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The Veil of Narcissism within Families Part 2

Leaving Adult Survivors Living with Depression

Reviewed by Anthony Carlino

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The absence of a supporting and nurturing relationship for this individual has inflicted very real wounds to the soul.

Pressman and R.M. Pressman.

Although written for therapists, the book is written in language that is accessible to those without formal training and I highly recommend it to anyone with an interest in this topic.

Of particular interest is how the authors describe adults who grew up in such families often having problems with trust and maintaining long term relationships. They describe how the process of learning not to trust begins with learning not to feel in childhood and translates into not trusting as an adult:

I am in pain. There is no one out there to really take care of me. Whenever I allow myself to have feelings, I get hurt. I don't want to feel. I won't feel. I have no feelings. If I can't feel, there's no me, but I can watch and adapt. I can lose me, and be who I have to be to survive. Then I can have a relationship. I have a relationship, but I can't trust her (she might hurt me), and I can't trust myself (there is no me). So I can't let her get too close; she might find out there's no me. To protect myself, then, even though I desperately want it, I can't have an intimate and sharing relationship. So I sabotage my relationship. I lose my relationship. I am in pain. [And the cycle repeats.] (p.111).

Some readers might ask why someone would continue not to trust others when it clearly defeats the aim of having an intimate and in turn healthy relationship. The answer is paradoxical. This pattern of relating through distrust is an adaptation – the very behaviour hurting their personal relationships was also a valuable coping mechanism learned as a child in response to parents who could not truly meet their emotional needs. In other words, it helped that person to survive their childhood. Giving up a mechanism that helped keep you alive is not just difficult, it can be terrifying and thus the pattern is continued into adulthood even when no longer in the circumstances that required it.

Children from these families come to therapy as adults often completely dumbfounded as to the cause of their lack of self-esteem and history of failed long-term relationships. If the cause of their problems cannot be easily found, a common conclusion is to believe they have something inherently wrong with themselves.

This is a core belief supported by their experience as children, where their true emotions were not welcome, so they had to hide who they were. It is easy to see that when one is carrying this core belief it is going to be extremely difficult to move through life with a secure sense of oneself (identity) and to believe we can be truly loved for who we are.

The absence of a supporting and nurturing relationship for this individual has inflicted very real wounds to the soul. And for your therapist, it may well be the role they need to fill for these wounds to heal. From my own experience, the healing takes place in the relationship between therapist and client. More specifically, a therapist needs to show the following:

A recent article I wrote for *Polare* dealt with how adults who grow up in narcissistic families often find themselves living with a lack of satisfaction and depression they find difficult to explain. To

recap, such individuals often have these experiences growing up: received negative messages about themselves covertly or overtly; what other people think of the family and ensuring it is positive becomes a priority; a lack of or unclear boundaries; and learn to meet their parents emotional needs rather than their own (parents emotionally unavailable)

I have decided to revisit this topic due to a rather large number of positive responses to the first article. By far the most informative work I have read on this area is *The Narcissistic Family: Diagnosis and Treatment* by S. Donaldson -

The good news for people with this experience is that, in time, these wounds can be overcome and they can develop a true sense of identity and their own self-worth

- A consistent flow of support and acknowledgement of who the person is and what they feel;
- Approaching the client as "a pilgrim, not a missionary" so that clients supported to make their own mistakes without fear, greatly increasing the chances they will learn from them by accessing their own inner wisdom (rather than receiving advice from an "expert").
- Role-model their own imperfections and acknowledge them as part of being human rather than a source of shame
- Maintain healthy and professional boundaries while also showing support and validation.
- Meet the person's insecurity and self-doubt with empathy and a consistent belief they can learn to nurture self-love within themselves.

The good news for people with this experience is that, in time, these wounds can be overcome and they can develop a true sense of identity and their own self-worth.

If you agree that the most important relationship we ever have is that with ourselves, then one can see that working on these issues is a journey worth undertaking.

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