



# **The Self-Asorbed Client: Evolving Troublesome Traits into Empathy and Engagement**

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# The Self-Absorbed Client: Evolving Their Troublesome Traits into Empathy and Engagement

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

Perhaps they're preoccupied with themselves, their emotions, and desires.

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

Or they are self-indulgent.

Perhaps you have heard these complaints:

- "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 they should do anyway?"

When it comes to **giving** in relationships, some partners are just miserly. They have a lopsided focus on getting versus giving. They are very comfortable with things not being fair. For many, many reasons, their behavior is self-absorbed.

If you work with couples, you have surely been exposed to self-centered behavior. I am talking about something that's much, much more common than narcissism. It doesn't come with an extreme diagnosis, but the sheer numbers — the magnitude of people in this condition — make it a significant problem and one worth addressing.

I am tempted to call it narcissism-lite. But I am not interested in developing any new diagnostic categories for The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, which already has more than enough.

In the 30 plus years I've spent working with couples in Silicon Valley, California, I've seen all different levels of self-absorption.

I want to shine 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. As a child I sometimes thought his expectations were extreme and unrealistic.

When I first started doing couples therapy, I was appalled by the amount of self-centeredness I encountered.

I worked with a woman who went on a blind date with a much older man. And before her children even woke up the next day, she had asked him to move in. She was surprised and confused that her children were so upset about her moving a “new father” into their home before they had even met him.

Later, I had a client 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 more than 30 years of working with couples to get better and better at confronting and transforming this dynamic.

## Troublesome traits of self-absorbed partners:

Self-absorbed partners...

- Focus mostly on their own thoughts, their own activities, and their own interests.
- They have trouble giving when it is inconvenient. Their own agenda is what prevails.
- They tend to indulge themselves with food, with sex, and with relaxation.
- Commitments to others and showing interest in their partners have very low priority.
- 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.
- They may walk into the house and turn on the TV, barely grunting hello.

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. They place themselves whenever possible on the winning side, with no 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 can 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.

## Why self-absorption is a problem for the spouse

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

These spouses commonly feel...

- Powerless, insignificant, dismissed, and trapped. Over time their self-esteem erodes.
- 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.
- Their sense of hope that change is even possible disappears.

When a suffering spouse describes their intense loneliness 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 spouse’s loneliness grows even stronger.

Many self-absorbed partners are likeable extroverts. This can compound the loneliness for their spouses, which leads to the spouse questioning their own experience.

## 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 so much from the relationship without replenishing it. By the time these partners come to see you, their relationship is usually withering. The lonely spouse feels depleted and pessimistic about the future.

But all is not hopeless. You can work with them. It takes learning and integrating several interventions from the Developmental Model of Couples Therapy. These integrate interpersonal, intrapsychic, attachment, differentiation, and neuroscience 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

Armed with the knowledge of how to sequence your interventions, you can navigate tricky waters with more skill and less frustration. It took me many years to deeply understand that self-absorbed partners lack other-differentiation and even more years to develop increasingly effective ways to increase their engagement with their partners. They come to therapy low on the capacity for empathy, but developing increased empathy is what fuels change in them.

With effective interventions and time, you will get to see evolution take place.

In the meantime, I would like to share a handout I created that shows a continuum from less differentiated to more differentiated aspects of empathy. You will find it at the end of this document. You can use this handout to help assess a partner's capacity to be empathic. You can invite clients to look at the chart and identify where they see themselves and where they'd like to be.

## Free Workshop

I am committed to preventing premature and unnecessary divorces by training a core of exceptional couples therapists and relationship coaches. To introduce you to my work and to the Developmental Model of Couples Therapy, I am conducting a free workshop called ***What Do You Do When...?***

We'll have five days of articles, clinical transcripts, and webinars with time for discussion and your own specific questions.

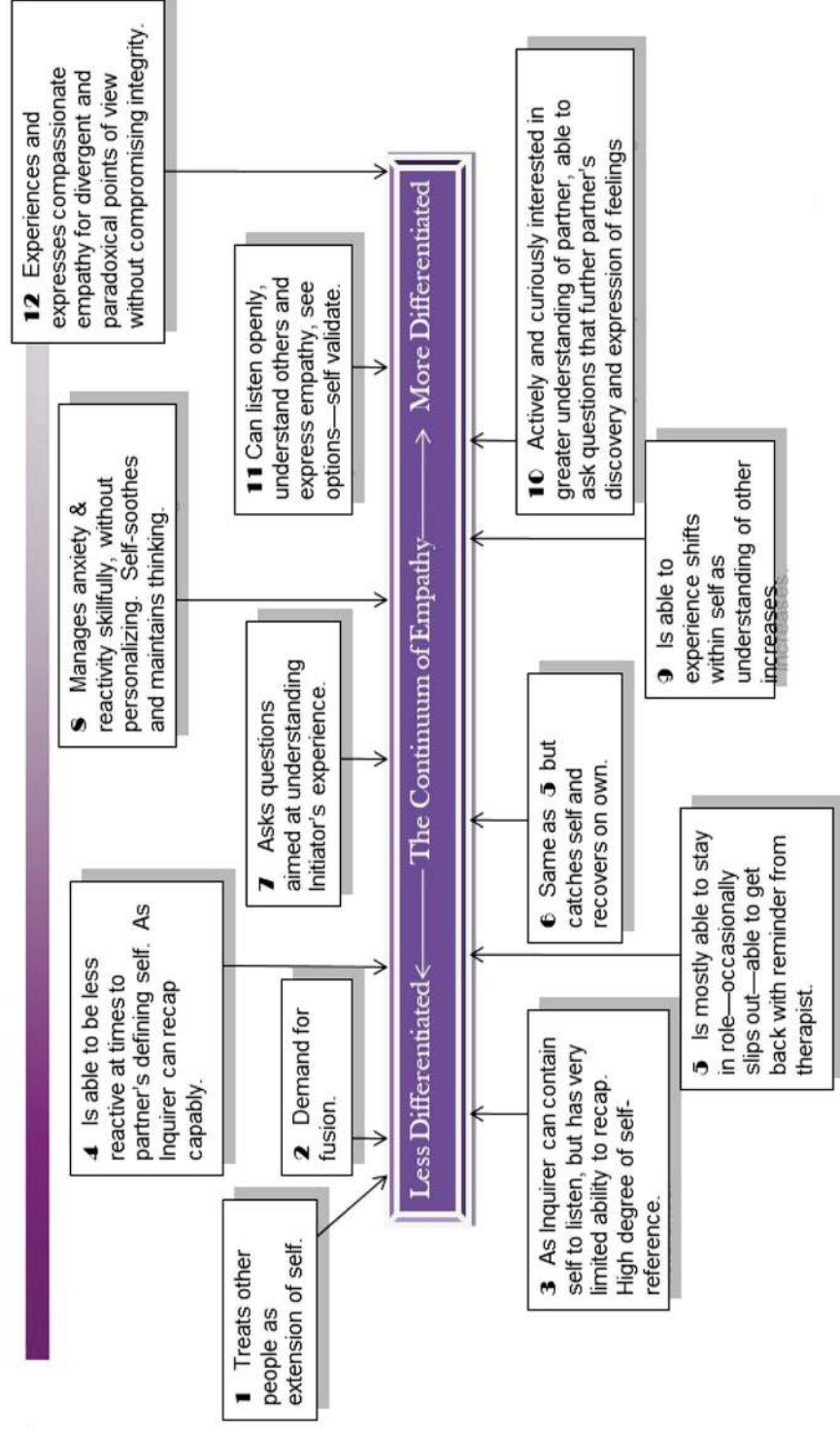
I hope you will join me.

[\*\*Sign up here.\*\*](#)

### ***Here's a look at the whole schedule:***

- **Live webinar, September 9, 10 am Pacific:**  
*What Do You Do When Your Clients Aren't Telling You What You Need to Know?*
- **Article and Clinical Transcript, September 10:**  
*What Do You Do When Partners in a Power Struggle Refuse to Budge?*
- **Live webinar, September 11, 1 pm Pacific:**  
*What Do You Do When Couples Think Their Problem is Simply Communication?*
- **Article and Clinical Transcript, September 12:**  
*What Do You Do When Narcissistic Clients Criticize, Attack, and Dominate Your Sessions?*
- **Live webinar, Sept 13, 1 pm Pacific:**  
*What Do You Do When a Client Can't Stop Obsessing About the Details of an Affair*

# Empathy in the Inquirer



Concept: Peter M. Krohn, MFCC