

On My Mind: Narcissistic abuse



Some people are so thoroughly self-centered and uncaring about the needs of others that mental health professionals think of them as having a brain disorder called narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). I haven't known many people with NPD, because they don't tend to seek help from mental health professionals. Some of the hallmarks of people who are severely narcissistic include an inflated sense of their own importance, brilliance, beauty, and ability; a need for continuous admiration; a sense of being entitled to special treatment at all times, and extremely self-centered behavior. They tend to lack empathy for others, experience frequent envy and/or the belief that others are envious of them, and indifferently exploit others for personal gain. They often think that they are doing better than they actually are, make promises that they can't keep, and get angry if people don't support them. Think of some politicians, movie stars, or CEOs, and you can probably identify some who fit the definition of narcissism.

Those who are in relationships with people who have NPD generally suffer as a result. It is common for psychotherapists to see these individuals, because having a parent, partner, or boss who has NPD can be extremely damaging and traumatic. Those who find themselves stuck in relationships with narcissists tend to be kind, hopeful, and forgiving people who long to help, rescue, and repair others. They often stay in their relationships with narcissists out of fear of rejection or abandonment; they sacrifice their own well-being to avoid the loss of the relationship. One psychologist calls it “self-love deficit disorder.”

A friend of mine who was in one of these relationships wrote to me, “People thought he was just the best! So anyone I eventually confided in would look at me like I was, well, crazy, or unappreciative. Or it would back up his own complaint that I never gave him any credit ... I have heard this from other partners of narcissists — they start to think themselves crazy because everyone thinks their partner is so great.” Since leaving this relationship, she appears happier and kinder to herself, and her career has soared.

Last fall, psychotherapist Julia Kidd gave a presentation on surviving narcissistic abuse at Martha’s Vineyard Community Services. Helping the survivors of narcissistic abuse is a specialty that she has developed, and much of the material in this column is distilled from her lecture and subsequent conversations with her.

Narcissists tend to be highly skilled at manipulation. During the early phases of a relationship, they commonly promise undying and desperate love, only later to engage in devaluing behavior, indifference, lies, and eventually rejection. If it stopped there, the relationship would end, but the narcissist doesn’t like to lose anyone, and tends to suck people back in with apologies, bigger promises, and apparent adoration. Then the cycle begins again.

People who have been abused or traumatized at the hands of people who also show love and affection often form strong sympathetic attachments to their abusers — often referred to as Stockholm syndrome, where people come to endorse the ideas of the abuser.

For this reason, one of the first steps in recovering from any kind of abuse is seeing it clearly for what it is. A useful concept that Kidd mentions is that people who are in a relationship with severe narcissists need to recognize that they function as “supply” or “fuel delivery systems.” The narcissist uses them to feed their craving for control, admiration, attention. To paraphrase Julia, when a narcissist says, “I love you,” he or she means, “I love the fuel you supply.” When he or she says, “I miss you,” the true message is, “I miss the fuel supply.” “I can’t

stop thinking about you” equals “I can’t stop thinking about what you give me,” and “I can’t wait to be with you” really means “I can’t wait to get more of your fuel.” It is crucial for the survivor, whether child, romantic partner, or employee, to understand that it is not about them, but rather about what the narcissist wants from them, they are only there to feed the narcissist.

It is striking to see people in these relationships who don’t leave, and keep going back for more. It is easy to understand why a child stays; there is no choice. But why do romantic partners, employees, and adult children continue in these relationships? How is it that exploited individuals seem to become addicted to their abusers?

One of the most important concepts in psychology is that neither positive reinforcement nor punishment is the most effective tool in affecting behavior. Rather, it is *intermittent reinforcement*: that is, never quite knowing whether you are going to get the reward you seek. It is a concept well understood by the architects of the gambling industry. Imagine a hungry person going to a refrigerator that is unpredictably full or empty. When it is full, there is a rush of pleasure chemicals in the brain; when it is empty, there is a rush of chemicals that lead to sadness, despair, and disappointment. But because it is sometimes full, there is an impulse to keep going back and checking over and over again.

Julia Kidd talks about an old concept in the world of trauma and recovery, the *trauma bond*. It refers to a compulsion to repeatedly return to a traumatic situation or relationship. She lists four elements that contribute to the creation of a trauma bond: 1) “an intense emotional experience with an abuser over time.” 2) “the victim is dependent on the abuser for sustenance of some kind.” 3) “inconsistent behavior from the abuser (cruelty to kindness),” otherwise known as intermittent reinforcement, and 4) “a promise of a reward.”

Furthermore, one of the hallmarks of what happens to people who have been traumatized is that they learn to disconnect or dissociate from the reality of how terrible it is, and for periods of time, there is “abuse amnesia.” Also, it is disturbing to acknowledge that the person one loves is vile, vicious, and damaging. In addition, there are the biological reasons (like family ties) for why people stay in abusive relationships.

To live in the orbit of a narcissist’s apparent greatness, intense desire, and brilliance can make being the object of a narcissist’s “love” absolutely thrilling. The powerful emotions that can accompany what is sometimes experienced as “love bombing” release strong reinforcing brain chemicals, like the pleasure

chemical, dopamine. There is a major release of dopamine with intermittent reinforcement, and it is central to addiction. Intimacy with a narcissist leads to the release of oxytocin, also known as the “cuddle hormone” or “love hormone” because it promotes feelings of bonding and connection. When the narcissist inevitably pulls away, there is fear and stress that causes the release of “get into action chemicals” like adrenaline or norepinephrine, which are also reinforcing and can leave the recipient hungry for more. There is also a release of the stress hormone cortisol, which can cause depression, and when chronically elevated can shorten lifespan. These chemical activities change the brain and behavior of the survivors of narcissistic abuse, and make it all the more challenging to see clearly and to let go.

In the end, the survivor of narcissistic abuse may develop post-traumatic stress disorder, in which demonstrable brain changes lead to re-experiencing the trauma in the form of nightmares, intrusive thoughts, and vivid memories; emotional numbing in which individuals lose the ability to love, trust, feel safe, or feel their feelings; dissociation (see [mvtimes.com/2018/08/15/mind-detach-reality/](https://www.mvtimes.com/2018/08/15/mind-detach-reality/)), and a chronic fight-or-flight response. The very sense of who they are as people becomes damaged. Confidence is replaced by self-doubt, shame, and exhaustion.

Julia Kidd offers good advice for anyone suffering from an addiction to a narcissist. In short, going “no contact” is best, eliminating exposure to the narcissist. When no contact is not possible, she talks about the “gray rock” response, in which there is about as much response to the narcissist’s overtures as one would get from a gray rock. Therapy, Al-Anon, Codependents Anonymous, or any practice that enhances one’s sense of self is invaluable. She recommends YouTube videos by coaches such as Ross Rosenberg and Lisa Romano.

In the end, recovery work provides the opportunity, indeed the necessity, for the survivor to, in Julia Kidd’s words, “find out who they really are, learn how to stand for and protect who they are, learn to self-partner and self-parent. And learn to love themselves like no one else ever has.”

Kidd will be offering the Narcissistic Abuse presentation again; please call 508-410-5142 if you’d like to attend. My thanks to her for her wonderful teaching and suggestions for this column.

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