

Destructive Narcissistic Parents - Part II

In the Summer of 2010 a published Psychealth article on "Destructive Narcissistic Parents" triggered a number of calls from the adult offspring of these parents. They felt relieved in recognizing that they were not alone, nor were their parents who struggled with these traits. In therapy they were able to address the emotions they encountered during parental interactions. They learned to develop assertiveness, independence and healthy boundaries. Yet, something was missing. They described sadness, bitterness, and resentment at the wasted years of waiting for a loving relationship. They needed to understand the missing piece of the puzzle.



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Removing the parent from one's life is not always the answer, albeit for some it is the healthiest way to avoid ongoing trauma. Yet there still lingers that inexplicable emptiness that is often hard to articulate. I believe that for many people the emptiness stems from a wish to forgive but they are not sure what forgiveness should look like. Dr. Les Carter (Enough About You: Let's Talk About Me) provides some pearls of wisdom in why forgiveness can be an important form of healing.

Some positive aspects of forgiveness can include the ability to:

- Focus on priorities that are more important than anger.
- Let go of obsessions about the one who has wronged you.
- Refrain from making insulting and derogatory remarks about the one who has wronged you.
- Move toward a healthier and more peaceful life.
- Put acceptance and tolerance before bitterness.
- Recognize that forgiveness is your choice.

- Forgiveness in NOT:
- Denying the legitimate pain you have experienced.
 - Denying legitimate anger.
 - Agreeing to act closer than you are comfortable with the person who has wronged you.
 - Allowing others to disrespect your needs and boundaries.

- Condoning behaviours that are inappropriate.
- Pretending all is okay and act as though nothing has happened.
- Ignoring the ill effects of past wrongs that continue to influence current events.

Forgiveness is a choice, not an obligation and we have to determine why it is important to let go of painful emotions in the first place. Too often the children of narcissistic parents find they can't move forward until they receive the narcissist's blessing that they are valuable. In this instance you become captive in allowing your worth to be determined by one who struggles with empathy and encouragement. Forgiveness can release you from the bondage of pain. It can reaffirm your self worth.

Bitterness engages you in the futile battle of trying to gain the upper hand. "If I try hard enough I can force them to see the error of their ways." This is not a competition! Broken feelings are unlikely to be mended through the normal channels of communication with those who struggle with narcissistic traits. These individuals are often incapable of repaying the "accumulated emotional debt", not because they don't want to but because they don't know how to. Holding onto bitterness makes it hard to come to terms with reality. It is often the regrettable truth that needs to be acknowledged, that this will not be what you dreamed. It is hard to accept that we get stuck in a childish approach to life. We demand that significant others *must* treat us with respect before we can be healthy ourselves. When I ask these adult children how old they feel in the presence of their parents, the answer has consistently come back "Six, eight or ten years old, petrified and paralyzed. Sometimes I feel like a teenager, full of indignation and rage that they refuse to see my worthiness and individuality".

Emotional pain in these circumstances is a way of telling us that something needs to change. You need to listen to that pain and explore productive ways to expend your emotional energies. Pain is an inevitable part of life, we can't escape it. But when acknowledged wisely it can

encourage positive change.

Forgiveness can be important in moving toward a peaceful life. Perhaps we need to make this our priority rather than trying to make the destructive narcissist comprehend what to them is incomprehensible.

Imaging for a moment, in the heat of a painful encounter that you can think of what forgiveness means to you. Perhaps as Mother Teresa said "Peace begins with a smile". The smile comes to your faces, it is not malicious or sarcastic but rather filled with wisdom of what you need to do. At this pivotal point in the relationship you can bring to mind these words, spoken quietly within, "Better than a thousand hollow words, are {three words} that can bring peace". (Siddharta Buddha). Perhaps those words could be "I forgive you...".

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Where Were You When I Needed You Most?

Mark and Rachel are in their mid 40's and have been married for 20 years. They have been attending couples therapy following a "drifting apart" from each other over several years. In the sessions, they are gradually sharing their feelings to try to regain a greater sense of closeness that they had previously experienced. In one session, Rachel erupts into anger, indicating that she doesn't think that she can continue the couples therapy as she has not trusted Mark for the past 10 years. Mark is shocked to learn that she is "full of resentment" that "he was not there" for her when she had a miscarriage 10 years earlier. She explains



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that Mark did not come with her to the doctor's office at the time and worked late and "was not with me" when she got home that night. Despite seeing her anguish and grief at the time, he avoided talking with her about it, and acted like "it was just a fact that happened." Rachel indicates that she felt completely abandoned by her husband at the time, and was forced to deal with something very painful on her own. At that point, she felt that Mark did not really care about her and decided to never again turn to him for support. She explained that she had tried to bring up her hurt and anger about this incident for several years; however, she found that Mark tended to

justify and rationalize his actions ("It was a very busy time for me at work - why can't you get that and get over it?"), thereby minimizing her feelings whenever she would discuss it. This left Rachel feeling even less understood and abandoned. She states that this incident, along

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The Law of Unintended Consequences

If we could look into the future, we might be surprised at the consequences our present actions would have on others. We may not intend the results that occur. Robert Merton, a well-known sociologist in the early 1900's, stated that the phenomenon of all human actions having at least one unexpected result was so common it could be labelled the "law of unintended consequences". This "law" operates politics, societies and relationships. A recent example of this occurred in a country trying to exterminate its prolific rat population. A program that was established to pay a bounty for each rat pelt collected had the unexpected consequence of rat farms being developed to take full advantage of the monetary rewards! Or consider the unintended consequences of the technological innovations of Tim Berners-Lee, who

developed the World Wide Web. Although it was developed only for publishing and distribution of physics papers, statistical estimates today suggest that there are over two billion users of the World Wide Web in technological communications today.

This law of "unintended consequences" also affects our relationships, especially in parenting. In the light of the recent Stanley Cup riots, the Twelve rules for Developing Your Normal Healthy Baby into a Juvenile Delinquent" set out by the Houston City police department seem quite relevant. Raising a child to be a juvenile delinquent



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would not be a goal for any new parent, but it may be the unintended result of certain parenting practices.

Consider Marci's situation. She wanted to raise her son so that he would have things that she never did, to be a "buddy" to him instead of a disciplinarian and to give him complete freedom in making life choices. In reality, Marci gave Johnny everything he wanted, when he wanted it. She attempted to make up for her own childhood without

the experience of designer clothing, expensive vacation trips, and the "toys" her peers had. She and her husband paid

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The Law of Unintended Consequences

hugely for this with their constant work they neglected and lost their own relationship. In retrospect, Marci realized that by giving her son everything he wanted, she never gave him the opportunity to want something badly enough that he might work for it himself. She had not anticipated the unintended consequences in Johnny's sense of entitlement and boredom with his life.

Marci did everything for her little boy. Getting him to do his chores was frustrating so she stopped asking. She didn't realize that her own negligence to enlist his help fostered irresponsibility. She didn't recognize that a child's ability to work is learned early, through simple tasks that teach him that work can be enjoyable and rewarding. The unintended consequence of Marci's lax parenting was Johnny's lax responsibility, with an expectation that others should provide him with life's necessities.

Marci and her husband did not expose Johnny to any moral teachings or spiritual guidance, believing instead that he would be able to make those decisions for himself when he "grew up". Now, as a young adult, he did not know *what* to believe, let alone *why* to believe it. When he got into trouble with his teachers, his coaches and eventually the law, Marci took his side, rather than letting him suffer the consequences for his behaviour. Now, seeing Johnny as a young adult, Marci realized that he did not recognize "right" from "wrong". Johnny had no moral compass to guide his actions and little

ability to understand other's perspectives. Although he had physically become an adult, he was ill-prepared to assume the responsibilities of one.

Marci never anticipated these consequences. Had she been aware that her complacency, her desire to be liked and her conflict avoidance would contribute to Johnny's delinquency, she may have changed course. Instead, her coddling left her son with an unmerited sense of entitlement, an apathetic work ethic, and a lack of respect for authority figures. Of course Johnny's behaviour is not entirely due to his parenting. His personality, social connections and the influence of others are also significant. Yet the role of Johnny's parents, particularly in his younger years, is especially important.

How do we influence the most positive outcomes possible for our children? Here are a few ideas: 1) *We need to parent intentionally and proactively.* It's a helpful practise to set aside time once or twice a year to focus on your family's needs and goals for the next time period. Observe your children. Ask the important questions. Consider their development socially, emotionally, physically and mentally. Evaluate your child's ability to make decisions, their sense of humour and ability to care for others, their ability to be a good communicator and listener, their ability to discern right from wrong, their ability to fail and cope with failure, their ability to forgive others and to ask for forgiveness, their

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ability to attempt the impossible, their ability to be a good citizen and whether they feel secure in their parent's love. Where they are lacking in an area, develop a plan to help them grow in it.

An effective parent makes decisions intentionally, exemplifying the attitudes and teaching the skills that help their children live life fully.

2) *Realize as parents we need to be willing to be teachable ourselves.* We need to make ourselves accountable to friends and/or family who demonstrate wisdom in their lives and want the best for us. We need to ask questions, read the right books and look for role models that we ourselves can aspire to.

3) *Work towards being the persons we want our children to be.* We need to set examples for our children in our family and community life. An effective parent makes decisions intentionally, exemplifying the attitudes and teaching the skills that help their children live life fully. There may be unintended consequences in parenting, but with care, consistent evaluation, and positive examples, it is possible these consequences can be good ones.

Where Were You When I Needed You Most?

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with the subsequent inability to resolve it, caused her to withdraw from Mark and led to the gradual disconnection between the two of them over time.

The incident described above is typical in the "wear and tear" it can cause on a relationship. Many couples expect that if there has never been an affair, physical abuse, or substance abuse in the relationship, there is no real relationship wound to repair. Sadly, this is often not the case. Dr. Sue Johnson, the pioneer of emotionally focused couples therapy, indicates that the type of incident (described above) is called an "attachment injury." She indicates that a healthy dependence (not clinginess or neediness) is essential for a good relationship. A healthy dependence means that one's spouse is there for both the *good* and the *difficult* moments, and will reach out to offer some kind of comfort or support during the difficult times. In a healthy relationship, this reaching out of support is enormously comforting to the spouse in need and allows for a "coming together" in dealing with the challenging event; this, in turn, leads to greater emotional closeness and trust in the relationship. However, when this does not occur, the "injured" spouse is left with a deep hurt or wound, as was the case for Rachel in the example above. Thereafter, a significant distance between the spouses frequently develops.

Attachment injuries usually occur in response to a significant life event, such as the death of a parent, a serious illness or diagnosis (e.g., cancer), the loss of a child,

one spouse experiencing depression, or the loss of one's job. What constitutes an attachment injury is the seriousness of the event for the person affected and the inability of their spouse to be there in a supportive way. An attachment injury in itself is not lethal to a relationship if it can be discussed and resolved after its occurrence. However, an attachment injury becomes a significant relationship "wound" when there is an inability to resolve the injury. In this case, the "injured" person tries to discuss their hurt or disappointment with their spouse and experiences further abandonment and isolation when their spouse minimizes the incident (e.g. "You are making this into a big deal") or justifies their behaviour without ever understanding why it was a big deal for the other person.

Typically, attachment injuries are not intentionally inflicted and can be caused by the most caring and loving of spouses. Sometimes, these injuries occur because one person may not realize the significance of the event for the other or because the person feels anxious about not knowing *how* to support their spouse, and winds up doing nothing. Other times, one individual may be preoccupied with their own life stressors (e.g. work or children) and not have the energy to attend to their spouse.

The good news is that attachment injuries can be "repaired." The key is to recognize that they don't tend to go away on their own and can cause significant damage to the relationship when they

remain indefinitely "buried." What is needed is an open discussion of the event and a gradual shared understanding of what happened for each party. For example, it would be important for Rachel to share her hurt and disappointment that Mark wasn't there - not in an attacking way, but in a way that lets him understand what the emotional impact was for her and how her sense of security or closeness in the relationship was impacted. Equally important would be for Mark to listen, in a non-defensive, non-justifying manner, to try to understand Rachel's pain and what the miscarriage, and his not being there, was like for her. It would also be important, for Mark to share what had happened for him at the time (e.g. "I was so scared and devastated about what happened, I didn't know what to say to you.") and for him to share his genuine regret that he could not be there in the way that Rachel needed. Gradually, with this kind of dialogue, Rachel can feel heard and understood once again, and can begin to forgive Mark and gradually let down her "walls." With this issue finally "healed," the "ghosts of the past" can be let go and a new sense of closeness and security can finally be achieved.

Note: If these dialogues seem too difficult to undertake, it is important for the couple to seek couple's therapy to be able to more fully resolve the issues in a safe environment.

Envision Your Future

This is not how I had planned my life to be.... I've lost interest in this job that I used to love.... I've never enjoyed working and I don't know that I ever will..... Is this all there is?..... Vision. Passion. Dreams. Hope....how do you bring these into a life course that seems to have gone off track or has somehow become stalled.

What is a metaphor for your life? An uphill climb? A competitive race? A field of wildflowers? Most people find that as life unfolds, it seems to take unexpected twists and turns. These are usually a mix of wanted and unwanted life events.

Whether you are 13, 37, 55, or

109...or anywhere in between, most people feel stalled or off course at points in their lives. You have choices. You can ignore feeling off course. That might work for awhile. You can allow yourself to be discouraged. You can also take a closer look at what the roadblock is...what is keeping you stuck and what has taken you off course?

Re-assessing where you have been, where you are going, and where you would like to be in the future, these



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are keys to unlocking the stuckness.

Here are some guidelines to help envision new goals and dreams:

- Being stuck or feeling off track can happen at any age. New studies on "brain plasticity" means that we can keep learning, growing, and making changes in our lives into old age. It's

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never too late to formulate a new vision, new goals, plans and dreams.

- Make space in your life to take a closer look at your past, present and future. Think about what the messages were in your family and cultural background. Write them down and then decide which of those you want to hang onto and which ones to discard. Congratulate yourself for accomplishments and achievements. Allow yourself to daydream. Bring in your creative side by considering metaphors for your current situation and your vision for your future. What is the metaphor...spinning hay into gold?

Metaphors can help to spark our vision for the future and provide us a picture to hold onto and a target to aim for. Allow yourself to wonder about what it is that you wanted for your life when you were a child...is some of that still true? Personality and individual preferences show up early in life. Sometimes we end up silencing our childlike parts because other messages about what we should be crowd out the early wisdom.

- Ask yourself if you are using the talents, skills, and abilities that you enjoy using. Maybe there are new skills that you would like to develop.

Upcoming Workshops

Marriage, Bereavement and Parenting

Fall 2011 - Dates TBA

- Be on the alert for new opportunities. We easily miss opportunities because we aren't watching for them.
- Be willing to take some risks. Change can be risky.
- Hold on to your vision. Persist. Be careful who you share it with. Allow yourself to share it with others who you know will cheer you on.
- If you believe in prayer, pray about it.