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Review Article

Recovery from Narcissistic Abuse through a Spiritual Lens: Who is in Charge?

Rivka A. Edery*

¹M.S.W, L.C.S.W, Psychotherapist, Private Practice, Brooklyn, New York, USA

***Corresponding Author:** Rivka A. Edery, M.S.W, L.C.S.W, Psychotherapist, Private Practice, Brooklyn, New York, USA, Tel: 646 6917771; E-mail: rebecca.edery@gmail.com

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Abstract

“Narcissistic personality disorder is a mental disorder in which people have an inflated sense of their own importance, a deep need for admiration and a lack of empathy for others. But behind this mask of ultra-confidence lies a fragile self-esteem that's vulnerable to the slightest criticism” [1].

There are untold numbers of people who have been effected by, to varying degrees, by a narcissistic person. Simply put, the term “narcissism” refers to a psychopathology of self-centeredness. It is important to acknowledge that the term “self-centeredness” is often used in a negative capacity – a character defect to be banished from self. Self-centeredness is a part of the human condition, and to a degree, it is required for healthy functioning. This can be observed in young children, expressing their needs. Assuming healthy adults are the caretakers, the caretaker meets their needs, and one can say that the little child is the center of their world – their needs are the priority of the caretaker. As the child ages and matures, this self-centeredness is disciplined and tempered to include “the other”,

and a more mature way of advocating for one's needs. For a person to function well in life, have meaningful and productive relationships, and maintain accurate self-esteem; concern for others is a crucial ingredient. There are those people, however, that operate based on their belief that the world does, and SHOULD, revolve around them. This is evidenced by how they relate to people, and what they withhold from others: close family, friends, co-workers, the world in general.

Their level of demand for constant admiration, approval, gratification, and subservience of "other" to meet all their needs, are frozen in time and in front of the mirror. Such people are referred to as narcissists. The narcissist is known to pursue only what serves him/her, and has little genuine regard for the needs and/or suffering of the other. The focus of this paper, is on providing both empathy for the victim of a narcissistic relationship, and some thought-provoking questions and exercises, for which the survivor can utilize for their recovery and growth.

Keywords: Narcissistic abuse; Healing; Trauma; Spirituality; Self-esteem; Integrity

1. Introduction

It can be said that narcissism is an extreme and damaging version of egoic selfishness, what experts would refer to as "pathology". The focus of this paper will not be on the narcissist per se, but on the survivor of narcissism, in whatever relationship they have experienced it. People who have been subjected to narcissistic abuse, especially in the early developmental years, may have ongoing issues with control, authority figures, and actual or perceived criticism. At the center of this wound in one's heart, is the constant self-doubt and fear that one is, at their core, simply not valued or good enough. Given our innate social need for love, belonging, and connection, such a core wound can keep one transfixed on the narcissist's belief of themselves, and perhaps even immobile in their efforts to develop a separate sense of self, that is not tainted with the narcissist's projections.

Included in one's journey in healing a wound that lies in the core of one's self, is seeking and identifying a self-image that is genuine and based on spiritual principles. The purpose of this shift is to steer clear of an ongoing relationship, internally, with the narcissist, and this can be done most effectively with a genuinely positive and loving replacement. Often, the survivor maintains the narcissistic relationship by repeating scenarios and conversations in their mind, bringing up issues, defending themselves, etc. – all in a dire effort to concede control

back to themselves. If the narcissist is still in their lives, they may be inclined to be subservient around them, continually argue with them and seek approval and/or control, or simply isolate. These are all efforts to achieve what a healthy person desires the most: an inner sense of value, feeling good and positive about themselves, and/or simply just not being abused or used in some way. Those people around the narcissist may simply be objects for them to use at their will, albeit some narcissists can be seductively charming and convincing of otherwise. For the survivor to shift away from the narcissist's perspective of them, in whatever capacity they can afford to do so, would require awareness of their position, acceptance of the mitigating circumstances, and actions necessary to pull forward.

To aid in one's recovery, establishing empathic and supportive connections, are paramount. At the root of one's inner schema on self, is the troubled answer to the question: *"Who is in charge of me: the narcissist's opinion and demands of me, my ego, my spiritual "Higher Self", God, or something else? Can I actually take back my "self"?* Left unattended and unexamined, plagued by guilt, and low self-esteem, this question and answer, plays well into the survivor's anxieties of authority figures, power struggles, feelings of unworthiness, isolation, and other related difficulties. The survivor may feel like they need to initiate an emotional rescue operation, just to manage their awareness of the situation.

As a first step in addressing this issue, is the need to admit to oneself, who is the narcissist that has effected, or is currently effecting one's life. There are several important considerations for the survivor: perhaps the survivor has been previously unconscious to this reality, are actively in denial, are aware of it but have chosen to ignore it, and try to move away from the person, or are currently actively engaged with such a person. If you are facing this for the first time, you may ask yourself if you have frozen pockets of pain, which is also referred to as emotional numbness. Given the varying levels of narcissistic abuse, people will experience and relate to this in different ways.

Consider the following analysis of the narcissistic person, from the perspective of Annie Reich (Psychoanalytic Contributions, 1973):

According to Reich, *the narcissist has weak sense of their "self", and a fragile ability to maintain self-esteem. They have an ongoing dependence on other people, experienced narcissistically. Associated with this vulnerability were repeated fluctuations between primitive idealization and overvaluation of the self and/or of others, and*

corresponding reciprocal fluctuations between intense self-hatred and self-devaluation and contempt and devaluation of others. Reich also discussed the specific types of anxiety, particularly annihilation anxiety, severe separation anxiety, and hypochondriacal anxiety; the vulnerability to depression and shame propensity [2, 3].

If you are in a relationship with such a person, or have been and not yet healed from it - it is common and understandable to want to hide your painful reality from others. It is logical to feel generally unhappy in life, and to even become an expert at hiding and keeping secrets of your difficulties. An abuse survivor can have all the trappings of a good lifestyle, and still feel that they just “don’t measure up”. *Just being aware of this makes one feel so raw and vulnerable.* For some survivors, seeing through one’s own denial cannot be done in one sitting, or alone. The pain and fear at the anticipation of frozen pockets of pain beginning to thaw, old anxieties and needs, not yet processed or faced beginning to surface, can be looming and daunting. So many survivors of narcissistic abuse can appear to be strong and competent. But internally, there is a sense of being out of touch and unfamiliar with trusting what is safe and real – plagued by guilt, anxiety, depression, and strong feelings towards authority figures. Such strong feelings can be the likes of distrust, rage, fear, passivity, complete submission, a deep need to hide or be dishonest to protect themselves. Such emotions and behaviors make sense considering what the survivor experienced in relation to the narcissist – with varying degrees depending on the person and circumstance. Although these maladaptive behaviors are understood, there is suffering that they instigate: living in constant fear and dread of ‘being found out’, chronic avoidance of the authority figure, uncontrollable rage and/or the need to be in charge. The following exercises are simple, and based on spiritual principles.

Let us start the first exercise: Find a secure mode of expressing whatever emotions you have bottled up. For example, take pen to paper and write about your emotions. Emotions such as intense anger, pain, sadness, fear, grief, longing, etc., – are some manifestations of having been subject to a relationship that is, or was, belittling to you – an insult to your soul. Once you have appropriately and sufficiently expressed your emotions (not necessarily in just one sitting), you may have cleared some of the way for trusting in your own basic goodness and worth. This starts by taking a spiritual look at your value, through a practical and spiritual lens. It is said that we human beings are spiritual beings having a human experience. We are different than non-human forms of life, with a consciousness and ability to reason, among other characteristics. We are not just our mind, our intellect, our body: we have a spiritual aspect to us, which remains a mystery to a great degree. This spiritual aspect, referred to by different names

and concepts depending on person and affiliation, is part of a power greater than our human selves. It is that mysterious component that sets us apart, that can be understood as ‘a power greater than ourselves’. Having a power greater than yourself, and greater than your narcissist, is a fantastic consideration given the level of subservience, feelings or the need to ‘worship’ him/her, or repulsion and rage towards them. Such a reflection can begin to loosen the cords that ensnare you to such a person. Pause now to consider what your inherent worth would feel like to you, if it were based on strong spiritual truths, and NOT on the beliefs and lies that the narcissist hopes you will continue to believe in about yourself, your power, your worth, your role in their life and life in general. If you believe in a higher power, consider this higher power as being: a) greater than your wounds, and b) has the perfect capability to help in your healing no matter what you suffered.

Since the dawn of time, people have been searching to answer the question of why there is human suffering, and more specifically, what is the role of a higher power in ‘bad things happening to good people’. Those who suffer in the hands of the narcissistic despotic rulers, have offered up many cries towards the heavens, begging for a “why?!” For survivors, this is an even more burning question, usually with intense pain and anger attached to it. Going through life blocked from trusting, loving, reciprocal relationships, is a tough call, with denial being the warm blanket of protection. Naturally, these strong emotions are directed towards the concept of a higher power, with many people denying the existence of one altogether. Included in this approach, can be for some people, a fear of such a ‘power’ that includes distrust that is cemented at the core of their psyche. If you apply this to your circumstance, and are seeking a spiritual connection, understanding impact of victimization can be of great aid to you. It is typical for survivors to be well-defended against pain, as this defense, at the core, is necessary self-protection. Naturally, you want to prevent yourself from being hurt again. This desire is especially urgent, when you feel life cheated you out of your birthright for true emotional freedom. If you have been betrayed by other people, let alone if caregivers were the perpetrators, your need for this self-protection, may also provide you with an illusion of control.

When you go about your life this way, you are left with a life that is more difficult and empty because you have a deep sense of isolation. Mistrust takes away the very search for meaning. You need someone or something in life that you can believe in, trust in, and rely upon.

In my work with survivors, I have observed the following emotional conditions that have their origins in traumatic experiences. Such conditions will pose as a great challenge for the survivor wanting to take a close look at their inner wounds, external life situations, and perhaps an outlook that includes useful tools for reparation to the Self.

- Belief that I am to blame for what happened, so why would anyone, including a ‘higher power’ do anything good for me? (I am undeserving.)
- Belief that I am as powerless as I was when traumatized (so how will trust help if I am powerless and I cannot ‘see’ this spiritual entity?)
- Loss and betrayal is doomed to be repeated, so why try? I don’t need the heartache! (Anticipation that all relationships will ultimately end up in disappointment.)
- Having a sense of deep shame and alienation from others because of my experiences, which no one can ever find out about! (I am doomed to be shamed and rejected.)
- Acting on destructive tendencies which may include addictive behaviors and other destructive coping mechanisms. (If I am bad, which I must be since no one rescued me, who cares what I do to myself?)
- Attachment and/or sexual disorders (a genuine block to experiencing long-lasting trust and intimacy).
- Abandoning myself to support, please, placate, or rebel against others; instead of being firmly on my own side.

Take time to reflect and consider the questions/points, because by doing so, you may initiate the process of transferring power from the narcissist in your life, to a power greater than yourself. This restorative process can occur by examining your hidden internal messages to yourself, and bringing them into consciousness for authentic evaluation. Most often, we think, act, believe and perpetuate unexamined internal messages, put there by the narcissist to maintain their own agenda, so laying all the subconscious cards out on the table, so to speak, is a critical component of authentic recovery.

Consider your higher power as a spiritual entity that is a constant, loving presence, whether you feel you deserve it, understand this power, love this power in return, feel it, accept it, or can explain it. It always exists as a safe, gentle, and unconditional love, demanding nothing in return. According to Kabbala (Jewish mysticism), God chooses to be right here with our human experiences: our suffering, tragedy, joy, and everything in between. These are the attributes of a highly personal and compassionate Creator, who desires closeness with all of creation.

2. Exercise: A Suitable Replacement for Your Internal Object Relations with the Narcissist.

Draw two lists. On the first list, put down every characteristic that your dream Higher Power does not have. On the second list, put down all the characteristics that your dream Higher Power does have. Allow yourself to be creative, bold, courageous, open-minded, and truly reflective of what you dream for in this ultimate connection. When you are finished, see if you notice any patterns. For example, you may notice that with each quality you listed in the “*not have*” column, you were once hurt in this way. Perhaps you are still being hurt by such qualities, either from yourself or from someone else. In the “*does have*” column, you may notice that you are deeply touched by these qualities, either by having them yourself, or through other people.

CHARACTERISTICS THAT MY DREAM HP DOES <u>NOT</u> HAVE:	CHARACTERISTICS THAT MY DREAM HP <u>DOES</u> HAVE:
-	-
-	-

You may notice that the list of 'who my Higher Power was NOT', has all the characteristics of the Narcissist. When you review your second list of the characteristics of your “dream Higher Power”, a new concept may begin to form, and may be unlike your old, archaic one. You may begin to feel a new sense of hope, and courage to begin your recovery process from such a toxic relationship. Hopefully, you will see your own good qualities, and at the very least, you may begin to believe that you are a basically a good, compassionate, empathic, and conscientious person.

3. Conclusion

It is of great importance to examine your role in such a relationship – not for pointing shaming or blaming fingers at yourself, but to examine how you got the ball started, if you did play such a role. It is also important to be honest with yourself, if you are currently participating in such a relationship. Since we cannot change other people, control them, or predict their future actions, our control lies within the scope of our thoughts, feelings, actions, and behaviors – stemming from our unconscious. By making it conscious, we bring it into the light, where we can examine our involvement, and make amends as needed.

The following three questions, can provide guidance for assessing your relationship with the narcissist – specifically with addressing who oversees you internally: the narcissist or the healthy, wise part of yourself?

1. What is your understanding of your issues of control: internally who or what controls you?
2. What are you doing to overcome any unrealistic, false, or otherwise erroneous beliefs that you may be harboring and fueling, your engagement with the abusive narcissist?
3. Are you willing to believe in a power greater than yourself, who can support, love and guide you through your process to remove this person from your life? If not literally, then to internally detach?

In your traumatic experiences, you may have been alone, in extreme pain and isolated. Now you have an opportunity to be released from the blind pursuit of your illusions, false beliefs and unnecessary suffering. You no longer must struggle to keep your traumatic experiences a secret or isolate yourself to hide your pain. You can experience belonging by seeing that you are part of a larger universe that supports, nurtures and values you. With the support of this foundation and newfound faith, you can achieve the willingness and trust to participate in the transformative work of your recovery [4].

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