

Secrets of Making Progress with Self-Absorbed Partners

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Self-absorbed partners challenge many therapists, due to their preoccupation with themselves.

If you work with very many couples, you will surely recognize these partners. They prioritize their own thoughts, their own activities, and their own interests above almost anything else. I sometimes call their self-indulgence 'narcissism-light', because this form of self-preoccupation is much more common than narcissistic personality disorders.

What does self-absorption actually look like in marriage or committed partnerships?

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. It isn't that they are ungenerous. It is that they have trouble extending themselves when it is inconvenient for them. 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.
- They don't see their spouse as a separate person with their own history, desires 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 naturally 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. They have little or no awareness that when their partners lose, they lose something precious, too. And even worse, they don't think about what their 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, establishing goals in couples work can be a challenge. And for these clients, stretching to understand or have compassion and empathy for their spouse's distress is usually a bother.

With all this in mind, it's no wonder self-absorbed people will create problems for their partners.

What if you were the self-absorbed partner's spouse?

Before you read any further, take a minute to imagine you were married to someone whose self-interest was primary most of the time. Ask yourself what problems would that create for you.

Do you imagine you might feel...

- powerless, insignificant, dismissed, or trapped?
- hopeless that change is even possible?
- invisible, as if you are not a real person with your own challenges?
- lonely and sometimes depressed?
- low self-esteem?

Now imagine you really want your partner to change and include you more in their thoughts, feelings and actions. You go to see a couples therapist.

You describe your loneliness and explain how the emotional disconnection feels. Predictably, your self-absorbed partner responds poorly. They personalize your pain. Because they feel attacked by you, they attack back, and they discount the significance of the problem you are describing.

Before you know it, the session gets out of control. Your therapist looks confused and disoriented, and seems reactive to both of you.

You expected your therapist to be able to manage the situation better.

Luckily you are not the spouse in this scenario! And as a therapist, you can take a much better approach.

What does progress look like with a self-absorbed partner?

Therapists who make progress with self-absorbed partners must know how to:

1. Take charge and actively set the stage for change, including naming the problem rather than shying away from it or being too nice.
2. Address the self-centeredness in a way that does not make the self-absorbed partner defensive.
3. Help the spouse understand the self-absorbed partner better – perhaps even helping to develop some compassion rather than more anger.
4. Coach both partners to change their failed communication patterns.
5. Avoid alienating the self-absorbed partner by over-identifying with the spouse.
6. Acknowledge and even transform the greedy part of the self-absorbed partner.
7. Assign homework that gradually increases the self-absorbed partner's ability to take into account their spouse's thoughts and needs.

All of this and more is possible when you are a Developmental Model Couples Therapist working with self-absorption.

You can take charge from the beginning by asking both partners:

- What do you do that creates problems for your wife/husband?
- What do you believe will be required of you to create enough change to end the loneliness in this marriage?
- How motivated are you to extend yourself and stretch in new ways?

Then, you can begin to address the self-absorption by identifying it as only one part of the person, a part that had safety/survival benefit at one time.

You create dialogues between the demanding self and the self that would like to be more giving.

You support the spouse as he or she backs off, listens and learns more about the demanding or greedy part of the self-absorbed partner.

You help both partners understand that the greedy part of the self-absorbed partner would exist no matter who they were married to.

You teach the couple the Initiator-Inquirer Process to support enormous growth for both partners.

You can understand the spouse's anger towards the self-absorbed partner, but help both learn to initiate more openly and authentically rather than screaming.

At the same time, you help the self-absorbed partner learn to listen without blame or criticism and to hear the other partner's cry for connection in positive ways rather than having to fight against it.

Ask yourself, how skilled are you at taking charge and transforming greed into more gratitude? When self-absorption prevails in a couple that comes to you for help, are you confident that you can face the challenges the couple brings to you?

These couples tend to disengage and the relationships wither. Unless new energy is pumped into the system, it will disintegrate. And when they start therapy, ***the new energy is you!***

Are you up to the task?

If you'd like to learn more, you can follow my video and blog series that starts at <http://www.couplesinstitute.com/self-absorbed-partners-one/> and includes a clinical transcript of working with the self-absorbed partner.

And to find out more about the training program that will help you develop the skills described above go to www.couplesinstitutetraining.com/developmentalmodel.

Giving you the skills and confidence to transform troubled relationships,

Ellyn