

ON BORDERLINES AND NARCISSISTICS

A MARRIAGE SKILLS ALTERNATIVE TO PATHOLOGIZATION

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For therapy with the so-called personality disorders of borderlines and narcissists, a non-pathologizing orientation can be helpful. These are folks who function in a borderline or narcissistic manner, that is, in a way that is emotionally stormy and 'all about me.' In both syndromes, the folks are not sick; they are unskilled, and as a result they make very difficult marriage partners.

In this regard, it is important to note that there are alternatives to the notion, which fits for some but by no means all borderline and narcissistic folks, that their problem is too much childhood suffering and pain. Too much success, especially success at getting one's way by ignoring others' concerns while expecting others to respond to one's own, can create these disorders with or without what we usually think of as emotional injuries.

What folks sometimes refer to as "spoiled" kids, emotional kids who always get their way because they have overpowered their parents with their intense emotional storms, are at risk for becoming borderlines. Specially talented kids, at the same time, are at risk for what I call "tall man syndrome," i.e., becoming narcissists. They are at risk for feeling so talented or tall or smart that what they want seems to them, and often to others as well, as far more important than what others want.

In other words, borderline and narcissistic syndromes are patterns of response to situations in which what they want feels sacred and what others want, irrelevant.

This model of personality disorders, based on conflict resolution theory, (see From Conflict to Resolution by Susan Heitler) leads to a practical treatment response. Teach narcissists and borderlines to listen and become responsive to others' concerns, teach them win-win conflict resolution, and they will learn to function with emotional health and personal maturity.

A key part of the skill set narcissists and borderline personalities need to learn, in order to do win-win conflict resolution, is emotional self-regulation. After years of pitching fits to get what they want, they typically need much coaching to learn to recognize anger as it begins to arise, remove themselves from the situation, self-soothe, and then return in a calm problem-solving mode to find win-win solutions.

This treatment approach requires first that the therapist become an expert in conflict resolution, and then that the therapist become a great coach for conveying the skills to clients. For a free download on Therapist as Conflict Resolution coach, go to www.therapyhelp.com.

In sum, with enough confrontation on their old ways of powering over others, plus coaching in win-win skills, borderlines and narcissists who want to grow up can become great folks with normal to excellent potential for partnership.