



Defusing anxiety and narcissism through the therapeutic process

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One of the most basic needs we have as human beings is to feel confirmed in our being, and good about ourselves. Stripped of intellectual language and science-speak, we need to know that we are loveable. This need is stronger perhaps even than that of food and shelter; infant animals deprived of a parent or caregiver's touch yet given shelter and food have been seen to die through the lack of a caring touch. Our basic patterns of reaction and response are created at this time. The more secure we are in our sense of self worth, the less we are vulnerable to anxiety and self-critical beliefs; the more we can thrive.

Even in the healthiest upbringing as infants we experience the pain of disappointing our care-givers. The fear of the withdrawal of their approval teaches us about what guilt feels like and to adapt and 'be good' to avoid it. It's a huge fear – withdrawal of approval is like the threat of death to a dependent child and the body responds accordingly with stress. The brain is given a boost of the stress hormone cortisol linked with adrenaline, which facilitates all the physical responses to stress.

If the caregiver is insensitive sometimes the guilt tips over into something even more self-harming: shame – the sense that we are intrinsically bad. This is not a rational thing – it is held in our bodies (like blushing) through sensation, and plays out through our primitive survival reactions. For some of us, even with otherwise happy upbringing, the sensitivity meter is more finely calibrated than others. We're accordingly more driven to avoid the pain, more driven to be good, have a compulsion to feel proud of ourselves, and may be more prone to anxiety.

The symptoms of anxiety are many, for example feelings of free-floating worry or excessive tension, or panic, a racing heart, choking and breathlessness. Alternatively it may appear as obsessions or compulsions, or a phobia, or social embarrassment. So with a list like this anxiety and pride may seem at first glance to be an unlikely pairing. However when we look closer, they are often two sides of the same coin. Many of us are not aware that the driving energy behind our general anxiety is the fear of being exposed as not good enough – or worse, of being bad.

The feeling of being not good enough is so harrowing that the mind suppresses awareness of it and devises subtle strategies to avoid and compensate.

There are different ways this fear of exposure can play out: one response to this is to be invested in anything that brings a feeling of pride – of being MORE than good enough – of being the best! And ‘best’ might mean superior in any number of ways: physically or spiritually, or the richest, cleverest, most efficient, strongest, most loving. It can be inward focussed and self-burdening which might lead to masochistic or addictive behaviour, or turned outwards and quite aggressive and power-hungry. Whether you succeed or fail at maintaining the high standard you set yourself, you can’t win so long as the underlying fear-inducing cause remains hidden. Anxiety is the result.

You may rightly argue: “surely it’s good to be proud of oneself! After all, we teach our children to be proud of themselves don’t we?” I still feel great about myself every time I remember my name being announced as the winner of an essay competition at school and I’m not about to suggest that feeling is wrong. Nevertheless, most of us have learnt somewhere along the line that pride is a sin. How can we make sense of this contradiction, and stop burdening ourselves with guilt when we have every right – in fact in counselling we are positively encouraged - to appreciate ourselves? The key is to notice the difference between *appreciating* one self and being *driven* to feel pride about oneself.

In the counselling room this pride and its underlying sense of the void of unloveability might play itself out through a rather patronising attitude, a highly critical awareness and hypersensitivity to criticism. At the far extreme it appears as narcissism and an inability to make or receive relationship. It will be experienced by both therapist and client, though the experienced therapist will be using awareness of these signs as pointers to the need for validation and confirmation of being. Without having the validity of their pride questioned, the client can be led to wonder what is driving the need to feel that. The clue to recognising the ‘investment’ in pride might be in noticing how sensitive we are to challenges to it, or perhaps in how judgemental we are about the failings of others, or how sensitive we are to the envy of others. Healthy pride is something which increases our sense of being connected to others. Unhealthy pride drives a need to get things right at all costs, leads to anxiety, and separates us from others.

With the unconditional positive regard, compassion and support of a counsellor or psychotherapist it is possible for these deep wounds and their compulsive power to be faced and understood. And then understanding, self-compassion and deep healing can manifest.