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Narcissism and Co-Narcissism

by [Gudrun Zomerland, MFT](#)










More than anything else in my almost 20-year practice of psychotherapy, I have found that parental narcissism and the resulting lack of empathy and attunement with the child is what brings people into psychotherapy later as adults. In order to survive a narcissistic parent, children learn to tune out their own vulnerability, their own needs, and their own emotional world that would direct them toward their needs. Children learn to be close to the parent by either imitating the narcissistic parent and becoming like him or her (a narcissist), or by tuning into the parent's bottomless need for positive self-reflection (co-narcissist). Children who have adopted the latter survival mechanism will later on in life choose other narcissists or other people with strong narcissistic tendencies to bond with in order to fulfill the role and type of relationship they are familiar with.

Client Resources:


-  [Addiction Self Tests](#)
-  [12-Step Fellowship Links](#)
-  [Handouts and Forms](#)

Articles by Gudrun Zomerland:

Addiction and Co-Dependency:

-  [Shame as Self-Care](#)
-  [The Dangers of Internet Porn](#)
-  [Non-Violent Communication and its Relevance for Codependents](#)
-  [Teen Addiction: An Open Letter](#)
-  [Prescription Drug Abuse](#)
-  [The Core of Co-Dependency](#)
-  [Co-Dependent Characteristics](#)
-  [H.A.L.T.: A Self-Care Tool](#)
-  [The Family Member in Denial](#)

Relationships:

-  [Non-Violent Communication and its Relevance for Codependents](#)

Throughout this article I am using the terms narcissism and co-narcissism to describe complex intrapersonal states. These are generally not fixed. All conditions manifest in degrees. Most of us have some narcissistic and co-narcissistic tendencies. It's a byproduct of growing up in this imperfect world. What I am describing below is the most acute form of these disorders but please be advised that other conditions, such as parental depression, alcoholism or tragedy can bring about similar effects.

Narcissism in its most extreme manifestation is a personality disorder. This means that the usual defenses, which we all have developed to cope with various degrees of harm done to us in childhood, have become so entrenched that they are considered in most cases immune to influence from outside, i.e. psychotherapy. Narcissists, because of their inflated sense of self, are often very charismatic, charming, vivacious and fun to be around --- until you live with them for a while and the endless overt or covert demands based on their self-absorption become tedious and eventually hurtful.

At the core of narcissism is such a deep level of shame that the person develops an insurmountable defense against it. With shame hidden away deep within the psyche, the narcissist has access only to the opposite condition: a sense of unworthiness becomes an overdeveloped sense of entitlement; a sense of extremely low self-esteem becomes an overdeveloped sense of confidence, bravado and infallibility. Narcissists think they are the best there is to the human race. They do not understand how they might be overlooked for a promotion; they will not admit mistakes; they cannot stand criticism; and above all they are unable to perceive a situation from a different point of view.


A child growing up with this level of self-absorption on the part of the parent does not get what is necessary for healthy brain function and emotional development. Recent research has shown that our brains have such a thing as "mirror neurons". A baby's mirror neurons will tune into the parent's mirror neurons and will absorb what it finds there. If the parent is able to be present to their own emotional discomfort (e.g. shame), this will be transmitted to the child; if the parent has shut away deep emotional discomfort and lives a life of make-believe, this will be transmitted to the child.

Narcissists will unconsciously use their children to boost their own self-image. Anything the child does becomes food for self-reflection. If the child misbehaves, the parent has to reject it. Instead of appropriate boundaries and guidance, the child has to cope with emotional rejection and overt or covert shaming. In this way, the narcissistic parent passes unresolved shame on


to the child. At the same time, the parent also distances himself or herself from the child in order to continue to present a positive image to the world. In effect, the parent is saying: "This child is not really mine; I don't know what's wrong with it." If the child is striving to be good and succeeds, however, it becomes an appendage to the narcissistic parent's self-image. The child does not exist in his or her own right with interests and accomplishments different from the parent's; it exists primarily to fulfill the dreams and expectations of the parent. In either case, a child is left with an undeveloped sense of self.


As mentioned above, narcissists will rarely find their way into therapy because it would require taking the risk of self-reflection and thereby finding the profound level of shame underneath the inflated self-image. If, for whatever reason, they do decide to seek therapy, treatment is a very long-term affair. Because narcissists have to guard against the inner demons of shame, any exploration of vulnerable emotional states or any reflection of non-productive behaviors are rejected. The therapist becomes a mirror for positive reflection and more like a teacher suggesting slight changes in behavior here and there or additional philosophical concepts to explore in order to improve personal relationships.


The therapeutic work with co-narcissists is very different in flavor. The body, mind and soul of

 [Attachment in Adult Relationships](#)


 [Getting to Know Your Emotions](#)


 [Communication Skills for Couples - 101](#)


 [Differentiation, or What Makes Relationships Work](#)


 [John Gottman's Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse](#)


General Topics:

 [Rapunzel, Daughter of a Closet Narcissist](#)


 [Trauma: The Shaking Of A Soul](#)

 [Shame as Self-Care](#)

 [Narcissism and Co-Narcissism](#)

 [Sexual Abuse Guidelines](#)

 [Book Review: "Stop Gaining Weight"](#)

 [Is Forgiving Our Parents Necessary for Mental Health?](#)

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the co-narcissist eventually wear out from the strains of living with a narcissist. The frequent dramas and the constant need to be there for another affect not only the emotional balance of the co-narcissist but also their physical immune system. Often co-narcissists will self-medicate with the help of various addictive compulsions. If they do not succumb to these, they may eventually realize that something needs to change in their lives and seek out therapy, 12 Step groups, workshops, or other tools that help them put the focus on themselves.

Classical client-centered psychotherapy is a balm for co-narcissists because they are hungry for someone to pay attention to their inner states. With this inner focus healing can begin. Besides grieving a lost childhood and finding ways to set boundaries with those around them, what contributes to the healing effect are the mirror neurons that continue to operate in our brains. The client's mirror neurons align with the therapist's mirror neurons, and thus the therapist's level of emotional maturation transmits to the client. Of course, this being so, it is very important that the client truly likes the therapist and finds him or her trustworthy.

If you seek more information about narcissism and co-narcissism, following are a few books that I found helpful:

- [When You Love a Man Who Loves Himself](#) by W. Keith Campbell
- [Children of the Self-absorbed: A Grown-up's Guide to Getting over Narcissistic Parents](#) by Nina W. Brown
- [Loving the Self-Absorbed: How to Create a More Satisfying Relationship with a Narcissistic Partner](#) by Nina W. Brown
- [Why Is It Always About You : The Seven Deadly Sins of Narcissism](#) by Sandy Hotchkiss and James F. Masterson
- [The Wizard of Oz and Other Narcissists: Coping with the One-Way Relationship in Work, Love, and Family](#) by Eleanor Payson
- [When Your "Perfect Partner" Goes Perfectly Wrong: Loving Or Leaving The Narcissist In Your Life](#) by Mary Jo Fay
- [Enough About You, Let's Talk About Me: How to Recognize and Manage the Narcissists in Your Life](#) by Les Carter

Co-narcissism is very similar to co-dependency in that both conditions describe a survival style in which one person lives for the apparent survival of another. It can therefore be helpful for co-narcissists to read about co-dependency and to join programs like [CoDA](#) or [Alanon](#) to help change destructive patterns in relationships.

Feel free to email me or give me a call for more information.

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