

The Self-Absorbed Partner

Transcript of Video One

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How often have you worked with couples where one partner is self-absorbed?

Perhaps they're preoccupied with themselves.

Maybe they prioritize their own thoughts, their activities, and their interests

Or they could be very self-indulgent.

Or perhaps you have heard these complaints:

"I love my partner but I am not in love with them anymore."

"I didn't get married to have to put up with ..."

"I just want to be happy."

"Why should I have to give compliments to my spouse for things she should do anyway?"

When it comes to giving in relationships, some partners are just miserly. They have a lopsided focus on getting versus giving. For many many reasons, their behavior is self-absorbed.

Hi, my name is Ellyn Bader.

This is the first in a series of videos and blogs about the self-absorbed partner.

Today we are going to look at the troublesome traits of the self-absorbed partner and what problems this creates for their partners.

Then in just a few days I'm going to send you another video where we will take a deeper look at how to view this problem from the perspective of the Couples Developmental Model. I'll show you why self-absorption creates a problem for you, their therapist, and give you two tools to begin addressing this developmental arrest.

And finally, we'll look at how you can free yourself from some of the binds created by these partners and transform self-centeredness into gratitude, empathy and compassion.

If you work with couples, it's difficult to work with them and not be exposed to self-centered behavior. And I am talking about something that's actually much, much more common than narcissism.

I am tempted to call it narcissism-lite. But, actually I am not interested in developing any new diagnostic categories. The DSM already has way more than its share.

But I do want to shine a light on a dynamic that befuddles many partners and many therapists, especially in Western cultures where so much focus is on "taking care of ourselves" and finding happiness.

But first I have a confession to make. Perhaps my interest in this topic comes from my own counter-transference. I grew up living with a father who had absolutely no patience whatsoever for self-absorbed people. He grew up in Germany and by the time he was 7 years old he had to search nearby neighborhoods and garbage cans to find food for his mother and his brother. It was World War I and his father was away fighting in the Austrian army. He

learned two lessons early in life that became his guiding stars. The first was the importance of caring for others and the second was the extreme value of family.

He always insisted that I think about the implications of my words and deeds on my mother, on my sister and on the community. Sometimes he even insisted it way too much!

But when I first started doing couples therapy, I was appalled by some of the self-centeredness that I encountered.

I met a wife, actually at that point she wasn't even a wife, she was a woman who went on a blind date. And before her children even woke up the next morning she had asked him to move in. She was confused why her children were so upset that she moved a "new father" into their home before they had even met him.

Later, I met a man who spent \$40,000 to climb Mt. Everest without ever involving his wife in the decision. In fact, he only informed her that he was going the day before he left.

I quickly learned that sharing my negative reactions, barging in and pushing self-absorbed people to be more caring never, ever really worked for anyone.

My graduate school coursework in couples therapy left me totally unprepared to shift this dynamic. The theories that I studied addressed things like communication challenges and behavior changes, but they never touched on how to work deeply with self-absorption, and especially not in the context of couples therapy.

In fact, it's taken me 30 years of working with couples to get better and better

at confronting and transforming this dynamic.

So what does self-absorption actually look like in marriage?

Self-absorbed partners:

- Focus mostly on their own thoughts, their own activities, and their own interests.
- They may walk into the house and turn on the TV barely grunting hello.
- They have trouble giving when it is inconvenient. Their own agenda is what prevails.
- They tend to indulge themselves with food, with sex, with relaxation at the expense of showing interest in their partners or in keeping commitments.
- They don't see their spouse as a separate person with their own history, their own desires, their own conflicts, vulnerabilities and inadequacies.
- They rarely give much thought to their partner's emotions.
- They have little motivation to push their own interests aside and to connect in more dimensional ways with their partners.

Since self-absorbed people are actually high on the capacity to pursue their own desires, they are rarely team players. Instead of viewing their marriages as interdependent partnerships where it is important for both of them to “win,” they operate from a win-lose framework, placing themselves most often on the winning side, with little awareness that when their partners lose, they lose something precious, too. And even worse, they don't think about what the spouse loses when they win.

One wife described it this way: “I treated every battle like I needed to win. I thrived on instant gratification. I won in a bad way and it didn't matter what

happened to anyone else.”

Because these partners are not interested in inconvenient personal growth, stretching to have compassion and empathy for their spouse’s distress is actually a bother.

These patterns that I’ve been describing can be more or less prevalent and certainly all of us, you and me, we can all be self-centered at times. However, when these dynamics are significant in a couple that comes to you for help, they will create some predictable challenges for the spouse and for you.

So, let’s look at why self-absorption is a problem for the spouse.

Spouses of self-absorbed people feel...

- Powerless, insignificant, dismissed, and trapped. Over time their self-esteem erodes.
- Their sense of hope that change is even possible disappears.
- Some describe it as feeling invisible or not being seen as a real person.
- Spouses of self-absorbed people are very lonely and sometimes depressed. Many times they don’t have the words to describe why. They may flail about or spew anger.

They live with partners who rarely say “please” or “thank you.” Small acts of consideration are usually absent in their day-to-day living.

When a lonely spouse, in fact, describes being lonely or tries to explain how the emotional disconnection feels, the self-absorbed partner responds poorly. They personalize it, they feel attacked, they attack back, and they discount the significance of the problem. And the loneliness builds and builds.

The self-absorbed partner may, in fact, earn good money and be a socially, extremely likeable, extrovert, which will just compound the loneliness for the spouse. And they [the spouse] begin to question their own reality.

What is the future of this relationship likely to be?

The law of entropy gives us a clue. It states that all systems, when left unattended, will run down. Unless new energy is pumped into the system, it will disintegrate. The self-absorbed partner takes more from the relationship rather than replenishing it. By the time these partners come to see you, the relationship is usually withering. The lonely spouse feels depleted and not optimistic.

But all is not hopeless. You can work with them – it's not easy or simple. It takes integrating intrapsychic, systemic, behavioral and developmental interventions in a targeted way. And being targeted is the key.

Knowing what to do, when to do it and why to do it is empowering.

You will get to see evolution take place. Armed with the knowledge of how to sequence your interventions, you can navigate these tricky waters with more skill and less frustration.

It's taken me many years to deeply understand that the self-absorbed partners lack in other-differentiation and even more years to develop increasingly effective ways to increase their engagement with their partners. But yet that is where the juice comes from in the process of change.

Some of you watching this video probably have heard about or even used the Initiator-Inquirer process that my husband, Peter Pearson, and I developed. For others of you it may be new.

The Inquirer role in that process serves as an excellent diagnostic about the level of self-absorption, and it also will give you some new ways to work directly with this issue.

Later in this series, I'm going to give you a new continuum. It's one that I've recently developed about engagement and self-absorption. Before I send it though, in the next video, I'll describe why these partners create such a challenge for therapists and then reveal how you can use this continuum immediately to help with some of these challenges.

And before that, I'd really, really appreciate getting your reactions and your comments. I'd love to know... am I making sense? Is this what you see? And most of all, in the comment section below, please share one example of self-absorbed behavior that you've seen recently.

Until then, I'm Ellyn Bader, reminding you that when it comes to working with couples, you are not alone.