

Mixed blessings: the role of narcissism in affluent families

This article was conceived and developed in collaboration with my friend Thayer Willis, LCSW, a specialist in family wealth psychology. A shorter form appeared in Worth, Aug, 2005.

A common, if unexamined assumption is that the experience of privilege - the financial means to accomplish nearly any goal - is tantamount to the best life. Period. We fantasize that wealth connects us with access to the best schools, the best real estate, the best support staff, vacation experiences, and overall glamour - and hence, the most fun times, the best life. This is a central feature of the American Dream. Upon closer inspection, however, this very commitment to "the best of everything" can undermine family relations.

How does this happen? Easy. What begins as well-intended standard-setting about family styles and rituals ("We all clean up a bit for dinner, we have meals with candles in the dining room every night, and the staff take care of the cleanup") can become a prison for all but the standard-bearer. In most cases, the one with the authority to make decisions is a parent. The children, eager to please and fearful of a parent's wrath, learn to uphold nearly impossible standards in an effort to be the "best child ever:" the high-value product of their parents' investment.

Considerable confusion exists about just what narcissism is, what kind of narcissism is healthy, and what kind, unhealthy. In the famous myth of Narcissus, the youth is mesmerized by the beauty of his own reflection. Narcissism is basically a focus on the self: self interest, self worth, self knowledge. The baby boomer generation is known for being intensely preoccupied with such a journey of discovery.

Appreciation and knowledge of one's true self is the healthy side of narcissism. Self interest is a normal part of a healthy ego. What constitutes a danger to relationships is a more twisted form of self-concern. Some people feel unsatisfied, or unhappy with, their self image, and so they rely on others in their environment to construct a beautiful reflection of themselves. For example, mothers who cannot feel good about themselves if their preschoolers are wearing mismatched clothes, or fathers who are extremely upset that their sons are not "select" soccer players. In either case, the young child has a much less intense need to look perfect, or to excel at soccer, than does their parent. The tenderness of their youth, however, makes them sensitive to the needs of this all-important figure in their life, so they begin to abandon their own playful childhood and instead shape their interests around parent-pleasing.

Consider one example of goal-setting: playing an instrument. The child achieves one set of the parent's standards – playing the violin, or singing a solo – and then the parent, eager to continue creating excellence and accessing the best, sets a whole new row of hurdles. In healthy systems, this process of hurdle-setting is a normal part of growing up. Parents are always seeking to cultivate the child's capacity to master appropriate developmental tasks. What distinguishes the narcissistic parent from the healthy parent is the *emotional attachment to uniquely favorable outcomes*; and therein lies the damage.

A parent who suffers shame – and hence grows upset - when their child does poorly on tests or competitions is a parent who is seeking to fill their own (empty) psychic tank by using the child as a tool for favorable reflection: “I am a good person, and a good parent, because my child is special, talented, beautiful, extraordinary, practically perfect.”

Over time, this cycle of striving linked to emotional satisfaction builds a toxic relationship. When the child enjoys a tentative triumph, for instance, a narcissistic parent will move the bar higher, foreclosing on that child's right to celebrate. In lieu of celebrating small successes, the parent points to larger goals. Strong children, forced to comply with incessant hurdles, smolder with resentment toward a stance which discounts their ability to contribute to the family. More sensitive children simply collapse into discouragement and low self esteem. In any case, the “true” child goes underground to protect themselves from further painful experiences. At some point in the childhood, the child turns away from their true nature, and constructs a “false self,” the product of the parent's desire.

The child of a narcissist, having silenced his or her own internal cues, learns to attune themselves ever more acutely to the parent's wishes. They learn to discipline, or even eradicate, their own desires. They show incredible social poise at an early age. Why? Because they apply their training, expanding from the parent to the parent's whole social network, and eventually, all authority figures. As time wears on, this parent-pleasing pattern extracts a fundamental toll. As adults, the children of narcissists have no appropriate sense of their own rights, needs, or inner motives. All of their attention has been focused on being the good child. Most chilling, the grown child, having assumed that all other adults are like the demanding parent figure, reflexively assumes that their own needs are not legitimate or important. In adulthood, in the absence of external cues, they literally lack an internal compass for the management of their own lives.

Some grow depressed and listless. Others are oversensitive – still attempting to “sense” others' hopes or expectations without the balancing sense of their own stance in the scheme of things. Still others commit to rebellion or knee-jerk rejection of the parental relationship. For some, it is a combination of the dynamics above. Confusing.

In all cases, the children of narcissists suffer from an inappropriate or misguided understanding of just how much space they are entitled to occupy. Many commit to

marital relationships with other narcissists, unconsciously repeating the parental cycle of over-pleasing. Healthy, authentic relationship skills are minimal or non-existent. Friendships are shallow or just inaccessible. The “relationship skills” of this young person are merely coping skills developed in self-defense. The psychological neediness (for praise and approval) born of insecurity, or chameleon-like pleasing, are red flags to high-functioning, relationship-healthy, would-be-friends,

Returning to the central question, why or how is this aggravated by the wealth experience?

1) The power of assuming that one’s children can be “the best” through investment in the best resources for them sets up disproportionate expectations of success, especially in cases in which the parent is the wealth creator. Where social status is a concern of the parents, the children are often viewed as little ambassadors for the parents. The child may or may not recognize that the chief purpose of their own existence is to make the parents look good. The child could have the turmoil of demons inside, but as long as they keep the family “look good” going, all is well. In wealthy families, there are tremendous resources available to keep the “look good” in tact.

2) In many cases, the parent grows “spoiled,” indulged by professionals and support staff. The normalization of high levels of service feeds a narcissistic attitude: I am wealthy, I deserve the best, and I can afford it. The parent grows accustomed to being pleased and accustomed to wielding the power to demand desired results – or else. Such conditions weaken the character and blur the wise navigation of cooperation and compromise. When the child asserts any differentiation from the parent’s wish – such as healthy exploration or rebellion, the parent may unconsciously engage in the same power games. The imbalance of power between parent and child is nearly infinite; and a young person’s spirit can be broken, or deeply harmed.

3) Money may be used as the ultimate threat. In typical problematic cases, money and love are so intermingled that monetary consequences are love equivalents: if I love you, you get money. If I don’t love you, you are poor. If you make me angry, I won’t love you, and I won’t support you. I have the power to cut you off from everything. By the time these threats start, the child is typically a teenager, and understands that financial wealth is a powerful commodity in our society.

Thus, the power conveyed by wealth has the ability to amplify the stakes in the entire familial picture: the height of expectations, the depth of the disappointment, and the breadth of opportunity to acquire, or deny, resources.

Sounds dark. So what can you do about it? Real healing and change *are* possible.

Correcting narcissistic behavior, and overcoming the experience of being reared by a narcissist, is possible, but not typical; it occurs in a series of highly difficult growth steps. For purposes of this article, we will deal with the adult children of such childrearing experiences.

The first step, of course, is to spot the pattern. Often adults aren't sure just what is wrong, but they feel that something is "missing." They may feel vague foreboding at the prospect of a parental visit, or reunion. They may notice that it takes a lot of energy to muster a phonecall to the parent. The hole in the psyche makes itself known: some sense of fulfillment or contentment is drained in the presence of the parent.

The second step is to develop self-protective measures. A variety of coping skills can be developed to avoid being an easy prey to a powerful figure in need of connection. A client can be coached in communication styles and patterns that minimize their vulnerability. Additionally, they can begin to analyze past moments of greatest injury or difficulty, and manage expectations. One therapist referred to communication patterns as the "pint of blood" syndrome: that is, the child feels that they must offer up a real sacrifice of their own energy to keep the parent's wrath at bay. Morality, relationship, and priorities are managed around the management of another's mood, rather than internal principles. Changing expectations can greatly reduce vulnerability.

Finally, prudent self-care in the face of unavoidable challenges is restorative. Adult children of narcissists may need a spa treatment, or meditation time, or a new novel as the incentive to get through family meetings or holiday encounters.

In some cases, clients are willing to engage in some deeper exploration of the true child left behind. This work constitutes the core of what is often referred to as "inner child" work: reawakening, and attending to, childish needs and experiences that were previously silenced. The child of the psyche is never gone; but years of inattention can create a void, or a gulf, between the active, surface personality, and the true nature. Rebuilding this bridge is the key to the recreation of an authentic life. That's what re-creation means: to create, anew, by engaging in the therapeutic power of play. Narcissists are often quite judgmental about childish things. They long to be protected from their own vulnerabilities. Hence, one common hurdle for their children is to keep the play process safe and protected from the incisive, damaging eye of the parent's judgments.

The fourth, and rarest step, is to end the cycle by changing the pattern of the relationship between child and parent. The most powerful healing comes when the child of a narcissist dares to voice themselves: to declare their freedom, to assert an independent position, to move beyond fear, into compassion for the wounded adult living life the only way they know how. This "declaration of independence" is never warmly received. Often, a period of distance is required by both parties.

The liberation from the narcissistic pattern is a difficult crossing because, by its very nature, narcissism forecloses authentic character formation. A silent code precludes the life-giving power of honesty: *I will never tell you anything about you as a parent that would displease you.*

The fifth step is reconciliation. Once the “child” has regained themselves and their independence, the movement towards or away from the parent figure holds little emotional charge. They learn that they, too, must accept the parent, and not continue to bestow upon them the magical powers of the terrifying giant from their childhood. Many therapeutic clients, unaccustomed to an internal registry of validation, feel that their own healing will only be complete when the other, narcissistic figure, agrees to change, or validates their grievance. This assumption is emblematic of the damage to their psyche: the measure of success should lie within themselves, but that system is broken.

That said, wholesale change does occur in a family system. When a narcissist is faced with crushingly painful consequences associated with their relationship style, they will seek remedies. Examples include the threat of divorce, loss of coveted leadership position, or exclusion from family gatherings and meetings as a consequence of their behavior. So, with this leverage, it is possible that the narcissist could experience enough pressure to give up some or all of their narcissistic attitudes and behaviors.

In most cases, it is the fear of the unknown – fear itself – which binds up the whole family. Families will arrive at a deadlock while the narcissist holds all the power. Everyone is afraid. Often blame is leveled at the most agreeable, or functional one, to keep them at bay. Family members, who know only the one way of relating by pleasing the narcissist, are less afraid of their known predicament than the void of the unknown field of alternatives.

If there is no way to get leverage on the narcissist, the best way to handle such a situation is to focus attention on creating a good life with the resources already in hand. If, in reading this piece, you arrive at the point of realizing that this is what you face, you will have a sense of loss as you distance yourself from this unhealthy family system. Yet, it is the wisest choice. Be polite for the sake of your own dignity, but you will have to make a place for yourself in the world away from them and without their support, for some period of time. For most clients, the most difficult crossing lies in the deeply held wish that some day, some way, the parent would change. Relinquishing that one expectation brings grief, and freedom.

“If you want a place in the sun, you must leave the shade of the family tree.”

–Native American Proverb

