

The Narcissistic Family

The reasons for family dysfunction vary significantly. A lot of the time, the parent is an alcoholic or is drug addicted. These dysfunctions are easy to spot. One covert cause of family dysfunction which is harder to see is narcissism, which lies at the core of the narcissistic family.

In a healthy family, the parents are emotionally self-assured and live balanced, dynamic lives. They have a network of support around them, and their choice to have children came naturally. Consequently, they are equipped to nurture their children and to support their children's growth until the children are ready to differentiate and gain their autonomy. Healthy parents are empathic enough that their children feel secure in their attachment, and they have enough healthy shame that the children grow up with high self-esteem. Healthy parents rely on honest communication to establish order in the house, not an authoritarian rule.

In a narcissistic family, on the other hand, the parents have long lost touch with their true self and are living through a narcissistic false self. For the narcissistic parent, the family represents two things; a status symbol and an entity which they have at their disposal. What should be a nurturing and loving structure intended to raise healthy children, instead becomes a well of narcissistic supply. In such a family, the needs of the narcissist outweigh those of everyone else, and the spouse and children must serve the narcissistic parent. The narcissist's unquenchable thirst for control and narcissistic supply lies neatly under the guise of a loving family. The narcissist will relish their position of power.

For this structure to function, the following guidelines must be adhered to:

1. The narcissistic needs of the narcissist come first and foremost
2. The needs of the children or spouse must never limit the narcissist or threaten the image or reputation of the family

Rather than plan how to best nurture and raise their children into independent adults, the narcissist will ponder what role each person can play in bolstering their own grandiose image. This results in the creation of a hierarchy and a shuffling/suppressing of needs that ensures the family gains a dysfunctional balance which satisfies the narcissist. Anything that threatens that balance or threatens the narcissist must be crushed without exception.

The Narcissistic Family Image

Each person's role will depend on two things; what kind of grandiose image the narcissist is attempting to maintain, and what the family member can offer.

This 'image' or rather 'doctrine' of a narcissistic family is usually disguised beneath the following:

Image of a Happy Family

Fundamentally, the happy family is an image the narcissist needs to bolster their reputation in public, which means the children must be perfectly well-behaved at all times. Because the narcissist is not in touch with their emotions, they make no attempt to fulfil the emotional needs of the children but will still expect this image to be upheld. Resentment and dissatisfaction are not tolerated.

Image of Success

The narcissist values success, so the children will be expected to succeed in everything they do. In a covert narcissistic family, this expectation exists even though the parents make no attempt to teach their children and lead the way. The children are left to fulfil the expectations of a parent who is only obsessed with their own false image. In the overt narcissistic family, the narcissistic parent will lead the way and expect the child to keep up and exceed their expectations. Anything less than 100% is a failure.

Whether you receive acceptance and approval depends strictly on your ability to serve the narcissistic ideology of the family. You will be measured on the following:

What Role You Can Play

If you can play a role that serves the ideology of the family, then you will be valued, and consequently receive acceptance and approval. For example, a family may value first born boys, so being born a boy and first will instantly win you points. A family may value education as a pathway to success, so receiving high grades becomes a source of acceptance and approval. Simply being the well-behaved child and not causing any inconvenience for the narcissist can also win points, where if the child is being quiet and not causing trouble, they are labelled a 'good boy' or 'good girl'. The youngest child can win points just for being the youngest.

How Well You Sell the Image

If you represent your family enthusiastically in public, you will be given points. By appearing happy in front of others, it reinforces the family's reputation and helps conceal the narcissist's real agenda as well as the family's misery.

Any member who is unable or refuses to reinforce the narcissistic ideology of the family will be punished through being ignored, verbally or physically attacked and ridiculed. Being valued for some things but discarded and attacked for other things creates a lot of anxiety and tension for the child, who only wants the love and acceptance of their parents, but has no clear idea of what it takes. They are completely unaware of the narcissistic agenda of the parent, or that they are a pawn in a game. For the child, everything is a matter of the heart. For the narcissist, everything is a matter of their narcissistic image.

Roles of a Narcissistic Family

This narcissistic 'drama' is like a stage show, and each person plays their part. Typical roles of a narcissistic family are as follows:

Enabler

This is usually the spouse or one of the daughters. The enabler tends to the basic needs of the narcissist and helps put on a happy front. The enabler also makes excuses for the narcissist. Ultimately, the enabler wants the narcissist's approval and acceptance, which they only have a chance of getting if they play nice. When the enabler is not actively helping the narcissist, they are expected to orbit and remain by their side. This helps the narcissist maintain a feeling of grandiosity and control.

Golden Child

The narcissist will seek out a child to mould in their own image. This is usually the oldest child but can be the second. It depends on talent, attractiveness, ability, intelligence and what kind of agenda the narcissist has. For example, if a narcissist values image the most, and their first born is awkward and unattractive, they will designate the second born as the golden child. The golden child grows up believing they are special when in fact, they have simply been groomed in the narcissist's image. The golden child will believe that they are better than the other siblings and may try to boss them around.

Surrogate Parent

The narcissist is usually too preoccupied with themselves to cater to the needs of the children, and their enabling spouse is usually too preoccupied with the demands of the narcissist. When there are multiple children in the family, the narcissist will designate one child to play surrogate parent. This child-adult will be expected to cater to their younger siblings needs and will be held accountable for their sibling's well-being and behaviour. To fill this role, the surrogate parent will have to suppress their emotions, growing up to be overly disciplined and rigid.

Scapegoat

The narcissist will need somebody to dump their frustration and disowned rage on. The second oldest or the most outspoken child will be designated as the 'problem' child and be put down severely at any chance. Other children in the family may follow the narcissist's lead and unwittingly dump their rage and shame on the scapegoat.

Lost Child

Any children who have not been designated the role of golden child, surrogate parent or scapegoat will be neglected and encouraged not to rock the boat. They grow up with a sense of not knowing who they are or how they fit in the world, as well as a burning feeling of shame and inferiority.

Mascot

Usually the youngest. They are the joker of the family, providing comedy relief that masks the dysfunction of the family.

The roles can shift and vary. For example, if the oldest moves out or plays up, then the second oldest may be promoted to golden child. Also, a child may play multiple roles. The golden child can play surrogate parent, and the lost child can also play mascot. An only child is especially prone to multiple roles since they have no siblings. They will more often than not be designated the golden child, but also play scapegoat when the narcissist needs it and be expected to play the mascot to distract the parents and provide comedy relief. It's quite crazy making for the child.

Consequences of a Narcissistic Family

By designating roles for each person, the family becomes a cut-throat scramble for survival. Each child is left fighting for scraps of attention and approval from the narcissistic parent. This creates the belief in each child that love is a competition and getting it depends on playing your role. The reality that love is a source of acceptance, nourishment and sharing is completely lost on the children in a narcissistic family. They are living in a dictatorship, cleverly disguised as a 'happy family'.

The damage done by being in a narcissistic family is enormous:

Anxiety and Depression

The intermittent reinforcement the child receives from the parent is much like gambling. Unable to consciously grasp the narcissist's agenda, the child feels like they are

being rejected and rewarded randomly. This creates a lot of anxiety. For the child, this approval is what gives them a sense of safety and wholeness, and they continue to play the game, remaining addicted, anxious to gain love, falling into depression and shame when they don't get it, then starting the cycle again.

Emotional Suppression

The emotional needs of the family member must be suppressed so as not to affect the fragile balance of the narcissistic family. This is painful and stunts the ability of the child to thrive and to love and trust others.

Low Self-Esteem

Unable to ever really get it right, each member of the family develops an inferiority complex. The lost child is left feeling neglected and worthless, and the scapegoat is left full of rage and shame. Each person in a narcissistic family pays a price, albeit in different ways.

Wrong Beliefs About Relationships

Each member grows up with the belief that relationships are about which role you play, being in constant competition and that love is a limited resource which you must earn through your actions.

Lack of Trust

Intimacy is a battlefield for the child of narcissism. The child, who keeps opening up their heart but is rejected without knowing why, eventually stops trusting the parent, and this mistrust pours out into their daily life. The path to love becomes too frustrating, and the adult-child creates roadblocks to intimacy and closeness. This leads to enormous complications in their relationships when they reach adulthood.

The dynamic of the narcissistic family becomes deeply ingrained in the child. As they grow older and leave (or flee) their dysfunctional family, they will unconsciously gravitate to other structures which remind them of their family, playing out their role all over again; only this time in a new environment. The new structure will be based on the same principles of the narcissistic family.

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