

Relationships with Abusive Narcissists - Part I

By Sam Vaknin

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Question:

What kind of a spouse/mate/partner is likely to be attracted to a narcissist?

Answer:

The Victims

On the face of it, there is no (emotional) partner or mate, who typically "binds" with a narcissist. They come in all shapes and sizes. The initial phases of attraction, infatuation and falling in love are pretty normal. The narcissist puts on his best face – the other party is blinded by budding love. A natural selection process occurs only much later, as the relationship develops and is put to the test.

Living with a narcissist can be exhilarating, is always onerous, often harrowing. Surviving a relationship with a narcissist indicates, therefore, the parameters of the personality of the survivor. She (or, more rarely, he) is moulded by the relationship into The Typical Narcissistic Mate/Partner/Spouse.

First and foremost, the narcissist's partner must have a deficient or a distorted grasp of her self and of reality. Otherwise, she (or he) is bound to abandon the narcissist's ship early on. The cognitive distortion is likely to consist of belittling and demeaning herself – while aggrandising and adoring the narcissist.

The partner is, thus, placing herself in the position of the eternal victim: undeserving, punishable, a scapegoat. Sometimes, it is very important to the partner to appear moral, sacrificial and victimised. At other times, she is not even aware of this predicament. The narcissist is perceived by the partner to be a person in the position to demand these sacrifices from her because he is superior in many ways (intellectually, emotionally, morally, professionally, or financially).

The status of professional victim sits well with the partner's tendency to punish herself, namely: with her masochistic streak. The tormented life with the narcissist is just what she deserves.

In this respect, the partner is the mirror image of the narcissist. By maintaining a

symbiotic relationship with him, by being totally dependent upon her source of masochistic supply (which the narcissist most reliably constitutes and most amply provides) – the partner enhances certain traits and encourages certain behaviours, which are at the very core of narcissism.

The narcissist is never whole without an adoring, submissive, available, self-denigrating partner. His very sense of superiority, indeed his False Self, depends on it. His sadistic Superego switches its attentions from the narcissist (in whom it often provokes suicidal ideation) to the partner, thus finally obtaining an alternative source of sadistic satisfaction.

It is through self-denial that the partner survives. She denies her wishes, hopes, dreams, aspirations, sexual, psychological and material needs, choices, preferences, values, and much else besides. She perceives her needs as threatening because they might engender the wrath of the narcissist's God-like supreme figure.

The narcissist is rendered in her eyes even more superior through and because of this self-denial. Self-denial undertaken to facilitate and ease the life of a "great man" is more palatable. The "greater" the man (=the narcissist), the easier it is for the partner to ignore her own self, to dwindle, to degenerate, to turn into an appendix of the narcissist and, finally, to become nothing but an extension, to merge with the narcissist to the point of oblivion and of merely dim memories of herself.

The two collaborate in this macabre dance. The narcissist is formed by his partner inasmuch as he forms her. Submission breeds superiority and masochism breeds sadism. The relationships are characterised by emergentism: roles are allocated almost from the start and any deviation meets with an aggressive, even violent reaction.

The predominant state of the partner's mind is utter confusion. Even the most basic relationships – with husband, children, or parents – remain bafflingly obscured by the giant shadow cast by the intensive interaction with the narcissist. A suspension of judgement is part and parcel of a suspension of individuality, which is both a prerequisite to and the result of living with a narcissist. The partner no longer knows what is true and right and what is wrong and forbidden.

The narcissist recreates for the partner the sort of emotional ambience that led to his own formation in the first place: capriciousness, fickleness, arbitrariness, emotional (and physical or sexual) abandonment. The world becomes hostile, and ominous and the partner has only one thing left to cling to: the narcissist.

And cling she does. If there is anything which can safely be said about those who emotionally team up with narcissists, it is that they are overtly and overly dependent.

The partner doesn't know what to do – and this is only too natural in the mayhem that is the relationship with the narcissist. But the typical partner also does not know what she wants and, to a large extent, who she is and what she wants to become.

These unanswered questions hamper the partner's ability to gauge reality. Her primordial sin is that she fell in love with an image, not with a real person. It is the

voiding of the image that is mourned when the relationship ends.

The break-up of a relationship with a narcissist is, therefore, very emotionally charged. It is the culmination of a long chain of humiliations and of subjugation. It is the rebellion of the functioning and healthy parts of the partner's personality against the tyranny of the narcissist.

The partner is likely to have totally misread and misinterpreted the whole interaction (I hesitate to call it a relationship). This lack of proper interface with reality might be (erroneously) labelled "pathological".

Why is it that the partner seeks to prolong her pain? What is the source and purpose of this masochistic streak? Upon the break-up of the relationship, the partner (but not the narcissist, who usually refuses to provide closure) engage in a tortuous and drawn out post mortem.

But the question who did what to whom (and even why) is irrelevant. What is relevant is to stop mourning oneself, start smiling again and love in a less subservient, hopeless, and pain-inflicting manner.

The Abuse

Abuse is an integral, inseparable part of the Narcissistic Personality Disorder.

The narcissist idealises and then DEVALUES and discards the object of his initial idealisation. This abrupt, heartless devaluation IS abuse. ALL narcissists idealise and then devalue. This is THE core narcissistic behaviour. The narcissist exploits, lies, insults, demeans, ignores (the "silent treatment"), manipulates, controls. All these are forms of abuse.

There are a million ways to abuse. To love too much is to abuse. It is tantamount to treating someone as one's extension, an object, or an instrument of gratification. To be over-protective, not to respect privacy, to be brutally honest, with a morbid sense of humour, or consistently tactless – is to abuse. To expect too much, to denigrate, to ignore – are all modes of abuse. There is physical abuse, verbal abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse. The list is long.

Narcissists are masters of abusing surreptitiously ("ambient abuse"). They are "stealth abusers". You have to actually live with one in order to witness the abuse.

There are three important categories of abuse:

Overt Abuse – The open and explicit abuse of another person. Threatening, coercing, battering, lying, berating, demeaning, chastising, insulting, humiliating, exploiting, ignoring ("silent treatment"), devaluing, unceremoniously discarding, verbal abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse are all forms of overt abuse.

Covert or Controlling Abuse – Narcissism is almost entirely about control. It is a primitive and immature reaction to the circumstances of a life in which the narcissist (usually in his childhood) was rendered helpless. It is about re-asserting one's identity,

re-establishing predictability, mastering the environment – human and physical. The bulk of narcissistic behaviours can be traced to this panicky reaction to the potential for loss of control. Narcissists are hypochondriacs (and difficult patients) because they are afraid to lose control over their body, its looks and its proper functioning. They are obsessive-compulsive in their efforts to subdue their physical habitat and render it foreseeable. They stalk people and harass them as a means of "being in touch" – another form of narcissistic control. But why the panic?

The narcissist is a solipsist. To him, nothing exists except himself. Meaningful others are his extensions, assimilated by him, they are internal objects – not external ones. Thus, losing control of a significant other – is equivalent to losing the use of a limb, or of one's brain. It is terrifying.

Independent or disobedient people evoke in the narcissist the realisation that something is wrong with his worldview, that he is not the centre of the world or its cause and that he cannot control what, to him, are internal representations.

To the narcissist, losing control means going insane. Because other people are mere elements in the narcissist's mind – being unable to manipulate them literally means losing it (his mind). Imagine, if you suddenly were to find out that you cannot manipulate your memories or control your thoughts... Nightmarish!

Moreover, it is often only through manipulation and extortion that the narcissist can secure his Narcissistic Supply (NS). Controlling his Sources of Narcissistic Supply is a (mental) life or death question for the narcissist. The narcissist is a drug addict (his drug being the NS) and he would go to any length to obtain the next dose.

In his frantic efforts to maintain control or re-assert it, the narcissist resorts to a myriad of fiendishly inventive stratagems and mechanisms. Here is a partial list:

Unpredictability

The narcissist acts unpredictably, capriciously, inconsistently and irrationally. This serves to demolish in others their carefully crafted worldview. They become dependent upon the next twist and turn of the narcissist, his inexplicable whims, his outbursts, denial, or smiles.

In other words: the narcissist makes sure that HE is the only stable entity in the lives of others – by shattering the rest of their world through his seemingly insane behaviour. He guarantees his presence in their lives – by destabilising them.

In the absence of a self, there are no likes or dislikes, preferences, predictable behaviour or characteristics. It is not possible to know the narcissist. There is no one there.

The narcissist was conditioned – from an early age of abuse and trauma – to expect the unexpected. His was a world in which (sometimes sadistic) capricious caretakers and peers often behaved arbitrarily. He was trained to deny his True Self and nurture a

False one.

Having invented himself, the narcissist sees no problem in re-inventing that which he designed in the first place. The narcissist is his own creator.

Hence his grandiosity.

(continued)

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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.

Sam Vaknin is the author of *Malignant Self Love - Narcissism Revisited* and *After the Rain - How the West Lost the East*. He is a columnist for *Central Europe Review*, *PopMatters*, and *eBookWeb*, a United Press International (UPI) Senior Business Correspondent, and the editor of mental health and Central East Europe categories in *The Open Directory*, *Bellaonline*, and *Suite101*. Visit Sam's Web site at <http://samvak.tripod.com>

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