

Abuse amnesia and cognitive dissonance are created and sustained by **pathological lying and gaslighting**. People who are highly invested in manipulating others constantly rewrite reality to suit their needs and to conceal their agendas. This causes people around them to feel invalidated in their experiences, and eventually, leads to silence and isolation. “It is easy for narcissists to convince the outside world that they are the sane, rational ones: pathological narcissists enjoy calling anyone who challenges their self-perception “crazy.” It's the word they'll use to describe any valid emotional reaction victims have to their shady and inconsistent behavior. It is gaslighting (invalidation of one’s perception of reality) at its simplest form, but over time becomes a complex type of psychological torture in which the victim starts to mistrust his or her perceptions of the covert abuse and feels unable to trust his or her own reality..... When you complain or bring up any behavior that makes you feel uncomfortable, narcissists will call you “crazy” or “sensitive” (Arabi, 2016). In the previous posts I referred to some of the basic strategies that allow people to manipulate and control others.

One very common strategy is **triangulation**, which when used often enough disempowers and confuses others, and also, helps perpetrators maintain control. Triangulation and jealousy are not only used in romantic relationships, but also in circles of friends, classmates or colleagues. Narcissistic parents may pit siblings against each other or children against the other parent to play puppeteer in family dynamics. When speaking of jealousy within these kinds of relational contexts we are referring to destructive envy of another or any one that may feel threatening in some way. Situations are often manufactured, where jealousy and insecurity are provoked. **Provocation and triggering** are also ways to maintain control and create suffering. As perpetrators engage in investigating weak spots and past wounds or losses they know how to trigger and control other’s emotions, which gives them the power to effectively manipulate, distort perception of self and reality and convince people that they don't deserve any better.

Additionally, psychological and emotional abuse, and exploitative and manipulative relational dynamics rely a lot on **conditioning**. “In the context of abusive relationships, conditioning is used to reward or punish behaviors that the narcissist wishes to ignite or extinguish. The abuser doesn’t want you to succeed? They will begin to pair abusive incidents with moments when you are successful, by treating you to a big helping of neglect, verbal assault or an emotionally abusive rage attack when they see that you’re accomplishing things. The abuser doesn’t want you hanging out with other friends? They will begin a big argument right before you go out or before a big event..... Over time, this becomes so normalized that before we know it, **we’re in the middle of one big Pavlovian experiment**, associating pain with pleasure....” (Arabi, 2016)

Violations of trust is another significant characteristic of relationships where emotional / psychological abuse take place. Generally, people who are invested in manipulating others will collect information, which they will at some point use against the other person. They focus on flaws, shortcomings, insecurities, sensitivities, heartbreaks and secrets one might confide in them, as well as, wounds. Arabi writes that “the narcissist can and always will cut a wound that goes even deeper than the first”. This also means that old wounds and associated emotions and responses are often unconsciously reinforced and provoked. What might for other people be

perceived as a means of establishing rapport, connection and a way of being vulnerable and intimate will almost always be turned against them at some point. Arabi uses the term “**simultaneous wounding**”, which encompasses the complex nature of how narcissists can bring up past wounds, reinforce them and also manufacture new wounds simultaneously by projecting onto us their own wounds.” Walker (2013, cited in Arabi, 2016) suggests that they not only bring up past wounds, but “they compound them and add onto them, creating a chronic chain of stressors that can even result in Complex PTSD, the symptoms of which can include the regular symptoms of PTSD, as well as, toxic shame, emotional flashbacks, and a never-ending inner critic that diminishes us and demeans us.”

But it’s not only weaknesses and wounds that are targeted, but also **strengths, positive qualities and accomplishments**, especially the ones they might lack or be pathologically envious of. They can sabotage others’ dreams, aspirations, beliefs, ways of living, personality, goals, work or profession, talents, capacities and health. They can go as far as ruining one’s reputation and they will sabotage major events, the possibility of success and support networks. When a person high on the spectrum of narcissism feels that others may not cater to their needs or sense of entitlement to do as they please or when others question them or threaten the image they present to the world they experience what is termed as a “**narcissistic injury**” which will often manifest as narcissistic rage and vengeful behaviour.

Anyone can be a victim of serious psychological and emotional abuse, regardless of gender, class, education or background, in a variety of contexts. Survivors can come from any type of background and many of them are strong, intelligent, talented and / or successful. Individuals with high levels of empathy tend to be targeted, as well as, people who have had a narcissistic early caregiver or have experienced trauma. Cumulative trauma can lead to malleable boundaries and difficulties with self-esteem, which makes one more susceptible. People high on narcissism also come from varied backgrounds. They can lie anywhere on the spectrum of incredible success to deep poverty and they can hold positions that are charitable, be in helping professions, as well as, professions that allow them to execute power. Also, one never truly gets to know anything about the narcissist because they don’t do disclosure, honesty and open communication. Although they often present the image of a charming, intelligent, successful, generous and kind person, in private they demonstrate an intense sense of entitlement, are exploitative and deceitful, and can also be rageful. Most importantly, they lack empathy and that is one reason why they can be callous or indifferent when another person is upset, sick or facing an emergency. They are in some sense disconnected to vulnerable feelings, and thus, are not able to connect to others on a deep emotional level. Arabi writes that “Narcissists have what we call “**cold empathy**” – they are able to intellectually understand why someone may feel what they do, but they do not truly feel the same remorse or shame that others do for harming others....”. When we fail to connect with our empathic nature either momentarily or consistently if we can notice this it can become a portal for us to explore what might be going on underneath, what fears, wounds, unmet needs, learnt behaviours or unhealthy levels of entitlement are at play. As a species we have a natural ability to empathize with and take care of each other and we are capable of kindness, collaboration, friendship and love. The development of this inherent mammalian capacity also promotes care for the less fortunate, because we are aware that this is what we would need if we were in their shoes. **Being in touch**

with our empathic nature discourages behaviours like lying, social aggression, bullying or abusing power and causing harm.

At this point I'd like to move away from individual psychology and briefly touch upon sociocultural contexts that support a highly narcissistic approach to life, sexism, bullying, racism and other forms of abuse and control. On the one hand, narcissism is rising in our cultures, and on the other hand, **society is at large misinformed** about the severe consequences of emotional and psychological violence. We tend to pay attention to physical scars, but not emotional wounds. Pete Walker suggests that chronic emotional abuse, especially if experienced in childhood and later re-experienced in adulthood, can cause symptoms of PTSD or Complex PTSD (2013, cited in Arabi, 2016). Arabi writes: "The thing about narcissistic abuse and the covert manipulation, brainwashing, love bombing, devaluation, verbal attacks and emotional violence involved is – you can't just let it go – or the smaller events that remind you of the trauma, because it triggers an entire chain of reactions connected to the original trauma. Telling an abuse victim, especially a victim who has complex PTSD and a history of abuse, to "let it go," is quite frankly, one of the most selfish and ignorant things you can do." She claims that "society is just beginning to understand what narcissistic abuse is and how it differs from a normal relationship.....The truth is, **narcissists don't just gaslight us – they gaslight the public, too.** Their charming exterior convinces the public to shame and silence victims who speak..... outsiders who have never experienced this form of abuse, narcissistic abuse appears to be an elusive phenomenon to grasp. Let's be clear about this: narcissistic abuse is not about an oversensitivity to the normal ups and downs of relationships, nor is it a complaint about incompatibility or mere emotional unavailability in relationships..... The difference lies in their intention to harm, their inability to change and their sadistic nature. The abuse described here in this book is not a matter of everyday envy, anger or healthy conflict that eventually leads to resolution and growth in a relationship..." This type of relatedness feels like a wall or a thick web that slowly, but steadily, encroaches upon all areas of one's life, and over a long period of time, can lock one out of their own life.

Power is a major thread woven in all our relationships, but in these type of relationships power is chronically abused. In a previous post (2/10 /2020) on empathy, compassion and morality I referred to an article written by Rick Hanson that focuses on the social nature of our species and how power is a major thread woven in all our relationships and can often be abused and misused. Rick Hanson uses **bullying** as a general and more common term to refer to various forms of abuse of power, which can consist of intimidation, discrimination, oppression, tyranny, and so on. He goes on to say that bullying creates a vast amount of suffering and is **present in homes, playgrounds, work places, all the way up to the halls of power.** He writes that bullying is fostered by underlying conditions and that bullies are dominating, defensive and deceptive, and are valued and supported by **enablers** at all levels of society. He mentions ways of protecting oneself and of understanding what might be going on in the bully or enabler's inner world. He writes: "Deep down, the mind of a bully is like a hell realm of fended-off feelings of weakness and shame always threatening to invade. Lots of suffering there. **Compassion for a bully is not approval.** It can be calming and strengthening for you." He lists possible ways of dealing with bullies and enablers at different levels of society: name the bullying for what it is; dispute false claims of legitimacy; laugh at bullies; confront lies, including

denial of harms they're doing; build up sources of power to challenge the bully; confront enablers; they're complicit in bullying; engage the legal system; remove bullies from positions of power.

Compassion for people who consistently manipulate people and misuse power in the ways mentioned above requires at minimum an **understanding of the underlying forces** that can lead to highly and consistent destructive behaviours. Like most things in life I think severe narcissistic dysfunction is more likely to be the result of multiple interacting factors. Arabi writes: "There are many theories about how narcissism arises in the individual – from a "narcissistic wound" in childhood, to a pattern of idealization and devaluation by the parent or even a neurological standpoint that focuses mainly on how a narcissist's brain has structural abnormalities related to compassion (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1971; Lavendar, 2014; Schulze et. al, 2013)..... Millon (1981) calls "**compensatory narcissism,**" a self-protective false self that enables a child to believe in an illusion of superiority in order to conceal feelings of low self-worth" (cited in Arabi, 2016). Early trauma or / and emotional and physical neglect can lead to people shutting off the parts of themselves that could empathize with others, as a form of self-protection. There are other theories that suggest that narcissism can also be produced by the overvaluation of a child by a parent, which could arrest a child's emotional development. A child could be spoiled to the point where it develops an excessive sense of entitlement and disregard for the emotions of others. Thus, children seem to also acquire narcissism, in part, by internalizing parents' inflated views of them or through internalizing parents' ways of relating to others. According to Kreger, "grandiose narcissists are bred by parents who spoil them into thinking how superior and entitled they are, while vulnerable narcissists tend to be the product of neglectful parenting" (cited in Arabi, 2016).

It could in part also be the result of learnt behaviour within the family and broader culture. For instance, in boys some levels of narcissism and sexism have traditionally been encouraged and thought of as positive attributes. Factors like **enculturation and the operation of outdated beliefs** that encourage exploitation and misuse of power on the basis of gender, age, skin colour or status in various forms and settings should also be taken into account. Arabi also suggests that caregivers alone may not be responsible for producing narcissism in their children and there are many parents with children higher on the spectrum, who provide their children a loving and validating home and that there is also a biological and neurological standpoint that redirects us to consider structural abnormalities related to compassion and empathy in the brain of individuals high in narcissistic traits. The answers most probably lie in the dynamic interaction between environment, biological predisposition and multicultural components that according to Arabi "can make certain disorders more likely than others in specific countries or manifest differently across various contexts..... The factors that affect the manifestation of disorders include strong support network, access to therapy, upbringing, religious beliefs, culture, media, as well as other experiences outside of the family unit....." Therefore, I believe it is **not useful to think in terms of nature versus nurture, but rather to view causality as individual combinations of nature, nurture and broader economic and sociocultural containers**. It is also more helpful to consider that there are protective and risk factors that can weaken or strengthen a predisposition or anti social behaviours like bullying, sexual assault, psychological violence, sexism, ageism. We

need to see the ideological and socioeconomic structures that encourage, support or normalize certain behaviours and ways of relating.