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Narcissistic Mortification, Shame, and Fear

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Abstract

Early childhood events of mortification are crucial in teaching the baby to distinguish between the external and the internal, establish ego boundaries, recognize his limitations, delay gratification, and select among options. Of course, it is possible to be overtaken by multiple internal and external mortifications (“traumas”) to the point that repression and dissociation become indispensable as well as compensatory cognitive deficits (omnipotent or omniscient grandiosity, entitlement, invincibility, paranoid projection, and so on). Bergler and Maldonado reminds us that pathological (secondary) narcissism is a reaction to the loss of infantile omnipotent delusions and of a good and meaningful object, associated in the child’s mind with ideals, a loss which threatens “continuity, stability, coherence, and wellbeing”.

Narcissistic mortification is “intense fear associated with narcissistic injury and humiliation ... the shocking reaction when individuals face the discrepancy between an endorsed or ideal view of the self and a drastically contrasting realization” (Freud in Ronningstam, 2013). Rothstein (ibid.): “... fear of falling short of ideals with the loss of perfection and accompanying humiliation”. This fear extends to intimacy in interpersonal relationships (Fiscalini), unrealized or forbidden wishes and related defenses (Horowitz), and, as Kohut so aptly summarized it: “fear associated with rejection, isolation, and loss of contact with reality, and loss of admiration, equilibrium, and important objects.” Kernberg augmented this list by adding: “fear of dependency and destroying the relationship with the analyst, fear of retaliation, of one’s own aggression and destructiveness, and fear of death.”

Narcissistic mortification, is, therefore, a sudden sense of defeat and loss of control over internal or external objects or realities, caused by an aggressing person or a compulsive trait or behavior. It produces disorientation, terror (distinct from anticipatory fear), and a “damming up of narcissistic (ego-)libido or destrudo (mortido) is created” (Eidelberg, 1957, 1959). The entire personality is overwhelmed by impotent ineluctability and a lack of alternatives (inability to force objects to conform or to rely on their goodwill). Mortification reflects the activity of infantile strategies of coping with frustration or repression (such as grandiosity) and their attendant psychological defense mechanisms (for example, splitting, denial, or magical thinking).

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Biography

Sam Vaknin is the author of "Malignant Self-love: Narcissism Revisited" and other books about personality disorders. His work is cited in hundreds of books and dozens of academic papers.

He is Visiting Professor of Psychology, Southern Federal University, Rostov-on-Don, Russia and Professor of Finance and Psychology in CIAPS (Centre for International Advanced and Professional Studies). He spent the past 6 years developing a treatment modality for Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). Over the years, with volunteers, it was found to be effective with clients suffering from a major depressive episode as well.

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