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The Veil of Narcissism within Families

When the needs of the parents came before the needs of the child

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You are worthy of love and how you feel matters.

Many clients of mine have found themselves experiencing uncertainty as to the cause of the problems they encounter in life. Looking back, there was no overt abuse in the family, no history of drug addiction or alcoholism and everyone was fed, went to school and got jobs - the family unit functioned and appeared healthy even to those who took a close look. The conclusion they sometimes reach is that they themselves must be at fault. "I must be deficient or defective as it appears clear there is no reason for my problems in life".

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When we start to scratch the surface, it can become clear that all was not well at home. A common theme is either a current or past resistance to disclosing one's true sense of gender to parents. The question which pops into my head when I hear this is that if a family provided for someone so well, what causes this resistance? As we explore this further, a theme often emerges which can come in a variety of responses ... "They would not have accepted me wanting to transition.", "Oh that would have upset my parents.", "Mum and Dad would have freaked out and tried to change my mind!"

Sound familiar? What becomes clear in these responses is that within this family unit, the needs of the parents came before the needs of the child. Instead of feeling safe and supported to express who we really are, we are taught it is far more important to make sure we do not make our parents feel a particular way. What these people then learned to do as a child (and continue as adults) is to mask their true feelings, avoid experiencing them and pretend to feel what they don't feel. If we are not encouraged and praised for processing feelings, they do leak out in other unhealthy ways and this carries on into adulthood. This pattern of emotional repression is often observed in narcissistic families.

There are a number of other patterns that can often be seen in narcissistic families and which get passed on.

Negative Messages

These messages can be verbally communicated or not spoken at all and more often than not include messages of not being good enough or deficient in some way. Children will internalise this message and carry it into their relationships in adulthood.

What Other People Think is a Priority

In the narcissistic family, parents make it clear to children to make sure the outside world thinks things are going well in the family. What other people think is not only important, it is a priority. "What would they think?" or "Make sure nobody knows about this!" are two of the many ways parents communicate that the opinion of others is crucial in determining how you decide to behave and what you choose to say. The problem associated with this is that in adulthood the child will often get their sense of themselves not from within their core-self but from the world around them, resulting in a heightened and sometimes paralysing sensitivity to what others think of them.

Lack of Boundaries

Generally speaking, boundaries are not often respected in the narcissistic family. Going through a child's things, opening their mail, not respecting emotional boundaries are common. The child is left feeling violated and not entitled to have his or her own sense of self.

These are only two of the patterns seen in narcissistic families. What is clear is the impact it has on a child's development into adulthood:

"The typical adult from a narcissistic family is filled with unacknowledged anger, feels like a hollow person, feels inadequate and defective, suffers from periodic anxiety and depression, and has no clue how he or she got that way." [The Narcissistic Family, Pressman and Pressman].

Our sense of gender is part of our core self and is inherent in being human. When we feel supported by parents who welcome our gender and its expression, an important foundation for self-esteem and identity has been provided. The child from a narcissistic family is unlikely to have received this type of support.

The good news is that with support and growing awareness of how a person's developmental needs were not met, a person can learn and take on the messages which were missed.

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