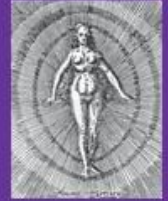


CHARLYNE GELT, PH.D.

Encouraging Self-Discovery and Empowerment



— Cinema Therapy —

Charlyne Gelt, Ph.D. writes the Cinema Therapy column for the bi-monthly publication, *Connections*, the newsletter for the San Fernando Valley chapter of the California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists. Below is her most recent column.

Seeing Beyond Our Reflection **Reviewed by Charlyne Gelt, Ph.D.**

“Narcissus does not fall in love with his reflection because it is beautiful but because it is his.” W.H. Auden

The Greek myth, Narcissus, informs us about someone who cannot see beyond their own image. There is no “other.” Narcissus fell in love with his reflection to the extent that he ended up wasting away. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) labels this behavior “narcissistic.”

Today, there is much exposure in the media around narcissism and the sense of entitlement that dominates our culture and has, in many cases, a destructive impact on relationships, especially love relationships.

Those fortunate enough to experience healthy relationships know the wonderful things that can come from of a loving bond — including emotional growth, mutual respect, emotional intimacy, and an environment that encourages the recognition of who one is, and allows the freedom to explore one’s potential.

However, for a partner involved with a narcissist, it’s a different story. It is about meeting the ravenous needs of the other at the sacrifice of self. In my clinical practice in Encino, California, I treat many men and women who are in toxic and destructive relationships with a narcissistic partner. These relationships are a challenge because there really is no relationship! Narcissists are incapable of looking empathically at how they affect others because they’re so focused on themselves. “I married a man like my dad — a rager,” said Susie, 46, an attorney for a legal firm. “I felt like I was in prison because he was just never there, and when he was, everyone needed to make him happy, not mad.” In a relationship like this with a self-absorbed narcissist, the bedroom is a particularly sensitive arena and can ultimately leave a partner feeling used, shut out, and unseen.

The narcissistic (“It’s all about me”) individual leaves a trail of damage in his or her path — in love relationships, in friendships, and in the workplace. Driven by a need to fill an empty cavern within — which usually stems from unmet childhood needs for love, belonging, and validation — the narcissist grows up to expect these needs to be met by others, usually love partners. Initially, a partner gets drawn in by the narcissist’s charismatic and often powerful facade — but it’s fraudulent! Its basis is a compensatory, shame-driven, inflated sense of self which is but a replacement for not having felt accepted or good enough in the parental environment. Now the narcissist is left with a negative self-view and poor impulse control. Once “hooked,” the partner keeps trying and failing to meet the narcissist’s unquenchable needs. A partner gets squeezed like a lemon then dropped when their nurturing juices run dry. This is a kind of vampiric energy that devours the life blood of the other.

Even in cases where “raging” on the part of the narcissist isn’t in the picture, as it was in Suzie’s situation above, the relationship dynamic with a narcissist is nonetheless destructive because it involves one partner exerting power and control while the other shuts down and withdraws. This pattern is evident in many emotionally and physically abusive relationships where the woman’s deeply longed-for connection drives her to try to soothe the narcissist’s needs which are too enormous to be met. Many women in the general population seem to be drawn into such relationships with an inevitable result — emotional pain.

If we are in a narcissistic space, we’re not going to have an awareness of the damage we’re doing to the “other” — not until we get some therapeutic insight into the dynamics at play on both sides. Healing can begin when both the narcissist and the partner ask themselves some probing questions: How do you feel about yourself? How do you treat those around you? Do you view yourself as a valuable member of your family and society? What actions can you take to begin to enjoy some of the wonderful things healthy relationships and loving bonds have to offer?

"To love and be loved is to feel the sun from both sides." ~ David Viscott

For additional information on narcissism: Watch TED: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arJLy3hX1E8>

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