

Challenging The Narcissist



How to Find Pathways to Empathy By Wendy Behary, International Expert on Narcissism

Given their arrogance, condescension, and lack of empathy, narcissists are notoriously difficult clients. The key to working with them is being direct and transparent about the roiling emotions they trigger in us.

As the morning sun warms your kitchen, you put on coffee, feed the dog, and glance at your calendar for the day's schedule. There *he* is: your 3 p.m. appointment. Your heart sinks, and you begin longing for a power outage in your office building today—anything to force you to cancel on this client, Mr. I'm-Right-and-Everyone-Else-Is-Wrong.

Although you consider yourself well trained and capable of handling the challenges of working with even your most depressed, anxious, and angry clients, this one reinforces your worst fear: maybe you aren't cut out to do therapy after all. But what exactly makes this pompous, narcissistic puff-dragon so tough? Who gave him the power to trigger you like that?

One reason narcissistic clients are so hard to treat is that they're adept at taking charge of a session and steering the conversation off course again and again, until you feel sorely tempted to give up and let them take the wheel. Richard, one of my clients, fit the classic profile. He often shifted into self-aggrandizing monologues on his latest brilliant investment, his newly purchased, one-of-a-kind this or that, his powerful business connections, his to-die-for wine collection. Whenever I hazarded an insight into his childhood or suggested that he might be feeling scared, he tried to derail me by saying something like, "I took some psychology classes, too, you know, and I could have been a great therapist." When talking about his marital problems, he'd say, "My wife has PMS. That's the

problem, not me. You have no idea what I have to put up with and all that I do to make her happy. But it's never good enough."

When our conversations ventured toward emotionally loaded material, he shifted into detached mode, denying that he had any feelings. When I tried to get him to see that this is a way of protecting himself from feeling difficult emotions, he demeaned me for my "hokey-pokey, touchy-feely therapy" that had "no relevance" to him. Rolling his eyes, he'd proclaim that he had a perfectly fine childhood and that the only reason for us to look at his past is to satisfy my need to justify myself as a therapist who's charging a hefty fee.

In my early days of treating these tough clients, I'd want to fight back. Digging my heels into the carpet, I'd silently declare myself unwilling to be defeated by their aggressiveness and arrogant refusal to acknowledge the value of what I had to offer. With Richard, my fantasy was to shout at him, "Of course, you aren't going to cooperate! Go ahead. Pretend that what's happening in this room isn't the same problem you have connecting with your wife, your colleagues, and everyone else you know."

But blurting out visceral frustration isn't therapy, and over the years, I've learned how to respond to clients' misperceptions and callous remarks in ways that can move things forward, rather than just reinforce their old relationship patterns. Often this means translating what's happening for me in the moment into a picture of what it might be like for other people when my clients treat them in the same way.

No matter how obnoxiously narcissists behave, it's important to remember that their self-aggrandizement almost always covers up painful longings for true connection, intimacy, and a sense that they're "good enough." In fact, rather than being purely entitled and spoiled, most narcissists are wounded, deprived, and avoidant, burdened with unattended loneliness and shame. Typically, they grew up with parents who sought to achieve a more illustrious identity themselves by expecting perfection from their little "chosen one." While these kids may not have

been physically abused, they could never count on being cherished and protected without having to prove their worth.

One client of mine remembered how, from an early age, he'd had to be the "entertainer and comforter" for his mother when his father was away on business, or was simply too shut down to engage in his marriage. He said, "Dad would only come alive when he was criticizing me for upsetting my mom or not doing well enough in school—a B+ should have been an A. The slightest pout on my face rendered me a 'faggot' in his mind. And at the same time, Mom and Dad would be all aglow when forcing me to recite to their friends in their card-game-of-the-month club some ridiculous poem I'd memorized for school. Being special to them was terribly confusing. When I got in trouble as a teenager, there was no limit to what they'd do to get me off the hook, but there were never any hugs or any feeling that they really wanted to know me. Then again, what good is all that anyway?"

The emphasis on performance and the lack of attuned connection leads many children who develop into narcissists to become workaholics drawn to addictive, self-stimulating habits—pornography, endless Internet surfing, drugs, and alcohol abuse—all of which serve to keep them distracted and cut off from deeper emotional longings. Indulging in these habits is much easier than trying to connect with anyone honestly. For instance, when Richard's wife, Carolyn, came in with him for a session, she declared that she was at the end of her rope in what she described as a lonely and turbulent marriage. Whenever she tried to share a story with him or get him to react to her, she said, "He'll just bury his head in his BlackBerry."

"What's the big deal?" Richard asked. "I can hear her while I'm looking at my email. Besides, it's not like she's telling me something urgent or new."

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For Richard, developing a more intimate relationship with his wife meant opening himself up to his emotions—which he’d learned at an early age were signs of weakness. At age 6, for instance, he’d had a fight with his best friend, Steven, who’d said he’d never play with Richard again. When Richard ran home crying, devastated at the prospect of losing his friend, his father disdainfully admonished him, saying, “Don’t be such a wuss!” His mother told him, “You’re much better than Steven anyway. You’re making a big fuss about nothing. He’s not worth your time.” The message was loud and clear: Richard should be above silly things like hurt feelings and lost friendships.

The Art of Empathic Confrontation

Narcissists will rarely initiate therapy, except in the case of debilitating depression or anxiety that’s interfering with their performance. More typically, they show up only because their partners have said they’re leaving them, their adult children won’t speak to them, or their employers have threatened some disciplinary action unless they start therapy. Sometimes they come because of a court order involving illegal substance abuse, sexual misconduct, or domestic violence. And when they do come in, they’re usually seeking the “magic wand” cure and blaming the world for their misfortunes.

Since the narcissist isn’t motivated to do the necessary work of exposing his vulnerability, the only leverage that allows therapy to succeed is usually the prospect of losing the people in his life who care for him. So to make what happens in my office matter, I need to connect our moment-to-moment encounter continually with what’s going on between the client and the important people in his life. And to accomplish that, I need to show up in the treatment room as a “real” person, someone who can acknowledge the sting of insults and cutting remarks, as well as the decidedly nontherapeutic urge to withdraw or even attack in the face of continual provocations. Calling attention to my reactions to off-putting behaviors as they occur forces the client to confront how that same behavior affects others.

For example, a client recently responded to my attempt to empathize with his struggles with his wife by saying, “Stop acting like you care about what happens to me. You probably think I’m a piece of shit, just like my wife. You’re a woman after all. I may not be perfect, but I’ve seen a lot more of life than you have in your cozy little therapeutic bubble.”

Taking a deep breath, I said, “My hunch is that right now you’re feeling uncomfortable about being here, and that your put-downs about me are your way of handling that. But I have to tell you that what you just said was not only inaccurate, but insulting. Is this what you do with your wife when you’re feeling uncomfortable? If that’s right, I can understand why she keeps saying she’s so fed up with your marriage. I think what you’re really saying is that it’s hard for you to accept that anyone can care for you when you expect to be seen with contempt. So you play the bully to protect yourself.”

This isn’t the kind of warm, supportive exchange that most of us associate with therapeutic conversation, but with narcissists, this sort of self-disclosure and limit-setting is necessary if a bond of honesty and trust is to be established. The truth is that narcissists are particularly adept at ferreting out weaknesses in others and triggering feelings of inadequacy and intimidation in the therapist. For a therapeutic bond to develop, it’s important to establish firm ground rules as well as acknowledge your own triggers and vulnerabilities that can get in the way of treatment.

When I began working with this population many years ago, one of my narcissistic clients launched into an eloquent discourse on some esoteric feature of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. I was momentarily caught up in trying to understand his references and admiring how incredibly smart he sounded. Noticing what he perceived to be a dumbfounded look on my part, he said, “Wendy, do you ever read anything other than psychology books?” I can’t recall how I responded to him, but I’m certain I wasn’t empathetic. What I do remember is that I felt both exposed and furious.

I went home and began feverishly searching for a copy of *Hamlet* to refresh my memory and show Mr. Larger-Than-Life a thing or two! Then I caught myself: *What am I doing? What's happening to me?* With the help of my own therapist, I was able to root out what had triggered me and get a grasp on my own wildly competitive reaction.

In the next session, I decided to tell him that I'd felt the impulse to outdo and impress him. I then wondered out loud about whether he had this effect on others who might have felt simultaneously captivated by his intellect and wounded by his careless air of superiority. While he dismissed me at first as being "too sensitive," he'd been caught off guard: he wasn't used to having people express their uneasy reaction to him this directly. This moment became a turning point in our therapy. He realized that he could trust me to tell him how I was actually feeling about him in the moment, without being completely critical of all the parts of him that were human—an experience he'd never had before.

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In the face of a narcissist's insensitivity and aggressiveness, it's crucial to balance direct self-disclosure and limit-setting with a concern for creating the sense of safety that comes when the client feels your determination to hang in through all the twists and turns of forming a therapeutic bond. When the narcissist says disdainfully, "This therapy is a waste of time," it's crucial not to take that statement too personally, but to see it as an opportunity to explore the links between what's going on in the moment and the client's unacknowledged vulnerabilities. So one way of responding might be, "Why would you say that to me? And why in that disgusted tone of voice? You may not have been aware of how hurtful that sounds, but wow! I think there's something important going on for you, but it's hard to hear that when I'm sitting here trying to protect myself. Now, please tell me again. What's making you so upset? What's going on? But tell me respectfully."

Bringing the Past to Life

Given narcissists' unwillingness to explore their feelings and histories, experiential tools can come in handy when trying to deepen the process and bring formative memories into the treatment room. Here are some of the methods I've found most useful.

Photographs. To maintain a two-track awareness in sessions linking moment-by-moment client behavior with their history, I've found working with clients' photos can be invaluable in opening doors to buried emotional experiences. After looking through an array of photos, clients and I typically select some that depict the innocence and vulnerability they felt early in life, along with images that reveal transitions into survival modes as they grew older. From my perspective, superimposing the image of a little child over the face of the scowling man sitting across from me makes it easier to maintain an empathic therapeutic posture and not withdraw into defensiveness. For clients, looking at photos of the little, helpless, vulnerable children they once were can bring alive for them the forgotten pain of never receiving unconditional love and the longing to be just ordinary kids.

For instance, a client who professed not to recall much about his childhood immediately responded to a photo of himself in a starched dress shirt. "Don't let the smile fool you, I was miserable that day. My mother insisted I wear that shirt because a friend designed it, and it made *her* feel special. But I hated it. Look at the other kids in the background dressed in play clothes. I felt like a freak!" It was the first time I'd heard him express some genuine emotion in all the months we'd been working together. Another time, a narcissistic client startled me by becoming tearful as he viewed the photo of his father holding him when he was an infant. "I don't think he ever held me again," he said as he welled up. "He worried it would make me a sissy or gay."

Photos offer countless opportunities to see the development of the clients' psychological survival mechanisms. Looking at a photo from when he was 5 years old, a client recalled, "I think that's when I learned to shut down my

feelings. It didn't take me long to understand that Mom was Queen Bee and my 'achievements' were going to make the world recognize what a special mother she was."

With my client Richard, I recall using photos of him to help me in a session in which he accused me of not caring about him because I'd changed an appointment time. I knew that I'd triggered some of his early life experiences and steadied myself before I responded by holding up a photo that we'd previously looked at together. "Listen, Richard, I know that in the world where you grew up, you were given the message that you had to do everything right, with no mistakes or second-best efforts," I said. Handing him the photo, I continued, "But look, you were just a small boy with burdens that shouldn't have been placed on your shoulders. Eventually, you grew to become this boy." I held up the photo of the overbearing 13-year-old bully he became. "This boy was mad at the world."

Richard became visibly upset, squirming in his chair, driving his pen into his shoe. Noticing this behavior, I added, "Richard, I'm not the enemy. I get you and care about you. Just because I changed our appointment time doesn't make it OK for you to make me a target for your anger and disdain. Is this how you speak to others when they disappoint you?"

Richard gave a small nod.

"The people in your world—your family, your coworkers—aren't trained to understand how your life was organized once upon a time. They can't get why you so often show such repugnance for them. Even I—someone who gets you—can feel the sting of your hurtful words."

Richard replied, "Yes, I know. But this is just who I am. I can't change who I am."

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"Change is really hard, but not impossible," I replied. "This is only part of you, and it's not who you are. It's how you become when you feel that insecurity crying out from deep within."

Chair Work. To help Richard appreciate, more vividly, these different behavior modes within him, I told him, “Imagine that your 4-year-old self is sitting where you are right now (*I handed him a photo*), and your angry 8-year-old self is sitting across from you (*I placed another photo in a chair*). We’ll put your demanding, critical father over here (*I placed that photo in a corner of the room*). Let’s begin with little Rick (*as he liked to refer to the youngest part of himself*). See if you can supply a voice for him. Let’s understand what he feels and what he needs most of all.”

Trying to sense the experience of little Rick, Richard stumbled but eventually, while looking at the photo, said, “Well, it would be nice to have someone ask me what I’d like, maybe give me a hug once in a while, and want to play with me or just hang out.”

I then asked detached, angry 8-year-old Rick to respond to little Rick’s feelings. Richard looked to the chair where Angry Rick was placed and replied, “Forget it, Buddy. Not happening. Not in this life! Get back in the basement and enjoy your comic books, be good and do what you have to do, because that’s all there is. Your mom is the only pampered one in this family.”

Following this, I asked judgmental, 12-year-old Ricky (a new reference to the preadolescent Richard) to join this dialogue by supplying a voice for his father—a voice that carried a message that had been well implanted in his brain. “What would he say about little Rick’s needs and feelings?” I asked.

“You don’t need that sissy crap! That’s for losers. Our family is for winners,” he said. “We’re better than other people. Do you want me to be proud of you? Well, do you? Grow up, be tough, do well, and keep your mother happy!”

I asked Richard to tell me how little Rick was feeling then.

“He knows this story all too well. He’s probably upset. I’m not sure. I think he’s shutting down,” he replied.

Guided Imagery. Sometimes I use guided imagery to help clients have an experience of feeling nurtured and of how it “should’ve” for the little guy in the

picture. I handed Richard the photo of little Rick, and asked him to look at it and then close his eyes and see the image of him in his mind beside adult Richard, as I supplied a voice for the healthy, adult Richard. “Of course you’re upset, little Rick. You have a right to be held, to have someone play with you, and love you just for you. All children need that. You don’t have to hide in that basement anymore when you feel sad, lonely, or angry. You’re safe here with me, and with Wendy. We’re going to take care of you. It never should’ve been that way. It’s not your fault; you’re just a little boy who needs to be loved and accepted for who you are. Carolyn wants to know you and love you, too.”

Richard’s facial muscles relaxed, and as he opened his eyes, he reported feeling a bit “thrown.” Wiping away a stray tear, he said, “Well this is weird, but yes, it feels a little better. I can see what you mean about the different ‘parts’ of me. Yes, I can see what we’re up against.” The photos helped Richard, like other narcissistic clients, to appreciate his smallness, his vulnerability, and his limited power to get what he needed earlier in his life. The vivid image of his little face and body helped him recapture an immediate sense of what the child thought and felt, how he dealt with the emotional emptiness of his world.

After a few interactions like this, Richard began to find a voice for his most vulnerable parts: “I need love and attention. I’m sad that I can’t be perfect enough for my dad. It’s my job to make my mom happy. I’m angry because I don’t fit in.” This process helps create empathic awareness of self and story, and later it makes room for empathic awareness of others’ feelings.

Audio Flashcards. I made sure that Richard left each session with brief audio files that I’d record for him in-session (directly on his smart phone, or on a voice-recording sent to his email or left on his voicemail). The audio message captured moments that I wanted him to hold on to—moments that resonated for him emotionally. These audio flashcards reinforced work we’d done together in session and have more impact than written notes.

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Here's an example of the countless messages I sent home with him: "I don't have to prove myself. I'm not the center of the universe; this was an ascribed burden from my father. I'm worthy of love and attention, and when I get upset with Carolyn, I need to take a little walk to calm myself and make sure I come back to whatever conversation triggered me in the first place."

Sometimes the audio flashcards were used to anticipate activating events that might cause a spiral or a flare-up of the bullying, controlling, or entitled behavior. Whenever Richard was going to have an encounter with his parents at a social event, holiday, or family reunion, I'd send him an audio flashcard to remind him to keep little Rick at a safe distance, and to be sure to stay in his grown-up mode.

In the early phases of treatment, Richard, like many narcissistic clients, was at risk for the post-session shame of having dropped his guard and exposed his vulnerability in the treatment room. I knew that by the time he left the session and turned the key in his car, he might already be hearing an inner voice that said, "You made a fool of yourself. You've been tricked. You're just being used. You don't need therapy!" After one especially revealing session, I gave Richard the following audio flashcard before he left the room: "I'm so proud of you, Richard. I know it's hard to share this part of you with anyone, and it may even be a little weird. But I really like knowing you and your emotions. Beautiful work! Hold on to that little guy. Resist that old message that may tempt you to toss this work aside. Don't slip away. Change will take time. We'll navigate these rocky paths together."

Keeping It Real

Narcissists tend to be keen observers, who pick up on fakery fast. To be effective with them, you need to display confidence at the same time you communicate openness, a bit of good humor, and a sense of "keeping it real." Perhaps most important, however, is absolute persistence on your part. Successful treatment is about continuing to show up as a real person, not a jargon-spouting expert. This

is all the more challenging because just when you least expect it (insert theme from *Jaws*), the uglier parts of the narcissist will return.

No matter how connected I thought we were, Richard remained capable of surprising me, offering up scathing comments—about me, my office, or even the crookedness of a picture on the wall—that left me feeling blindsided. After years of doing this kind of work, I’ve learned that the best response is usually lightheartedness and transparency. “Sometimes it’s simply amazing isn’t it, Richard?” I’d say. “One minute we’re sharing your deepest feelings of injury and the next you’re picking on me again. Then I get triggered and feel like I just want to fight back or surrender and go home.” Then I’d add reassuringly, “But I won’t. I know this is coming from that ‘tough guy’ part of you that screams, ‘Attack!’ whenever you start to let your guard down. Hey, it’s me, Richard. It’s safe here. You’re not weak: your emotions are the best part of you. I like knowing you.”

At this point, Richard might offer a clumsy apology and clear his throat, and we’d go on; however, instead of just letting it drop, I might try to connect him with a sense of empathy: “Richard, although I know you don’t mean to be hurtful, can you imagine the impact on me when you speak that way? It doesn’t convey your discomfort, the most important part of the experience you’re having. Instead, it distracts us and takes us on a detour from the truth. Remember, most people won’t tell you this because it’s not their responsibility. Most people are either intimidated or they’ve given up. It’s not your fault, Richard, but it is your responsibility, if you want to take it.”

Richard learned to build a better relationship with Carolyn one brick at a time. After a year or so of his work with me, along with some couples sessions, they’d made progress in their relationship. It wasn’t perfect, but there was a real commitment to attending to the nonnegotiable fundamentals of their marriage: respect, reciprocity, remorse, and repair.

Challenging The Narcissist - Part 6

It isn't easy to transform narcissists, mostly because, so often, they have insufficient motivations to change the old self-absorbed patterns with which they're so familiar. Here, however, Richard valued his marriage enough—or was scared enough at the prospect of losing it—to do the work of beginning to look at himself in a new way, even if that meant giving up his accustomed sense of unquestioned superiority and entitlement.

Narcissists will rarely shed all their defenses, but therapy can enhance their awareness of what it's like to be on the other side of a relationship with them. There are no shortcuts to helping them develop that awareness, but with persistence, skill, and commitment to holding them accountable for their actions and statements, it's possible to help them recognize the consequences of their behavior and the validity of others' feelings. It all begins with offering a moment-to-moment experience of relationship different from any they've ever had before. For the many narcissists who benefit from therapy, it can truly be said that their bond with their therapist, no matter how difficult and continuously tested it may have been over the course of treatment, is the most completely two-sided relationship that they've had in their lives.

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