

## **The Self-Absorbed Partner**

### **Transcript of Video Two**

**By Ellyn Bader, Ph.D.**

Have you ever noticed that self-absorbed people do not make easy therapy clients? Especially so when they come to see you in couples therapy.

And if you do much couples therapy, you'll know it's common to see relationships deteriorating when one partner is quite a bit more self-absorbed than the other.

Hi, My name is Ellyn Bader and this is part 2 of a 3 part series I am sending to you about working with self-absorbed partners in couples work.

In Part 1, I described the self-absorbed partner and how they create problems for their spouses. Today, we are going to take a deeper look into understanding the self-absorbed partner, and particularly reveal why they create so much difficulty for therapists.

And at the end of this video, I'm going to give you one impactful treatment intervention that you can use right away.

So let's quickly review some central features of the self-absorbed person through my experience with one couple. When John and Mary came to see me they had been married for 10 years; they had twin daughters who were in the first grade. Mary was depressed and withdrawn. John was impatient with Mary's negative attitudes. He wanted more attention and more time having fun with her.

As soon as Mary would come home from work, John wanted her undivided attention.

His emphasis was on now. "Attend to me. You've been away all day."

On first glance the self-absorbed partner's wishes seem legitimate and rational. John wanted his wife to be happy, to think positively and make time for more fun with him.

As I explored more I learned that John had not worked in the last three years, and that Mary was supporting them financially, as well as doing most of the childcare and housework.

Self-absorbed partners believe that whatever they are doing at any moment - it's the most important use of time.

A telling moment in the first session came when I asked John about his role in the family's morning routine. I also asked how many mornings a week he drove his daughters to school.

I learned that he liked to sleep in every morning until about 10:00 a.m. And, that he did not want to be awakened because he stayed up late at night working on his photography hobby, saying that someday he might sell some of his photos online.

When I asked John if he might start making his daughters' lunches, you would have thought that I had asked him to make dinner for 500 people.

Self-absorbed partners rarely initiate compliments, and they easily minimize how much their spouses do or give.

John minimized the amount of effort it took Mary to work full-time, take care of their twins, and prepare all the meals. He did, however, have great appreciation for his ironing and vacuuming skills.

When attention is not on the self-absorbed partner and they want it, they will feel agitated and anxious. They are very skillful at focusing the attention back on themselves and their needs.

John would begin most sessions with complaints about Mary. Like many self-absorbed partners, he had no understanding of Mary and her world. He had difficulty delaying gratification and just wanted to be happy, and wanted Mary to delight in spending time with him - when it was convenient for him.

But let's go deeper and take a more nuanced look at how the self absorbed partner functions in their relationship: Their primary orientation is **"Attend to me," versus "I give to you."** Or as Martin Buber, the philosopher, said, "Humans have two attitudes they may adopt toward the world; one is the I-It, the other is the I-Thou."

When one partner views the other primarily as a source of need gratification, this is the 'I-It' partnership.

The I-It partner orients from their own egocentric center. They're very miserly with gratitude.

The I-It relationship is more of a monologue. These partners can identify and express their own desires, a process known as self-differentiation. But, they are very low on other-differentiation. They don't easily get out of their own skin and inquire about the spouse's experience, desires or concerns. They don't listen to understand.

They quickly personalize and make their own issues, their reactions, and their feelings predominate.

This is in sharp contrast to the giving 'I-Thou' partner who views relationships as a dialogue, and an ongoing process of giving, receiving and collaborating. I-Thou partners make themselves accountable for growth within the relationship.

I-Thou is a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity while I-It is a relationship of detachment and separateness.

A very helpful lens to understand this more is the lens of differentiation and a disco ball.

In the Couples Developmental Model, my husband, Peter Pearson, and I have defined differentiation as:

The active and on-going process in which a person defines themselves, expresses their own thoughts, feelings, wishes and desires and handles their partner doing the same.

It's just like this disco ball. Differentiation unfolds just like the mirrors on this ball. Each mirror represents a new aspect of self that gets exposed over time.

Expressing self and pursuing desires actually leads to much greater vitality.

But this takes maintaining clear boundaries, being able to delaying gratification, and managing the anxiety that comes actually from risking more intimacy and getting to know another human being with all their vulnerabilities.

Self-absorbed partners are strong on differentiation of self. They can easily and comfortably expose these many mirrors.

They identify their own thoughts, feelings, wishes and desires, **and they** express them congruently, often even in a demanding or pushy way.

But they are extremely weak on other-differentiation. They don't, in fact, listen without interrupting or defending themselves. They don't ask other-directed questions. They rarely have a genuine interest and curiosity about their partner's internal process.

They don't understand their partners in light of the partner's history and vulnerability. They don't understand how their lack of giving impacts the relationship. And they don't work much to express empathy, or nurturing.

Successful work with self-absorbed partners take developing and strengthening new capacities and most importantly the capacity of other-differentiation.

These partners can indeed learn to be curious, to maintain a congruent image or memory of their partner over time, and they can learn to delay gratification. As they understand their partners better this will affect how they behave and the choices that they make.

And best of all, they will be able at times to delay gratification. In other words—they can move from an 'I need' to an 'I give' way of relating to their partner.

Going down this road isn't easy.

In fact I did a survey and over 200 therapists responded. About  $\frac{3}{4}$  of them said that self-absorbed partners created problems for them.

Let's look at the 6 ways that self-absorbed partners do create mischief for therapists, so that you know better what you are up against.

1. It's not easy to name the problem directly.
2. They can elicit amazingly strong and unpleasant feelings in you.
3. They make it hard to empathize with them and easy to align with their partners.
4. They threaten to quit therapy easily and you might end up being too nice.
5. Change can be very, very slow and it's hard for you and them to identify clear progress.
6. Teaching empathy and other-engagement to someone who isn't interested in learning is always a challenge.

So what I would like to do is quickly elaborate on the first 4 of these and then talk more about an intervention for the last 2.

**First, since it isn't easy to name the problem directly, you may be listening to the presenting problems, and you might intuitively get a sense that self-absorption is a central issue.**

You might even begin to question a partner about how they give, and they will quickly come up with examples of how they do indeed give.

Yes, they can list examples of being generous. However, you will recognize that usually they only give when it is convenient for them. Marriage takes a lot more than giving when it's convenient. It means going out of the way to be helpful to your partner or children, and that is rarely easy for these partners.

Since self-absorbed partners don't relish brilliant insights into their own dynamics, and they're usually pretty sensitive to being made wrong, it isn't simple for you to put an overt label on the problem.

One way I venture into this territory with couples is to say to them, “After thousands of hours that I’ve spent working with couples, I’ve come to realize that flourishing marriages take courage and character, giving and gratitude, vision and vitality.”

Then I usually ask them to identify where they are the strongest and weakest. Or in the case of John and Mary, I said to John, “John, you seem to be the one who can hold on to the vision of you and Mary enjoying each other and having much more fun together.” “And Mary, you have shown enormous character by stepping into supporting the family financially when John lost his job. You’ve maintained your commitment to being a really good parent as well.”

“And John you seem to be weakest in expressing gratitude and in truly recognizing what Mary is giving to you and your children.” “And Mary, you’ve given up on ever being vital again. I wonder, in fact, if each of you would like to build some more emotional muscle in those weaker areas.”

How partners respond to these questions will be a great diagnostic because you’ve given each of them a way to save face and still admit to their limitations or weak areas. And it also provides you a way to see their level of self-awareness. If their denial is pervasive, you’ll know what you are up against.

## **Second, these partners will elicit strong/unpleasant feelings in you.**

Your counter-transference is very, very easily activated. They tend to trigger feelings of frustration, of helplessness, of impatience, and even worse, disdain and contempt. These feelings are not simple to manage

constructively. In fact ask yourself, how do you indeed manage these feelings in yourself?

A therapist friend of mine said it this way, “It’s really hard being nice to someone who is just not being nice to their partner.” And simultaneously, you know, that if the self-absorbed person does not think that you are being nice enough to them, they will take offense and pretty soon you’ll have a mess on your hands.

I mentioned in the first video in this series that I probably developed contempt and impatience with self-absorbed partners because I internalized my father’s messages to me when I was a little girl. And I also saw the role model of him giving generously. His impatience with selfishness is something that I still carry and that I know can be easily triggered.

So, I have had to learn to manage my impatience with these partners, and not confront when I feel disdainful and yet still look for persistent, consistent ways to confront and push for growth.

**The third challenge with these partners is that it is so, so much easier to align with their spouse, and so much harder to empathize with them.**

Being a mother myself, it was easy for me to empathize with Mary being exhausted from working, from caring for twins, from having a demanding self-centered husband. I had to work a lot harder to empathize with John’s shame that he had failed so horribly at work.



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**Fourth, self-absorbed partners threaten to quit therapy too easily, and you can end up being too nice.**

Frequently, they will let you know that therapy is just not their cup of tea, especially as soon as they are confronted. They definitely don't buy in wholeheartedly to the process, and they may only give lip-service to their willingness to change.

Often times there is a secret message that goes like this: "If you are too rough on me, I will leave."

In doing this, they are actually grabbing the unilateral decision-making card with their partner and with you. Before too long, you can find yourself trying too hard to be neutral, tiptoeing around them, being too accommodating and catering too much to their outrageous requests.

Suddenly you have become just like their partner who is timid and afraid to take a stand. One trainee of mine said it like this, "I find myself not liking me for being such a wuss!"

And finally let's look at the last two issues through the lens of one intervention that you can use.

**The last two I mentioned are number five, that change can be slow and it's hard for you and hard for them to clearly identify progress.**

**And six, that teaching empathy and engagement, and extending themselves, to someone who isn't interested in learning, is not easy.**

Self-absorbed partners have little interest in exploring the emotional life of others. Being empathic is unnatural. Developing other-differentiation is not a

goal they'll put forward. And yet, developing emotional engagement and some empathy is essential to changing these relationships in a substantial way.

Therefore what you view as progress, initially, will not seem like progress to them.

I've developed a Continuum of Engagement. You can use it right away. This continuum is designed to make explicit that a continuum of partner engagement actually does exist. It enables partners to identify where they see themselves and where they would like to be. At one end of the continuum are partners who would rather not listen and, in fact, who find listening boring. While at the far other end is the partner who can be nurturing, giving, and empathic. There are 12 different points along the continuum.

Be sure to download some copies from the Engagement Continuum link below. You can put this in your client's hands and use it right away. Ask them to circle where they see themselves and to identify where they'd like to be. Using this continuum is an indirect confrontation that enables the client to confront himself or herself and makes it easier for you to name the problem.

**The continuum also provides a very explicit way to view and track momentum and progress.**

I guess one thing that I've learned over all these years is that I am still my father's daughter. I still find it painful to see self-absorption wreaking havoc in a marriage.

I'm sharing strategies that I've learned. I'm sharing them with you so you won't have to spend so many years... so you will have more effective methods than I had when I started.

Be sure to watch your email for my final blog in this series. In it I'm going to give you a clinical transcript, which reveals how you can do deeper intrapsychic work with the self-absorbed child part of your client. It will give you another way to see and to track progress, to promote intrapsychic change and to have the pressure for change come from your client rather than from you.

Working with these partners can feel lonely. You are often the one who initially will have to remember and track change. And you will be faced with the ongoing challenge of creating growth in someone who does not see the benefit of becoming more giving, the benefit of delaying gratification, or the benefits of expressing gratitude.

*You can learn to expose the ways that they sabotage their own real happiness.*

This is a key – it takes very targeted perseverance. But with that kind of directed perseverance you will see evolution take place. Armed with the knowledge of how to sequence your interventions, you can navigate these tricky waters. You will have much more skill and much greater confidence. Your couples will be very glad they found their way to you.

But before I send you the final blog, I'm asking you to join the conversation and make a comment below. Post one strategy that has worked for you or one that you tried and just didn't work at all.

Until the next time, I'm Ellyn Bader, and I want you to remember that you are not alone.



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