

Nonviolent Communication and Narcissists

By Tim Buckley

COVID didn't create narcissism, but the isolation created by the pandemic may have increased the challenges we face trying to meet needs of a shared reality and meaningful connection with others.

Recently, a friend asked whether there is an antidote to "dealing with a narcissist"? He said that providing empathy for that person had become emotionally taxing, and that more empathy seemed only to encourage the other person to go on and on, inviting more empathy and thus creating compassion fatigue for me.

Before I answered his email, I did a bit of research.

- Narcissus was a mythical Greek character developed as a morality lesson. The young man was classically beautiful, and he fell deeply in love with his reflection in a pool of water. Obvious to us, and eventually to him, the relationship was not destined for satisfaction. Narcissus became sad, then despairing, that his love could not be reciprocated. He ultimately killed himself and, after his death, a flower of great beauty was born, bearing his name.
- A foundational premise of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is that moral judgments precede all acts of violence. "Narcissism," NVC's founder Marshall Rosenberg would say, "is a diagnosis." The thought: "He's a narcissist" creates separation between me (the judge) and you (the object.) As soon as those thoughts enter our minds - good and bad, right and wrong - we are knocking at moral judgment's front door.

Instead of labeling the other person as a narcissist, it's possible (with practice) to refrain from knocking on that door altogether. Instead, as NVC teaches us:

- Form an observation: "Every time I spoke to my brother-in-law last weekend, he talked about his accomplishments and didn't ask me once about what I think, how I am or what I've been doing."

- (Self empathy) Identify the feelings about that: “I feel irritated and hopeless
- (Self empathy) Identify the needs not met: “I’d like a real conversation, to be heard and acknowledged, too.”
- Request...at this point, you have a choice: you can interrupt your brother-in-law and lay out your observation, feelings and needs; or, you could decide to empathize with him, so that you meet other important needs of your, like kindness, consideration, respect and empathy.

But, as in my friend’s case, the unmet needs continued to come up, and the choice to listen empathically to his brother-in-law became emotionally burdensome. So then what?

Rosenberg taught us to notice the moment we’re no longer enjoying the choice we made, and then make another choice to better meet our own need. When we can no longer being present to the other in a state of empathy, it’s important to say what has become more important. Not doing so can rapidly give rise to thoughts like: “he’s a narcissist,” or “he’s so self-centered.”

So here’s how that might sound:

Me: “Excuse me a minute, Rob. I’d like to check with you on something. I’ve been listening to you for awhile and asking questions about what you’ve been saying. I wonder if you can say how my listening and my questions have landed for you? Has it been pleasurable for you to have me be present to what’s going on for you?”

Rob: “Yeah, thanks, I’ve enjoyed talking with you and it’s rare to have someone express interest in what’s going on for me.”

Me: “Oh, I’m glad. You’re saying you long to be heard and that doesn’t happen as much as you like. When that happens, like with me just now, do you get the sense that you’re appreciated and respected?”

Rob: “Yes, very much so.”

Me: “I understand. And, I feel the same way. This last year being isolated because of COVID has been hard for me and I long for the same things you spoke about.

Would you be willing to listen to me for awhile so that I can be heard and appreciated for what's going on for me?"

Rob: "Sure."

Before I get more than a couple of sentences into my list of things, however, Rob cuts in and begins to talk about himself again. Often, something we say stimulates a thought in the other and, rather than hanging onto the thought, they interrupt with, "Oh, yeah, that happened to me too..." and then continue to dominate the conversation.

Me: (Internally..."oh, here he goes again!")

Me: (Internally...self empathy..."I'm irritated because he said he'd listen and now it appears he's not interested. I'd really like to keep my relationship with him solid so I want to be understood for this point. I'm going to say something now.")

Me: "Rob," I say, interrupting him. "I noticed just now that you jumped in when I was talking about my life, and just after you said you were willing to listen to me like I've listened to you."

Rob: "Oh, yeah, but I was just saying how I'm having some of the same issues..."

Me: "Yeah, I get that. And, I want to make sure that you're still okay with your agreement to listen to me? It's important to me to finish what's on my mind...you know, it helps me get grounded in my need for respect and mattering."

Rob: "Ok."

Perhaps at this point, Rob may be better able to stay focused on listening. If so, I would certainly end our conversation with a sincere thanks for his willingness to be present and attentive and to say that his doing so met my need for mutual respect and listening.

However, perhaps he's unable or unwilling to abide with that agreement. So, if Rob continued to interrupt and bring the subject back to himself, I might end the conversation this way:

Me: "Rob, I'm interrupting again only to say that I'm tired and want to talk to other people right now. I'm disappointed that my need to be heard like I wanted

to wasn't met. And, I noticed I was getting fidgety and frustrated when you continued to talk about yourself. My relationship with you is important and I'd like to talk to you about this more at some point."

Me: Internally, formulating a request...I'm hesitant to ask him if he'd be willing to tell me what he heard me say...fearing he'd be defensive and would eat up another five minutes about himself.

Me: (Request) "So, would you be willing to exchange emails now and then make an arrangement to talk by phone next week?"

Rob: "Ok...but, I wish you weren't so sensitive about being heard...it's kind of needy, you know?"

Me: " I think I understand what you're saying, Rob, and I hope we can discuss that more when we talk next week. Ok?"

Rob: "Sure.

Before the phone call, I would plan to do a preparatory check in with myself.

- What's my motivation for connecting with Rob?
- What would I like as an outcome?
- Empathy for Rob. What needs is he trying to meet in his behavior with me, dominating the conversation?
- Empathy for myself. What needs am I hoping to meet in relationship with Rob? Is that realistic? Is it possible, if Rob isn't interested or available for that kind of relationship, to get those needs met elsewhere?