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The Importance of Narcissism in Psychotherapy

Narcissism is a state of preoccupation with the meaning of events for oneself, especially in regard to whether events make one seem important or valuable. It comes from a history wherein one's experience was not valued, and in which there was a lack of empathic connection with another. As a result of such an experience, the person comes to believe (or fear) that he or she is indeed worthless. Such an idea, when held consciously, is quite painful and results in depression and isolation. The person therefore is preoccupied with defending himself or herself against this idea, and therefore is very attentive to events which can be taken to reflect on the person's value. The significance of events in the person's life is mainly in regard to the meaning they may have in regard to the person's value, and are reacted to in terms of that meaning. For example, while walking down the aisle during her son's marriage ceremony, his mother announced to the crowd, "See, I *am* important! I'm a VIP!" Narcissistic people are frequently experienced as pompous, self-absorbed, or annoying by others. They are tragic figures because they are so interpersonally isolated. At a deep level they believe themselves to be unacceptable to others. They are so dominated by this belief, and by their efforts to defend themselves against it, that they are unable to form empathic connections with others.

A patient reported that when he got married, he walked down the aisle with his mother on his arm. While they were walking, his mother turned to those assembled and said, "See, I *am* important!"

Therapists rarely see narcissistic people in psychotherapy. In defending themselves against their core belief in their own worthlessness, these people typically blame others when things go wrong for them, and so do not see themselves as needing help. In addition, they do not believe they deserve help, nor that they *can* be helped. And finally, they anticipate that another person will not be able to have an empathic and benign relationship with them, and so they cannot imagine any benefit resulting from it. In fact, they anticipate more of the kind of treatment they received which caused their narcissism in the first place. So narcissists rarely show up in therapists' offices. When they do, they are usually there to blame the therapist for his or her failure to fix their child or spouse according to their specifications and needs. They may also come in because they are coerced to do so in some way, perhaps by a court or some other agency. They are typically unpleasant for the therapist to deal with because they do not accord another person the right to their opinion or point of view, and so typically the other person feels ignored or discounted by them. They do not seek or hope to receive any benefit for themselves from the encounter.

The value for psychotherapists in understanding narcissism is that most of our patients grew up with one. Almost all the people we see in psychotherapy suffer from the inability of important people in their early lives to form empathic connections with them. When this kind of trauma is so intense that it produces further narcissism, that person typically does not seek psychotherapy. However, when, the trauma is less intense, the person accepts the blame

The person considers himself or herself to be at fault, accepts the blame of the narcissistic person for their unhappiness, and in some cases tries to respond to this circumstance by getting themselves “fixed.” Patients very often come into treatment full of blame for themselves for causing unhappiness for others, when what is really happening is that they have been trying to accommodate to the impossible needs of a narcissist.

Patients are typically very relieved to have all this explained to them. Much of their suffering comes from thinking they are the cause of the other person’s unhappiness. They have made efforts to change, to behave better, to be more understanding, more loving, more adaptable, less demanding, more self-effacing. To be told that their needs, preferences, wishes, and point of view are legitimate and not the real cause of the other person’s problems is very freeing. It substantiates their own view, which they have given up in trying to comply with the narcissistic person. They become freer to pursue their own interests and feel less compelled to respond to inappropriate blame. Sometimes this changes their relationship for the better, and sometimes it results in the end of the relationship if the other person cannot benefit from their healthier behavior.

In the transference, the “co-narcissist” expects the therapist to be narcissistic, and unconsciously adapts to this expectation. The patient tends to be unassertive, or may be defiantly assertive in an attempt not to comply with the anticipated narcissism of the therapist. In these situations the patient is greatly helped when the therapist can easily consider the patient’s experience, and it is also of great value for the therapist to sincerely inquire about the patient’s experience without being prompted or put off by the patient’s confusion or lack of awareness of his or her experience. The patient feels safer to find that the therapist can consider the patient’s needs without sacrificing his or her own, and can consider his or her own needs without sacrificing the needs of the patient.