

By: **Wendy Terrie Behary**

## **The Art of Empathic Confrontation**

### *Working with the narcissistic client*

You recognize the narcissistic client soon after he enters your office. He's the guy who comes in because his significant other has finally mustered up the courage to say "get help or get out." Or the boss has given him an ultimatum based upon countless complaints of his poor attitude. Or he's involved in a legal fight and his lawyer has told him counseling might make him look better before a judge. Occasionally, though rarely, he slips in because he's simply lonely, depressed, or anxious.

With an outstretched hand, I introduced myself and welcomed Louis, an imperious-looking, expensively dressed man, then quickly noted the scowl. Feeling a surge of unease, I offered him a chair. But before he even sat down, he leaned toward me, eyes narrowed, finger wagging a couple of inches from my nose. "Just know this, and know it well," he hissed. "Never will I enter into any marital therapy with you or anyone else for that matter. So, if that's your little hidden plan, forget it! I've been to the best therapists. I have no expectation that you can help me. So, *I'll* set the agenda here, not you."

I noted my elevated heart rate, took a deep breath, and responded as mildly as possible. "You have an interesting way of breaking the ice, Louis. I appreciate your interest in my agenda, but, tell me, when did you develop this intimidating way of communicating your point?" To which Louis, smiling like a victor, replied: "You know, maybe you're just a little too sensitive. And by the way, don't try to be clever with me."

I took another breath and said, after a brief pause, "Yes, I probably am sensitive at times. But I wonder if you present yourself like a bully to other people, as well, and if they might not find you simply arrogant and feel hurt or annoyed by your style?"

Now his face softened and his shoulders began to relax. "Fair enough. I like your honesty," he said, and dropped his gaze to his hands sitting on his lap.

But he was almost immediately on the offensive again. "So what makes you think you can help me? What's so special about your little therapy?"

Now, I was aware of feeling annoyed. "Louis, I'm just a therapist with an approach that's effective in helping others like you," I say. That was a blunder.

"And what exactly do you mean by 'others like me'?" he asks nastily.

"You know what I'm aware of right now, Louis?" I ask. "I'm aware that I was feeling

uncomfortable, and I reacted defensively. It's not unreasonable for you to ask about my approach to therapy, but it's *how* you ask that produces a feeling that I'm being interrogated and devalued."

And so it went during our first session, which resembled the first session with most of the narcissists I work with. My aim was to quickly establish some leverage with Louis early on by letting him know that I knew what he was doing and why, I was going to tell it like it was, and I had something he wanted.

### **Attractions of the Narcissistic Client**

The narcissist both appeals and repels. We can be hypnotized by his accomplishments, intelligence, charm, and self-confidence. Yet his arrogance, condescension, sense of entitlement, and lack of empathy make interpersonal relationships difficult. There's nothing more difficult than working with the aggressive, self-aggrandizing, condescending, even mildly abusive states these clients manifest. At the same time, however, there are few clients who provide the therapist with a greater opportunity for personal growth, straining our capacity for empathy and testing our ability to contain our own rage.

Yet, drawing from inner reservoirs we may not have known we possess, we sometimes get a fleeting sense of the raw, fragile little boy hidden deep inside the menacing grownup before us. We can imagine this small child longing for the loving comfort of a parent, the sense of being truly seen and felt by a cherishing adult. I usually ask these clients for photos of themselves when they were young boys. This helps me remember they were once hurt children and summon up compassion for them that overrides their inevitable assaults on me. Without that compassion, there's no way to reach them and to slowly chip away at the massive fortress of distrust they hide behind.

I base my work with narcissistic clients on Schema Therapy and Interpersonal Neurobiology. Schema Therapy, developed by psychologist Jeffrey Young, integrates cognitive-behavioral, object-relations, attachment, and Gestalt therapies. Early maladaptive schemas are broad, pervasive themes or patterns comprised of memories, bodily sensations, emotions, and cognitions about the self in relationship to others. These schemas develop in childhood or adolescence and, under certain conditions, continue throughout someone's lifetime.

Interpersonal Neurobiology is based on psychiatrist Daniel Siegel's approach, which combines neurobiology, developmental psychology, and interpersonal relationships in the practice of therapy. From Siegel's model, I learned how invaluable to clients it can be to understand how their feelings can arise from particular brain states. Both models emphasize compassionate attunement.

### **Profile of a Narcissist**

Louis is 58 years old, and has been married to Francine for 32 years. They have two grown sons. He retired about two years ago from a Fortune 25 company-a company recognized by the magazine as a business that's "changing the game." Like many of our narcissistic clients, he's highly successful, widely recognized in his field, and impressively wealthy. Francine is a

schoolteacher who continues to enjoy her work and has no desire to retire anytime soon.

Francine came to see me for a consultation, hoping I'd be willing to work with Louis, and perhaps with them together. From her own therapy, she'd come to understand her husband better, had deepened her self-awareness, and had learned how to assert herself. But although she was growing, Louis wasn't improving, nor was her marriage; she'd told him that if he didn't go into therapy, she'd leave him. Louis was no stranger to therapy, but his experiences in treatment hadn't lasted long-two or three months before he unceremoniously decamped.

In our sessions, he soon let me know about his manifold accomplishments-an Ivy League education, a taste for high-brow literature, a good game of golf, a passion for tennis, and lots of rich, powerful, famous acquaintances (though virtually no real friends). He wanted Francine to retire so they could travel more, and was angry at her for preferring to continue working at a profession he viewed as "simpleminded." He was also worried that she might leave and furious with me for having "brainwashed" her into this marital therapy junk.

Louis was the oldest of four children. He'd had a harshly critical and demanding father, who'd made it very clear that he wouldn't tolerate poor grades or anything less than a stellar performance in sports and music, both of which Louis hated. Nor could his father stand any unmanly signs of "weakness"-fear or sadness-in his son. His mother was a flighty, distracted socialite.

Louis was raised to believe that he was brighter than other kids-a "special person," who didn't necessarily need to abide by the rules applying to ordinary people. Successful at school, he was nonetheless lonely. He'd never learned how to interact with others and felt shy and awkward with girls, covering his loneliness, isolation, and shame with an attitude of indifference and superiority.

In my experience, narcissists never had their most fundamental emotional needs met as children, and later spend enormous energy trying to plaster over unbearable feelings of shame, emptiness, and pain through self-aggrandizement and a pose of self-sufficiency. To heal a narcissist like Louis, we must access the lonely child, and help him tolerate his painful feelings and develop compassion for the vulnerable part of himself. Therefore, my first job with Louis was to make it safe enough for him to drop his armor and allow me to see his pain.

To help him feel safer, I modeled openness and vulnerability through selective self-disclosure. But I also needed to empathetically confront the impact of his behavior on me. To do so, I needed to keep my mind's eye focused on the frightened, lonely little boy in order to override my initial instinct to react against his obnoxiously self-protective behavior. Once he could tolerate his own feelings, we could then examine the impact of his emotional states and personality traits on his relationships, and begin to focus on breaking behavioral patterns that repulse other people and keep him locked in his own isolation.

I worked with his changeable clusters of personal schemas and coping styles as they occurred in therapy, while meeting his constant threat to leave therapy by pointing out the consequences if he did. In addition, I educated him about his own brain-how neural structures laid down long ago

informed his present feelings, sensations, memories, and responses. Talking to a narcissist about his difficulties in terms of his brain has the effect of depathologizing him. I explained to Louis, for example, that he tends to respond to my support and sympathy with hostility because my behavior automatically evokes in him old brain states of pain and defensiveness. Just learning that the brain is only doing what it's been trained to do to protect him can lessen the narcissist's shame and blame.

### **Confronting Avoidance**

Among the most fundamental issues in therapy with narcissistic clients is confronting their avoidance of their own feelings, which accounts for their competitiveness, their need for control, and their relentless sense of entitlement. I've found guided imagery useful in helping these clients overcome avoidance because it allows for exposure to the vulnerable child side of the self that's been held hostage by early experiences (and perhaps by temperament), and can allow a client to develop compassion for the immense fear of shame and rejection held by this early part of the self. So I asked Louis if he'd be willing to try guided imagery so that he could authentically experience himself as a vulnerable child, and suggested we start with an image from the time when he was 6 years old and overheard his mother tell his father that she wished she'd never had children.

"It'll be a waste of time," was Louis's immediate, brusque rejoinder. "You know the story. It's over, and I just have to get over it. So, there's no point to this imagery crap-you just want to make me cry, right? Well, that's never going to happen, so forget it," he said.

I was quickly aware of my own feeling of frustration and a sense of fatigue. However, realizing that Louis's response came from fear, I gently began to confront his defiance. "Louis, it feels to me as if you're not being totally honest with me right now. Knowing how hard it is for you to accept any feelings of vulnerability, I sense there's some other feeling beneath your anger and defiance. I'm wondering," I ask in a curious tone of voice, "is it very scary for you to sit here with your eyes closed, allowing painful experiences and feelings to fill your mind and body?"

Louis now looked back at me sheepishly and said: "It's just that I don't think I can feel anything except anger. It'll be a waste of time." But his voice and posture had changed. I leaned toward him in my chair, and said softly, "Louis you're feeling something right now; and it isn't anger anymore, is it?"

He looked back at me and said with some bitterness, "Yes, I feel like I'm a waste of your time. I'm a waste of Francine's time, too. Seems no one has much use for me. You know, my phone used to ring a lot. Now I hardly ever get a phone call. Hell, even my sons only call when they *need* something from me."

I continued to lean forward and said, "Louis, you're not a waste of my time. I know that loss of contact with the world is difficult for you, and I understand your not wanting to feel the sadness that it appears you're feeling right now."

He responded harshly, "What would you know about loss coming from your perfectly sheltered

little life?"

I paused, suddenly stung by memories of a personal loss of my own and feeling resentful toward Louis. Then I remembered my old mantra-when a narcissist is attacking, superimpose the face of the shamed, lonely, little boy over the face of the man. As I began to feel my compassion again, I said, "Louis, I do know the pain of losing a loved one. And, while your words are hurtful to me, I understand that you didn't intend to hurt me." Again, I talked about the brain, which makes his discomfort less about a fundamental flaw in him and more about the way his neural networks are wired to protect him from hurt. "Your brain is pretty amazing, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry, Wendy," he uttered, shoulders relaxed, face softened, "Yes, the brain is a pretty amazing apparatus. And, you're right, this happens all the time." We smiled, nodded, and took a deep breath together.

I asked him what I could do to make him feel safer, so that he could close his eyes and enter into some imagery work with me. He asked me not to stare at him. We then managed successfully to spend 10 minutes alone with the vulnerable little Louis, who tells his mother just how hurt he feels and how much he needs her to love him. In allowing the vulnerability to emerge, we navigated toward compassion for this little boy's deprivation and aloneness, and recognized his mother's inability to meet his needs. Louis was saddened, but without the shame and fear that would typically accompany his exposure to his vulnerability. Guided imagery allows for an emotional experience to occur, which promotes the neural firing patterns necessary for change. Using imagery, we can reorganize the way memories are held in the mind. Through this work, I was helping Louis alter the way he viewed himself and move through feelings of defectiveness, shame, and unlovability to grief and compassion.

### **Confronting Condensation and Competitiveness**

Because his own sense of self is so fragile, the narcissist must constantly challenge what he perceives to be hierarchy or authority (anybody who in any way threatens to undermine his grandiosity and superiority) through competitiveness and put-downs. He needs constant recognition of his extraordinariness and superiority to other people (especially to the therapist). Louis and I went through countless confrontations when he was in this mode.

For example, I was in the middle of describing a noticeable shift in his emotional state when he interrupted me with a line by a "very famous" Russian novelist to create a "better" analogy for my unfinished point. When he learned I'd never heard of this author, he rolled his eyes incredulously, lifted his chin, and asked in his most condescending manner, "Do you read *anything* other than psychology books?" This time, I was silent for awhile, feeling genuinely resentful and frustrated, and letting him see it.

Before I spoke, he quickly said, "I know, I shouldn't have said that, Wendy. Most people get annoyed with me. But, remember," he said, in a lightning-fast switch to pugnacious self-assertion, "I'm tough. In fact, I'm a genius. I'll always be way ahead of you."

At the moment, I could understand why Francine wants to leave him. *I* wanted to leave him.

Instead, I tried desperately to gather some shreds of empathy, while letting him know he had, once again, gone too far. "Louis, you are indeed a very intelligent man, and a well-read one, too. But I can't help feeling resentful at your insulting words." Then, more gently, I continued, "It feels as if you broke your promise to be respectful when you spoke to me that way. Again, I know that you don't do this on purpose: I know that your amygdala has taken you down the low road of instantaneous self-protection again. I'd like to look back at what triggered you and caused that shift."

He assumed a stubborn, closed look. "You're making a big deal out of it now," he said.

"No," I replied with certainty in my voice. "This *is* the biggest deal. It's what keeps people distant from you. If they're not impressed with you, you feel lost and shove in their faces how much better, smarter, faster, and stronger you are. But this just turns off the very people who want most to have a real connection with you. And you won't ever connect if you don't learn how to repair these ruptures. What just happened between you and me was a mild rupture with me, where it's safe and there isn't much at stake. But other people aren't prepared to put up with it."

Louis now took a long pause and very hesitantly said, "I interrupted you because . . . because, I, um, felt like I didn't understand what was going on. I felt . . . I felt foolish. I guess I wanted to show you that I was very smart," he mumbled, looking into his lap.

I was very pleased and let him know. "That's beautiful Louis. I get it. Good for you!"

We then explored how his "defectiveness schema"-his underlying certainty that he's fundamentally flawed, inadequate, shameful, and unlovable-got triggered when he felt confused by what I was saying. We identified his father's unrelenting expectations and his harsh criticisms, his mother's obsession with appearances-always looking good, sounding "smart," being admired-as the origins of Louis' feelings of shame and defectiveness. We discussed what he might have done instead of insulting me.

### **Confronting Entitlement**

As a child, the narcissist typically has insufficient limits placed on him and is hardly ever held accountable except in areas of performance, achievement, or service to his parents' egos. He often redefines and breaks rules, demands special attention, and bullies others to get his own way. In fact, the rules of reciprocity don't exist for him-he's unique.

Told constantly by his parents that he was bound for glory, Louis spent much of his time alone pondering his grandiose schemes, so as to avoid feeling his loneliness and sense of belonging nowhere. His capacity for empathy was never adequately developed because he never experienced any from his own parents.

Louis was in the habit of being 5 to 10 minutes late, and then demanding more time at the end of the session. "What's the big deal of giving me five more minutes? This is important. You see, you're just like every other therapist, or lawyer for that matter. It's nothing but a business to you."

Again and again, I had to override my own anger and draw on my compassion for Louis's suffering. "Louis, if what you mean by 'it's a business' is that I couldn't possibly care about you given my time limits, consider this: you can only pay me for the time and expertise, but the caring is free. Even *you* can't make me care about you. And I gotta tell you, when you speak to me in that way, it's hard for me to feel my caring and give you what you need."

Then I reiterated that I knew he wasn't doing this on purpose-I knew it wasn't his fault that he was taught that the rules for everyone else don't really apply to him. "But, in order to have the kind of relationships that you truly long for, you have to make some changes, or you'll keep driving people away from you. So, let's try it again, tell me about your disappointment"

Louis had listened with only a couple of eye-rolling gestures. He now sighed and said, clearly struggling: "The time seems to go by very quickly, and sometimes-okay, often-I want to be here longer, to finish a thought or tell you about something else . . . and, well, it's frustrating to have to stop when you say so. I have trouble with feeling like I'm being rejected or controlled."

I asked him, "How uncomfortable do you feel having said it that way, Louis?"

He replied, "It seems unnatural, and I have to think about it. It feels tedious, a little annoying."

"That's because it's unfamiliar, Louis," I responded. "It requires you to pay attention to your own deeper feelings, as well as to the feelings of your listener, and you aren't used to doing that." Louis agreed. Again, I thanked him and recognized his good work.

## **Homework**

At the end of each session, Louis and I collaborated on homework assignments. He was to keep a diary of those times when he's feeling anger or self-righteous entitlement, and look for the deeper feelings of loneliness, fear, and shame beneath. He was to use his own body sensations for cues to these other feelings. We also devised a system of flashcard scripts he can refer to in difficult moments, which help him begin an inner dialogue between his healthier, more adult side and the vulnerable, defensive, child side. These flashcards help remind him to tolerate feelings he might otherwise try to bury with defensive maneuvers. For example, if he feels wounded when somebody doesn't seem to give him enough respect, instead of avoiding the feeling by counterattacking with insults and self-promotion, he reads the schema flashcard or listens to my voice on audiotape and is immediately reminded that he's been triggered and that there are alternatives for coping with the situation. Also, when feeling headed for an angry outburst, Louis now practices self-regulating exercises-such as attuned breathing-and meditation. We practiced the exercises together and role-played to help him build the self-confidence for doing the homework outside of therapy.

These exercises not only helped break old patterns, they built up his self-soothing and interpersonal skills-notably impoverished in narcissistic clients. Paradoxically, in spite of possessing formidable skills at orating, making a point, cowing other people, and dominating most social, political, and professional circles, narcissists typically don't know the simplest rules

for ordinary person-to-person communication.

No matter how successful treatment may be, most narcissists will never become Nobel Peace Prize winners or selfless nurturers. But they do learn how to become more interpersonally effective by learning to "take turns" and accept their ordinariness without the need to constantly promote their claim to being special.

Louis, for example, is slowly beginning to generalize his experiences from the microcosm of our relationship to the world he lives in. He's still no teddy bear, nor the soul of politeness, but he's learned how to express his feelings more authentically, with less of a driven need to present himself as an extraordinary paragon of power and righteousness. He's learning to incorporate and abide by the rules of reciprocity in his relationship with Francine and others, though he still needs gentle coaching when he automatically starts dominating conversations or showing off. The difference is that he's now receptive to the feedback. He no longer feels the need to shut down and soothe himself with endless hours spent adjusting his stock portfolio, or to counterattack and bully a perceived enemy. He doesn't react with competitive entitlement when threatened, because he can now differentiate the old feelings from his childhood from the here and now, and is getting some of the love he's longed for.

Louis now greets me kindly and expresses appreciation for my help and support. Friends and family have noticed that he's calmer, friendlier, and more caring. This isn't neat, linear therapy, though. He's still traveling on some rough terrain, but he's not landing in the ditches as often.

The art of empathic confrontation centers on confronting negative behaviors, while making links to the client's early childhood schemas and coping styles. In so doing, we, as therapists, are more likely to achieve a feeling of genuine compassion for this client. And when a narcissist feels understood and authentically cared for, he's less likely to armor himself against the phantom feelings of mistrust, shame, and anticipated deprivation. In this way, the narcissist can begin to experience remorse, empathy, and accountability.

I do eventually bring loved ones into therapy to observe the client's progress and assess his family's own schemas and coping styles. I try to help them hold him accountable while standing up for their own rights. I also try to help them overcome the sometimes, covert narcissistic elements in themselves.

The "bully" doesn't always show up early in treatment. However, if probed directly and forcefully enough early in treatment, that aspect of the narcissist will appear. Working with this side of him directly, not simply through accounts of his bad behavior with others or his chronic blaming-complaining rituals, offers an immediate opportunity to examine together, in the moment, the amazing nature of the brain, distinguishing the old story from the present experience. And it's in that immediate experience of empathic confrontation that I find the journey to healing begins.

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