supply. The more he knows about his potential Source of Supply – the better able he is to coerce, manipulate, charm, extort or convert it "to the cause". The narcissist does not hesitate to abuse the information he gleaned, regardless of its intimate nature or the circumstances in which he obtained it. This is a powerful tool in his armoury.

TIP

Be guarded. Don't be too forthcoming in a first or casual meeting. Gather intelligence.

Be yourself. Don't misrepresent your wishes, boundaries, preferences, priorities, and red lines.

Do not behave inconsistently. Do not go back on your word. Be firm and resolute.

Impossible Situations

The narcissist engineers impossible, dangerous, unpredictable, unprecedented, or highly specific situations in which he is sorely and indispensably needed. The narcissist, his knowledge, his skills or his traits become the only ones applicable, or the most useful to coping with these artificial predicaments. It is a form of control by proxy.

TIP

Stay away from such quagmires. Scrutinize every offer and suggestion, no matter how innocuous.

Prepare backup plans. Keep others informed of your whereabouts and appraised of your situation.

Be vigilant and doubting. Do not be gullible and suggestible. Better safe than sorry.

Control by Proxy

If all else fails, the narcissist recruits friends, colleagues, mates, family members, the authorities, institutions, neighbours, or the media – in short, third parties – to do his bidding. He uses them to cajole, coerce, threaten, stalk, offer, retreat, tempt, convince, harass, communicate and otherwise manipulate his target. He controls these unaware instruments exactly as he plans to control his ultimate prey. He employs the same mechanisms and devices. And he dumps his props unceremoniously when the job is done.

Another form of control by proxy is to engineer situations in which abuse is inflicted upon another person. Such carefully crafted scenarios involve embarrassment and humiliation as well as social sanctions (condemnation, opprobrium, or even physical punishment). Society, or a social group become the instruments of the narcissist.

TIP

Often the abuser's proxies are unaware of their role. Expose him. Inform them.

Demonstrate to them how they are being abused, misused, and plain used by the abuser.

Trap your abuser. Treat him as he treats you. Involve others. Bring it into the open. Nothing like sunshine to disinfect abuse.

Ambient Abuse

The fostering, propagation and enhancement of an atmosphere of fear, intimidation, instability, unpredictability and irritation. There are no acts of traceable or provable explicit abuse, nor any manipulative settings of control. Yet, the irksome feeling remains, a disagreeable foreboding, a premonition, a bad omen. This is sometimes called "gaslighting".

In the long-term, such an environment erodes one's sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Self-confidence is shaken badly. Often, the victims go a paranoid or schizoid and thus are exposed even more to criticism and judgement. The roles are thus reversed: the victim is considered mentally disordered and the narcissist – the suffering soul or the victim.

TIP

Run! Get away! Ambient abuse often develops into overt and violent abuse.

You don't owe anyone an explanation – but you owe yourself a life. Bail out of the relationship.

The Malignant Optimism of the Abused

I often come across sad examples of the powers of self-delusion that the narcissist provokes in his victims. It is what I call "malignant optimism". People refuse to believe that some questions are unsolvable, some diseases incurable, some disasters inevitable. They see a sign of hope in every fluctuation. They read meaning and patterns into every random occurrence, utterance, or slip. They are deceived by their own pressing need to believe in the ultimate victory of good over evil, health over sickness, order over disorder. Life appears otherwise so meaningless, so unjust and so arbitrary...

So, they impose upon it a design, progress, aims, and paths. This is magical thinking.

"If only he tried hard enough", "If he only really wanted to heal", "If only we found the right therapy", "If only his defences were down", "There MUST be something good and worthy under the hideous facade", "NO ONE can be that evil and destructive", "He must have meant it differently", "God, or a higher being, or the spirit, or the soul is the solution and the answer to our prayers", "He is not responsible for what he is - his narcissism is the product of a difficult childhood, of abuse, and of his monstrous parents."

The Pollyanna defences of the abused are aimed against the emerging and horrible understanding that humans are mere specks of dust in a totally indifferent universe, the playthings of evil and sadistic forces, of which the narcissist is one - and that finally their

pain means nothing to anyone but themselves. Nothing whatsoever. It has all been in vain.

The narcissist holds such thinking in barely undisguised contempt. To him, it is a sign of weakness, the scent of prey, a gaping vulnerability. He uses and abuses this human need for order, good, and meaning – as he uses and abuses all other human needs. Gullibility, selective blindness, malignant optimism – these are the weapons of the beast. And the abused are hard at work to provide it with its arsenal.

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Narcissism - Treatment Modalities and Therapies - Part II by Sam Vaknin

The fourth edition of the authoritative "Review of General Psychiatry" (London, Prentice-Hall International, 1995), says (p. 309):

"(People with personality disorders) ... cause resentment and possibly even alienation and burnout in the healthcare professionals who treat them ... (p. 318) Long-term psychoanalytic psychotherapy and psychoanalysis have been attempted with (narcissists), although their use has been controversial."

The reason narcissism is under-reported and healing over-stated is that therapists are being fooled by smart narcissists. Most narcissists are expert manipulators and consummate actors and they learn how to deceive their therapists.

Here are some hard facts:

There are gradations and shades of narcissism. The differences between two narcissists can be great. The existence of grandiosity and empathy or lack thereof are not minor variations. They are serious predictors of future psychodynamics. The prognosis is much better if they do exist.

There are cases of spontaneous healing, Acquired Situational Narcissism, and of "short-term NPD" [see Gunderson's and Ronningstam work, 1996].

The prognosis for a classical narcissist (grandiosity, lack of empathy and all) is decidedly not good as far as long-term, lasting, and complete healing. Moreover, narcissists are intensely disliked by therapists.

BUT...

Side effects, co-morbid disorders (such as Obsessive-Compulsive behaviors) and some aspects of NPD (the dysphorias, the persecutory delusions, the sense of entitlement, the pathological lying) can be modified (using talk therapy and, depending on the problem, medication). These are not long-term or complete solutions – but some of them do have long-term effects.

The DSM is a billing and administration oriented diagnostic tool. It is intended to "tidy" up the psychiatrist's desk. The Axis II Personality Disorders are ill demarcated. The differential diagnoses are vaguely defined. There are some cultural biases and judgements [see the diagnostic criteria of the Schizotypal and Antisocial PDs]. The result is sizeable confusion and multiple diagnoses ("co-morbidity"). NPD was introduced to the DSM in 1980 [DSM-III]. There isn't enough research to substantiate any view or hypothesis about NPD. Future DSM editions may abolish it altogether within the framework of a cluster or a single "personality disorder" category. When we ask: "Can NPD be healed?" we need to realise that we don't know for sure what is NPD and what constitutes long-term healing in the case of an NPD. There are those who seriously claim that NPD is a cultural disease (culture-bound) with a societal

determinant.

Narcissists in Therapy

In therapy, the general idea is to create the conditions for the True Self to resume its growth: safety, predictability, justice, love and acceptance - a mirroring, re-aprenting, and holding environment. Therapy is supposed to provide these conditions of nurturance and guidance (through transference, cognitive re-labelling or other methods). The narcissist must learn that his past experiences are not laws of nature, that not all adults are abusive, that relationships can be nurturing and supportive.

Most therapists try to co-opt the narcissist's inflated ego (False Self) and defences. They compliment the narcissist, challenging him to prove his omnipotence by overcoming his disorder. They appeal to his quest for perfection, brilliance, and eternal love - and his paranoid tendencies - in an attempt to get rid of counterproductive, self-defeating, and dysfunctional behaviour patterns.

By stroking the narcissist's grandiosity, they hope to modify or counter cognitive deficits, thinking errors, and the narcissist's victim-stance. They contract with the narcissist to alter his conduct. Some even go to the extent of medicalizing the disorder, attributing it to a hereditary or biochemical origin and thus "absolving" the narcissist from his responsibility and freeing his mental resources to concentrate on the therapy.

Confronting the narcissist head on and engaging in power politics ("I am cleverer", "My will should prevail", and so on) is decidedly unhelpful and could lead to rage attacks and a deepening of the narcissist's persecutory delusions, bred by his humiliation in the therapeutic setting.

Successes have been reported by applying 12-step techniques (as modified for patients suffering from the Antisocial Personality Disorder), and with treatment modalities as diverse as NLP (Neurolinguistic Programming), Schema Therapy, and EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization).

But, whatever the type of talk therapy, the narcissist devalues the therapist. His internal dialogue is: "I know best, I know it all, the therapist is less intelligent than I, I can't afford the top level therapists who are the only ones qualified to treat me (as my equals, needless to say), I am actually a therapist myself..."

A litany of self-delusion and fantastic grandiosity (really, defences and resistances) ensues: "He (my therapist) should be my colleague, in certain respects it is he who should accept my professional authority, why won't he be my friend, after all I can use the lingo (psycho-babble) even better than he does? It's us (him and me) against a hostile and ignorant world (shared psychosis, follies-a-deux)..."

Then there is this internal dialog: "Just who does he think he is, asking me all these questions? What are his professional credentials? I am a success and he is a nobody therapist in a dingy office, he is trying to negate my uniqueness, he is an authority figure, I hate him, I will show him, I will humiliate him, prove him ignorant, have his licence revoked (transference). Actually, he is pitiable, a zero, a failure..."

And this is only in the first three sessions of the therapy. This abusive internal exchange becomes more vituperative and pejorative as therapy progresses.

Narcissists generally are averse to being medicated. Resorting to medicines is an implied admission that something is wrong. Narcissists are control freaks and hate to be "under the influence" of "mind altering" drugs prescribed to them by others.

Additionally, many of them believe that medication is the "great equaliser" – it will make them lose their uniqueness, superiority and so on. That is unless they can convincingly present the act of taking their medicines as "heroism", a daring enterprise of self-exploration, part of a breakthrough clinical trial, and so on.

They often claim that the medicine affects them differently than it does other people, or that they have discovered a new, exciting way of using it, or that they are part of someone's (usually themselves) learning curve ("part of a new approach to dosage", "part of a new cocktail which holds great promise"). Narcissists must dramatise their lives to feel worthy and special. Aut nihil aut unique – either be special or don't be at all. Narcissists are drama queens.

Very much like in the physical world, change is brought about only through incredible powers of torsion and breakage. Only when the narcissist's elasticity gives way, only when he is wounded by his own intransigence – only then is there hope.

It takes nothing less than a real crisis. Ennui is not enough.

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