

Address:

109 La Grange Avenue
Suite 103
La Plata, Maryland

**Phone #'s:**

(917) 576-7237 (Olimpia)
(240) 253-7051 (Mike)
(301) 934-2640 (fax)



The false self and it's defenses - a compassionate review



by [Michael Etts, LCSW-C](#)

Show table of contents



To begin...

A baby cries and it's [mother cries harder, or walks away](#). The same baby smiles and is picked up and gets a smile in return. It quickly learns which emotions are acceptable and which are not. And so the development of the false self begins...



Perspective

The perspective of this article is that the development of emotionally overwhelmed and emotionally numbed defenses are meant to protect against great psychological pain and that it is both unconscious and involuntary. While virtually all current literature uses the term "narcissist," this article seeks to avoid such terminology, as it has become such a pejorative term. As such, there will be no references to a person as "a narcissist," as labeling a human being is often the first step in dehumanizing them. Instead, a case will be made that these defenses are a regression to wounds suffered near the time of infancy, the most vulnerable time of our lives.

This is not meant to minimize or trivialize the damage that these defenses can cause. Those emotional injuries can be serious and long lasting.

Rather, the goal of this article is to illuminate the injuries that lead to the creation of emotionally overwhelmed and emotionally numbed defenses. Hopefully, when armed with this information and insight, it will become possible to view them through a more compassionate lens.

Another article on the false self (narcissism) - why?

The vast majority of articles on the subject break down the population into "us" those unfortunate enough to have to interact with "them" and "them" (those who use emotionally overwhelmed or emotionally numbed defenses). This article takes the position that emotionally overwhelmed and emotionally numbed defenses is a spectrum and that, to some degree, it is in virtually everyone. In other words, it's all "us."

Further, this article delves into a less well known type of defense (called by others as 'vulnerable narcissism' or by the more unfortunate name 'covert narcissism'). This type of psychological defense

will be referred to as "emotionally overwhelmed defenses." It is when a person becomes so overwhelmed with their own emotion, pain and suffering that they are unable to acknowledge or respond to the needs/emotions of another.

A definition

Emotionally overwhelmed and emotionally numbed defenses prioritize the needs of the self while minimizing or ignoring the needs of others. It is usually, though not always, accompanied by an imagined superiority whose purpose is to protect against the destructive effects of an imagined inferiority.

An overview of the types

Emotionally numbed defenses

Mild

- some emotional numbing
- able to feel some empathy for others
- emotions of others are accepted (though not welcomed)
- empathy is generally reserved for the self
- some reliance on imagined superiority

Severe

- emotionally numb (but very aware and sensitive to their own feelings)
- emotions of others are ignored, ridiculed or invalidated
- all empathy is reserved for the self
- imagined superiority of the self is foundational

Emotionally overwhelmed defenses

Mild

- some emotional overwhelm (some difficulty regulating emotions)
- there is some ability to hear the needs and emotions of another
- the needs of the self are primary but are not exclusionary

Severe

- complete emotional overwhelm (inability to regulate emotion)
- no ability to hear the needs and emotions of another
- the needs of the self are all encompassing and exclusionary

Emotionally numbed defenses are evident by:

-  Emotional distance and numbing
-  Superficial confidence (and sense of superiority) that masks feelings of being "not good enough"
-  Dismissive or unaware of the emotions of others
-  Painful sensitivity to social rejection
-  Preoccupation with outward appearances and social status
-  The subtle (or obvious) use of guilt, money, power, flattery, etc. for the purpose of control in relationships
-  A sense of entitlement (without the need for reciprocity)

- 🌱 Verbal criticism and judgmental thoughts of others (that are not applied to the self)
- 🌱 Explaining interpersonal conflict as the fault of others (denying or minimizing negative behaviors of the self)

Emotionally numbed defenses are evident by the heavy use of invalidation and reliance on conditional self esteem.

All people who had to develop a false self suffer from self esteem issues. It is an inevitable consequence of having one's true self ignored or rejected. In the case of the emotionally numbed, that lack of self esteem will manifest in subtle or frequent references to traits that suggest they are "special" or superior (this goes beyond the ordinary pleasure of sharing a point of pride). Frequently, these traits are related to appearance, money, success, power and even the ability not to show emotion.

The ability to not feel emotion is a societally esteemed trait, especially for men. It is a common attribute of "heros" in the movies and no negatives or downsides are portrayed. However, just ask anyone who does couples counseling and they will tell you that one of the top issues is the inability of one partner to express emotion. *A common fear is that if someone starts feeling emotion, they will be emotional all the time ("I don't want start crying all the time"). This is a myth. Becoming aware and being able to express emotion does not mean unregulated emotion. Someone can feel all their emotions and still regulate them when they want to or need to.*

With that said, perhaps you can see the irony in taking pride in the ability to repress or not feel emotion. It is the equivalent of taking pride in a bleeding wound. It's not an asset - it is evidence of prior injury.

As we shall see later in the article, these defenses are the result of different types of emotional invalidation (e.g., role reversal, neglect, abuse, etc) in early childhood. So, this is not a behavior that is invented internally. It is a behavior that a person has experienced and is now visiting upon others.

Emotionally overwhelmed defenses are evident by:

- 🌱 Difficulty managing emotions (usually sadness or anger)
- 🌱 A major preoccupation with self care (that minimizes or ignores the needs of others)
- 🌱 Susceptible to self esteem collapse (superiority is not available as a defense)
- 🌱 Significant self doubting (decision making, skills, etc)

Emotionally overwhelmed defenses are characterized by ignoring the needs and feelings of another person in one of two ways. The first is an intense display of emotion that results in a shift of focus to the self. The second is emotional shutdown (silence, stonewalling). To reiterate, these are involuntary (likely subconscious) responses.

Some important notes for the emotionally overwhelmed defenses:

- 🌱 Applies when used as a technique to ignore/block honest emotional sharing by another.
- 🌱 Does not apply to situations where it is a temporary coping technique and the feelings of the other person are addressed later.
- 🌱 Does not apply if it is a reaction to any type of emotional abuse (yelling, name calling or emotional invalidation)

Here are some **verbal** examples of emotionally overwhelmed defenses:

What is said or behavior	What is implied or suggested
"I'm hurt"	let's focus on my feelings (what you feel gets ignored)
"I'm such a bad person"	attend to my self esteem collapse and overwhelm
"I always hurt you"	attend to my guilt, not your feelings
prosecutorial questioning ("what are you saying!?")	angrily badger into coerced agreement

Here are some **non-verbal** examples of emotionally overwhelmed defenses:

Behavior	What is implied or suggested
anger, becoming loud	stop expressing yourself or face a fight
collapsing ("I can't do this")	come fix it for me
acting injured	stop expressing yourself or face guilt
dramatic emotional display	let's all focus on me and my feelings
non-stop talking	no room for your needs/feelings
active ignoring	I won't acknowledge you
physical withdrawal	stop expressing yourself or face neglect

Since these defenses create a preoccupation with the self, it follows that the emotional needs of others are overshadowed. This makes sense, because, as we will see, the very early, critical emotional needs of the person with these defenses were not met. As is often the case, it is hard to give another what you have never received yourself.

How do people develop these defenses?

That is a question extending back to the late 19th century by analysts who spent large portions of their careers trying to understand it (Freud, Kernberg, Kohut, Winnicott). It is generally agreed that these defenses develop very young "According to Kernberg, such pathology is [...] due to severe, early deprivation, usually before age 2" (Tonkin M, Fine H, 1985, p 233).

**** A note to those who doubt the powerful influence of early childhood.*

In my practice, I have encountered many people who express skepticism about the damaging effects of negative early childhood experiences. If you are skeptical, have a look at [this 6 minute video](#) produced by Harvard University or [this 3 minute video](#) showing the effects of even brief periods of neglect. To see dramatic brain scan data that occurs from neglect, scroll to the end of [this article](#) from the Child Trauma Academy.

An important note before we proceed...

The primary caretaker is generally (though not always) the mother, so the convention for describing the caretaker will be mother. Reading this, one might be tempted to view this as an issue of maternal care. ***This is not the case.*** Variables that can encumber a primary caretaker are numerous. [Relationship conflict](#) (Hanington, et al, 2012), including [self silencing to avoid conflict](#) (Whiffen, et al, 2007), [paternal depression](#), (Wilson, Durbin, 2009), [lack of social support](#) (Elsenbruch et al, 2006) and economic stress are some of the major challenges. [The Infant Mental Health Journal writes "Economic stress and relationship stress directly affected maternal depression \[...\]"](#) (Coyl D, et al, 2002).

This article takes the position that raising a well adjusted child is a social responsibility. That all the issues mentioned above need to be addressed so that a caretaker has the support that they need. This is especially true for those who have been raised in difficult circumstances themselves.

“ [...] for parents who have themselves been abused or neglected, or whose families have been encumbered by emotionally destructive patterns, a deeper level of education together with outside support or therapy may be essential for constructive parenting (Karr-Morse, Wiley, 1997, p. 217).

Infancy

Creation of self definition

A baby sees no difference between itself and the world. Mother is something that just appears and ideally, brings food, warmth and comfort. But mother also begins the process of forming consensual reality. By mirroring back a reaction to the child (who is still is unaware of itself as a separate being), she is creating a mental image or impression of the self to the infant. Put differently, the infant has no "self definition." That will largely be created by mother.

Part of self definition is being "good" or "bad." Any living being must differentiate between what is beneficial (food, warmth,etc.) or harmful (freezing cold, burning heat, violence,etc). This mental categorization extends to the self. When treated well, an infant forms a self definition of "good." When abused or neglected, the infant cannot afford the luxury of seeing the mother as "bad." Since the infant is dependent on the mother for it's very survival, the only person that can be considered "bad" is the infant itself.

This is the beginning of self esteem issues and shame (feeling that the core self is "bad"). In extreme cases of neglect and abuse, toxic shame is created in a processes summed up here:

“ The expectation of being seen and understood as a feeling and thinking person, which is created by the attachment context, clashes violently with the brutalised person's objectification and dehumanisation. Shame is a higher order derivative of this basic affect of pain. Unbearable shame is generated through the

incongruity of having one's humanity negated, exactly when one is legitimately expecting to be cherished. (Fonagy et al, 2002, p. 426)

The ideal scenario

 The mother attunes to the infant's emotions and needs and reacts appropriately.

Mental impression – I can have needs and feelings and they will elicit a positive response, resulting in my needs being met. Mother will help me manage my emotions. I can rely on and trust others. The world is a safe and welcoming place.

Less than ideal scenarios

 The baby cries, the mother cries harder or walks away (a [2012 study estimates that major depressive disorder affects about 10% of reproductive age women](#)). The baby quickly realizes that it's emotions have a negative effect on the provider of all good things, so the baby stops crying.

Mental impression – I have to be careful not to upset mother and help her manage her emotions. The parent-child role is becoming inverted and the infant is learning to disassociate (or not feel) emotion. Also, the infant might feel the poor boundaries of the mother and consequently, can *begin to develop an aversion to the needs of others*.

 The baby cries and the mother is insensitive and only occasionally responsive. The baby responds by "turning up the volume" and showing amplified levels of distress.

Mental impression – I have to display distress and struggle to gain the attention I need. I must keenly focus on mother to see when I can get attention and care. There is not enough of what I need. *Emotionally overwhelmed distress is beginning to develop here*.

David Wallin (citing the work of Mary Ainsworth) explains:

“ Virtually from the start [...] these infants conveyed their disturbing preoccupation with mothers availability. Their distress upon separation was extremely severe and the relief upon reunion was negligible. (Wallin, p. 21)

 The baby cries and gets little or no response, or even an abusive response, a risk more prevalent when the mother suffers from substance abuse, depression or OCD (Chaffin, Kelleher, Hollenberg, 1996). The baby goes through a succession of reactions from protest (crying, screaming, flailing) to despair (stopping protest, falling silent) to detachment (Bowlby, 1979). For the purposes of understanding emotionally numbed defenses, despair and detachment are very significant. To visually witness the profound effects of neglect, watch this video of the [Still Face Experiment](#).

Mental impression - My needs and emotions will be ignored or punished. I can't count on others. The world is not a safe place. I am alone.

When infancy goes well ...

The infant's self-definition is of I (the self) and the infant begins to gain an innate sense of itself as separate. This would be referred to as the "true self." A coherent, separate identity forms and the idea can grow that "it is me for which that I have come."***

When infancy goes wrong ...

The negative effects of role reversal, neglect or abuse are numerous.

The first effect is emotional numbing, beautifully summed up by Alice Miller:

“ For a child can only experience his feelings when there is somebody there who accepts him fully, understands and supports him. If that is missing, if the child must risk losing the mother's love [...] then he cannot experience these feelings secretly "just for himself" but fails to experience them at all (Miller, 1996, p.10)

In these less than ideal situations, the child learns that it's true self and it's spontaneous expression of emotion are not welcome. A clear self definition does not get created. *Instead, the authentic, spontaneous self gets displaced in order to make room for the needs of others. This becomes the basis for the mask of the false self. The conclusion often becomes "I am here to meet the needs and expectations of others (in this case, mother)."*

In the case of the emotionally numbed defenses, the sense of entitlement and feelings of superiority can provide a buffer against the negative effects of this role reversal. For the emotionally overwhelmed defenses, the result is a slightly or severely impaired ability to set boundaries. In either case, the child develops a vulnerability to manipulation via guilt, money, flattery, power, etc.

And in the most harmful scenario, it leads to disassociation.

“ Indeed, for many of the maltreated children we work with, crying for "help" from a potential trauma is doomed to fail— often the parent causes the trauma. In the absence of an appropriate caretaker response to their initial alarm outcry, the child, eventually after many painful disappointments, will abandon this behavior (a defeat or surrender response). In the face of persisting threat and, depending upon the age of the child and the nature of the threat, the child will move [...] into the dissociative continuum (Perry B, et al, 1995, p. 279)

Toddler

The child now realizes that mother is separate and has some notions about wanting to be in control of the supplier of all good things. A power struggle ensues. If mother holds appropriate boundaries in a reasonably consistent manner, the mental impression is "I must conform to external limits."

If, on the other hand, the child successfully employs tantrums or other disruptive techniques to get mother to yield to his/her will, an altogether different impression will be created. The child learns "limits

don't apply to me" and "others can be bent to my will." *This is critical in the formation of the emotionally overwhelmed defenses, as the unregulated display of emotion is both reinforced and rewarded.*

Later development

Children exposed to role reversal, neglect or abuse can have their injuries compounded later in childhood.

These defenses can broaden to include feelings of superiority when the consensual reality within a family is that the family is superior. This notion is often non-verbally communicated though it may include verbal assertions of superiority. One client reports that his mother often used the term "far superior" when comparing family members with people outside the family. Alexander Lowen writes:

“A boy doesn't think himself a prince through any failure of normal development. If he believes himself so be a prince, it is because he was raised in that belief. How children see themselves often reflects how their parents saw and treated them. (Lowen A, 1985, p. 21)

Families that use these defenses will pick one (or more) children to assume the role of hero (a child charged with bringing pride to the family). This child will usually develop the emotionally numbed defenses. Another role assigned in emotionally overwhelmed or emotionally numbed defensive families is scapegoat (a child charged with reinforcing superiority of family members by being assigned an inferior role). This child is often targeted with criticism, devaluation (and sometimes violence) and will often develop emotionally overwhelmed defenses.

Relational styles of the false self

The first lesson in relationship

When someone is raised in a way that allows them to retain their true self, the lesson is profound. The implied lesson is that their essential humanity is prized and respected. They can then easily and naturally extend this to others. But as we have learned, this was not the case for those who had to develop a false self. Having sacrificed essential parts of themselves to meet the needs of their caretaker, they learn an unfortunate relational lesson.

The unconscious thought process goes like this. Other people are there to meet my needs, the same way I was created to meet the needs of my caretaker. People don't exist just "for themselves," rather they are a collection of benefits that I can access.

Eye contact of the false self

Making prolonged eye contact with someone with emotionally numbed defenses can feel uncomfortable for someone who is not numbed. One can get the sense that you are not viewed as a thinking, feeling other but rather more of an "it" or an object. There is an implied negation of one's humanity. And since the need to feel superior is a core need, the emotionally numbed will often scan others visually, looking for "flaws" or things to feel superior about. In couples counseling, partners of the emotionally numbed will accurately voice perceptions of being criticized, judged and devalued.

The emotionally overwhelmed have a different set of needs. Their eye contact is seeking emotional assurance. Abandonment issues, negative thoughts about the self and powerful tides of emotion create suffering that they understandably want to resolve. Here, others are seen as a source of assurance and comfort. Again, this is common human relational style but it is a question of degree. The emotionally overwhelmed cannot perceive another in their total humanity, rather they focus on the subset that can meet their emotional needs.

Emotionally numbed relational style

Early on in relationship, emotionally numbed partners can be especially charming, offering frequent praise and extensive flattery. One could consider this a type of grooming, as they attempt to create an unspoken agreement with this new person. Agree with my self perceptions of being special or superior and this praise will continue. This is especially intoxicating for those with self esteem issues. Here is this (superficially) confident person giving all these positive affirmations. But this is necessarily temporary, as the drive to feel superior eventually leads to critical and judgmental thoughts and on occasion, remarks.

Those with emotionally numbed defenses select attributes that they want and are indifferent or rejecting to attributes they don't want. While seeking to get social needs met is a basic attribute of almost everyone, it is qualitatively different for those with emotionally numbed defenses. On many occasions, I have heard about the search for someone "better." This is not a reference to finding someone more compatible, rather it is the hope for a better collection of desirable attributes. This is often reinforced by their family of origin, who might literally say "you can do better."

In essence, other people are viewed as interchangeable or fungible, like commodities. Qualities like loyalty, empathy and commitment are minimal or don't exist at all. If someone with more desirable attributes is accessible, they will opt to be with them. In marriage, this leads to affairs, or the abandonment of a spouse with little or no guilt. In friendships, this means ending long term friendships suddenly, often with no communication. Those unfortunate enough to be on the receiving end of this will often be shocked, as they are generally unaware of how little they were regarded.

The emotionally numbed will often stay in a marriage because, after a cost benefit analysis of divorce, the benefits of staying married are deemed to outweigh the costs. For example, giving the appearance of a successful marriage (divorce is seen as failure), keeping joint assets (avoiding having to divide them) and maintaining the parental role (avoiding someone else raising their children).

Schadenfreude in the emotionally numbed

The emotionally numbed have a strong drive to find "evidence" to support their illusory feelings of superiority. This is manifest in the relational trait best described as schadenfreude. Wikipedia defines this as "is the experience of pleasure, joy, or self-satisfaction that comes from learning of or witnessing the troubles, failures, or humiliation of another." One possible explanation is that the emotionally numbed see interpret the hardships of others as indirect evidence of their superiority. Another explanation is that the rejection of the true self created immense emotional pain which morphed into narcissistic rage. That rage, in turn, causes a feeling of pleasure when witnessing the misfortunes

and suffering of others.

Schadenfreude can be subtle and difficult to detect. Sometimes, it shows up in the *hope* for misfortune to befall others. An example that comes to mind is a client who had a contract position and was offered a permanent position. He was excited and called his brother. His brother responded, with obvious delight "so this means you'll get a pay cut?" Clearly, his brother took no pleasure in his brothers' good news. Instead, he was hoping that his brother had suffered a loss.

Vindictive triumph in the emotionally numbed

Vindictive triumph is using personal good fortune (e.g., wealth, income, physical appearance, popularity, etc.) in an attempt to induce feelings of inadequacy or inferiority in others. This is commonly referred to as bragging. With the emotionally numbed, it has a motivation that goes beyond flattering oneself. In the case of mildly emotionally numbed, this motivation is just to bolster the feelings of illusory superiority. In the more severe emotionally numbed, the motivation will have some sadistic intent, hoping to induce feelings of inferiority or inadequacy in others.

Psychological pathologizing by the emotionally numbed

Similar to the search for visual flaws, those with emotionally numbed defenses will frequently search for psychological flaws in others. This is particularly evident in family and couples counseling. Recall that criticism and judgmental thoughts are reserved for others and are rarely, if ever, directed at the self.

In families headed by someone with emotionally numbed defenses, the family will have a consensus about which member is "the problem." This is invariably the scapegoat child (also known as the "identified patient"). The family will focus on the emotional and behavioral issues of the scapegoat, while remaining steadfastly unaware of how their behavior exacerbates or even induces those symptoms.

In couples counseling, an emotionally numbed partner will come in with the verbal equivalent of a dossier, detailing all the issues of their partner. The confidence and self assurance of the emotionally numbed partner, combined with the distraught appearance of their partner, makes this assessment appear plausible. But delving into the details and specifics of their interactions often reveals a substantially different picture. The distraught, usually tearful, partner details incidents of emotional neglect, devaluing criticisms and invalidation. The emotionally numbed partner will usually show little or no empathy for the emotional pain of their partner. Instead, there is often visible annoyance and comments pathologizing their partner, such as "see, this is what I have to deal with." So the emotionally numbed partner will criticize the very emotions that their behavior has helped to create. Sadly, the irony of this is lost on the emotionally numbed partner.

In the more extreme instances, the emotionally numbed person will authoritatively label others with a specific psychological diagnosis. While a good deal can be learned about psychological diagnosis through self study, it does not replicate the years of study, the passing of standardized licensing exams

and the years of supervised clinical practice. Hence, such certainty is evidence of the superiority impulse and grandiosity.

Emotionally overwhelmed relational style

Those with emotionally overwhelmed defenses tend to unconsciously view relationships as a means of regulating their own emotions. While all positive relationships help one to regulate emotion, for the emotionally overwhelmed, this function is central. Fear of abandonment is usually present and this leads them to accept or overlook judgmental or devaluing behaviors in their relationships. But for behaviors that they cannot accept, they utilize unregulated emotion to gain control.

In many couples counseling sessions, I have heard stories of self silencing to avoid emotional turmoil. Again, this is common in relationships but it is a question of degree. The emotionally overwhelmed will display such intense emotion that the other person will often acquiesce simply to restore calm. Were this a conscious effort, it could be considered emotional blackmail. And while the emotionally overwhelmed feel and express emotion easily, the bulk of that emotion is reserved for the self. Compassion and empathy for their partners emotions are diminished or missing altogether.

Unlike the emotionally numbed, many with emotionally overwhelmed defenses will seek counseling. As they begin making progress, they find the behaviors of their emotionally numbed partners increasing intolerable.

Common relational attitudes

While it can be easy to judge these relational styles, upon closer examination, they can be easier to understand. This behavior is an echo or a mirror of their earliest days. When the needs of the caretaker were met, the false self was rewarded and reinforced. This early objectification leads the false self to normalize this relational style or to see it as "obvious" and appropriate. It is this unquestioned belief that may also explain the lack of guilt or remorse for negative behaviors. For the emotionally numbed, objectifying or devaluing others is rationalized as being "true." If the other person expresses distress, it is quickly invalidated and dismissed. For the emotionally overwhelmed, the needs and emotions of others are hidden by the impenetrable intensity of their own emotions. What cannot be seen cannot be acknowledged, and empathy becomes difficult if not impossible.

Common pairings - the emotionally numbed and the emotionally overwhelmed

In my experience, this is a common coupling. On the exterior, one could see how a person who has difficulty managing emotion could be drawn to some one who seems to manage emotions very well. Alternatively, some one who struggles to feel and express emotion could find some one who is very expressive appealing. Other dynamics are involved as well. The emotionally overwhelmed person will seek closeness while the emotionally numbed will want more distance. This sets up the well known distancer/pursuer pattern within relationship. Marriages of this type usually show up in couples counseling after the emotionally overwhelmed partner has done individual counseling.

Common pairings - the emotionally numbed and the emotionally numbed

This is a less common pairing. Here, each partner sees the other as a desirable collection of attributes (in terms of appearance, social status, money, etc). As mentioned earlier, initially there will be praise

and flattery and this results in a brief honeymoon period. However, the drive to judge and feel superior will eventually turn them against one another. The relationship will eventually devolve into indifference or a thinly veiled, mutual hostility. There will be little emotional intimacy as each partner preserves their primary attachment to their family of origin. Guilt free affairs are common in this type of relationship with one exception. When the emotionally numbed partner feels morally superior, they will not engage in affairs. The main motivation for fidelity is not loyalty or empathy but rather, to preserve the moral superiority aspect of their self definition.

Subconscious aspects of the false self

Dependency rage

This is usually associated with emotionally overwhelmed defenses. It is anger that results from having dependency needs (needs which cannot be independently met) that are denied by a caretaker who could meet those needs. Dependency rage is one reason why a person with these defenses can be resistant to some adult responsibilities, preferring to get others to "fix" or handle those responsibilities. It may also manifest in relationship, where a partner is tasked/expected to be like a mother or father figure (instead of a peer to peer, adult relationship of interdependency). This rage is disowned (kept subconscious) and manifests as helpless behaviors.

Dependency issues can be intensified (or develop) later on, as a result of "infantilizing" a child. This results from not allowing the child to gain competence and mastery, usually with the parent "taking over" tasks.

Abandonment terror

Abandonment was initially avoided (and attention secured) by becoming what the caretaker needed. The spontaneous expression of feeling and behavior was painfully sacrificed to gain what was far more critical, care from the caretaker. This Faustian bargain leaves a mental impression and an association between avoiding abandonment and negating one's true self. This may be one reason why someone with emotionally numbed defenses might disown and keep subconscious the fear of abandonment. It reminds them of the grievous price that they paid to avoid it.

Often times, the person believes they will be "fine" if a long term attachment ends. If that person is sufficiently numb, that may be true. But more often than not, the pain of attachment loss appears when separation is imminent or as it occurs.

Recall that control is a symptom of emotionally numbed defenses. Here we can see why. Controlling another person reduces the (disowned) fear of abandonment. When control fails and abandonment is imminent, the repressed emotions will likely emerge. This can be moderately to severely destabilizing, leading to rage and sometimes even violence.

Dependency terror

This is a less obvious side effect of developing a false self. It was the original dependency that led to the negation and the abandonment of the true self. I have heard many clients show open hostility to their own vulnerability and their own emotional needs. It is as if their subconscious blames the self for its own suffering. What results is statements like "I hate that I need other people" and other, similar

sentiments.

With emotionally numbed defenses, it goes much deeper. Dependency needs are denied, exiled deep into the subconscious. It is only in the context of extreme emotional safety, in a profoundly trustworthy relationship, that these needs might ever resurface. More likely than not, these needs will forever be repressed and denied.

The superiority impulse

Emotionally numbed defenses are characterized by a drive to establish a sense of superiority. It is widely held that notions of superiority offer a defense against shame and feelings of an imagined inferiority (Horvath S, Morf C, 2009). Another plausible explanation is that superiority creates a sense of relational power which, in turn, serves to protect the self against the despised feelings of dependency and vulnerability. In the same way the "divine right" of monarchs justified entitlement and dominion over others, a felt sense of superiority might provide a rationalization for the desire to exert control in relationships.

Alice Miller suggests that superiority (grandiosity) defends against depression:

“Behind manifest grandiosity there constantly lurks depression, and behind a depressive mood there often hides an unconscious (or conscious but split off) sense of a tragic history. In fact, grandiosity is the defense against depression, and depression is the defense against the deep pain over the loss of the self [...] (p. 34)

Why are these defenses are so hard to acknowledge?

People are generally averse to being critical of their parents and for good reason. Parenting is a demanding job that involves a lot of sacrifice and it is a position that deserves respect. However, to recover from these defenses means being able to tolerate a critical examination of negative early childhood experiences.

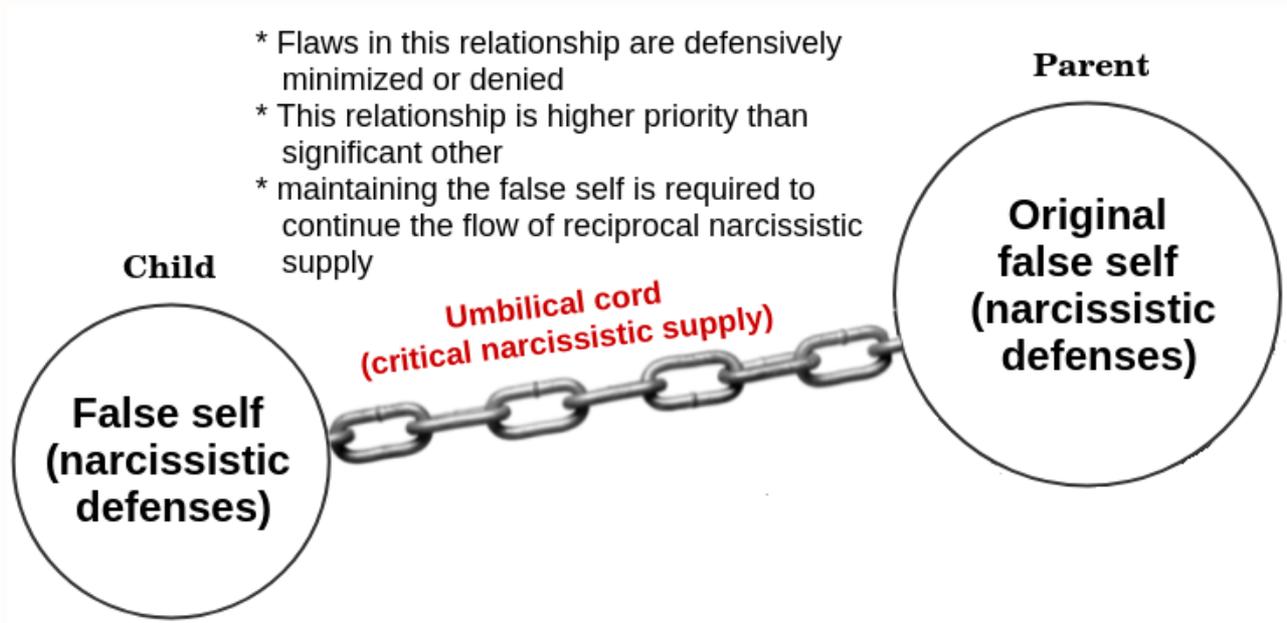
But it gets more complex, as the reinforcement of these defenses often continues into adulthood. A parent with these defenses will often create a child with the same defenses and as quoted earlier, imbue that child with notions of superiority. This is what is called "narcissistic supply" and makes the adult child vulnerable to continued influence and even control by that parent.

This continued relational pattern is explained here:

“The impact of first relationships may endure because the original patterns of behavior, communication and affect regulation are simply maintained and reinforced through the child's ongoing relationship to the same parents who helped shape these patterns in the first place. (Wallin, p. 24)

While the dynamics of this family type are multi-dimensional, this diagram details the relationship of the

false self child with the false self parent:



Will those with these defenses get counseling?

Those with emotionally overwhelmed defenses will often seek out counseling to cope with the emotional pain of their past.

Those with the emotionally numbed defenses however, don't feel the majority of their own emotions and are buoyed by feelings of superiority. Their self perception is that of being privileged, fortunate or lucky. The tragic loss that began in infancy is discounted or denied. The attachment relationship (diagrammed above) prevents any meaningful critical examination of their early childhood. If any dysfunction is identified, it will be minimized, explained away or otherwise invalidated.

Counseling is usually sought when the inevitable relationship problems arise and at that point, the motivation is to examine the issues of their *partner*. Those with emotionally numbed defenses are confident in their relative or complete innocence and unable to see how their behavior is harming their partner. Their partners will often develop depression and anger management issues as the accumulated frustration of coping with the lack of emotional intimacy/expression/empathy and the invalidation become unmanageable. Ironically, those with emotionally numbed defenses come to counseling seeking to help their partner with the very anger and depression issues that their behavior has aggravated or even created.

In sum, the original harmful relationship is rarely, if ever, questioned by people with emotionally numbed defenses. Sometimes, a story is the best explanation.

Unacknowledged injuries

Three friends decide to join the military and are sent to war together.

On a routine patrol, a roadside bomb detonates right next to their

vehicle. All three suffer severe leg injuries and none could walk after the explosion.

A year goes by and two of the friends are ably walking, although they still suffer some pain from their wounds. These two friends meet one day and talk sadly about their other friend, knowing that he has not fared as well. As it happens, they both get an invitation to his birthday and decide to go together.

At the party, they try to demonstrate to him how rehabilitation has helped them. From his wheelchair, he laughs at them and says "I don't see why you guys went through so much suffering. Look at me, I haven't suffered a bit. I know that the past is the past, and I just don't think about it. Maybe you should try the same." They looked down at his wheelchair and then at each other, with amazement and even confusion. It was clear that their friend wasn't hearing anything they said. The night ended and as they they backed out of his driveway, they waved goodbye. At the door, they could see his parents, smiling and waving back, both in their wheelchairs.

Glossary

False self - a persona or mask consisting of emotions (or lack of) and behaviors developed to garner care taking behavior from a dysfunctional caretaker.

Trigger - a current incident that is reminiscent of a prior emotional injury, which results in a disproportionate and intense emotional response.

True self - the spontaneous expression of emotion and individuality

References

-  Bowlby, J (1979). *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds*. New York: Rutledge
-  Chaffin, M., Kelleher, K. and Hollenberg, J. (1996), 'Onset of physical abuse and neglect: psychiatric, substance abuse, and social risk factors from prospective community data', *Child Abuse and Neglect*, vol.20, no.3, pp. 191 - 203.
-  Coyl D., Rogmann L., Newland L. (2002). 'Stress, maternal depression, and negative mother–infant interactions in relation to infant attachment'. *Infant Mental Health Journal* 23(1-2), pp. 145 - 163.
-  Elsenbruch S., Benson S., Rütcke M., Rose M., Dudenhausen J., Pincus-Knackstedt M., Klapp B., Arck, P. (2006). 'Social support during pregnancy: effects on maternal depressive symptoms, smoking and pregnancy outcome'. *Human Reproduction* 22(3) pp. 869 - 877.
-  Fonagy, P. György, G., Elliot, J. & Target, M. (2002). *Affect Regulation, Mentalization, and the development of the Self*. Other Press. New York.

-  Hanington, L., Heron, J., Stein, A. and Ramchandani, P. (2012), Parental depression and child outcomes – is marital conflict the missing link?. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 38: 520–529.
-  Horvath S., Morf C (2009). 'Narcissistic defensiveness: Hypervigilance and avoidance of worthlessness'. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. November 2009, 45(6) pp. 1252-1258.
-  Karr-
Morse R, Wiley M (1997). *Ghosts from the Nursery: Tracing the Roots of Violence*. New York, NY. Atlar
-  Ko J., Farr S., Dietz P., Robbins C. (2012). 'Depression and Treatment Among U.S. Pregnant and Nonpregnant Women of Reproductive Age, 2005–2009'. *Journal of Women's Health*. August 2012, 21(8), pp. 830 - 836
-  Lowen, A (1985). *Narcissism: Denial of the True Self*. New York: Touchstone.
-  Miller, A (1996). *The Drama of the Gifted Child: The Search for the True Self*. New York: Basic Books.
-  Perry, B., Pollard, R. A., Blakley, T. L., Baker, W. L., & Vigilante, D. (1995). Childhood trauma, the neurobiological adaptation, and "use-dependent" development of the brain: How "states" become "traits". *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 16(4), pp. 271 - 291.
-  Tonkin M, Fine H (1985). *Narcissism and Borderline States: Kernberg, Kohut, and Psychotherapy*. *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 2(3), pp. 221 - 239.
-  Schadenfreude. In Wikipedia[Web]. Retrieved Feb 14, 2019 from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schadenfreude>
-  Wallin, D. (2007). *Attachment in Psychotherapy*. New York: The Guilford Press.
-  Whiffen V., Foot M., Thompson J. (2007). 'Self-silencing mediates the link between marital conflict and depression'. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 24(6), pp. 993–1006
-  Wilson S., Durbin E. (2009). 'Effects of paternal depression on fathers' parenting behaviors: A meta-analytic review'. *Clinical Psychology Review* 30(2), pp. 167 - 180.

*** [derived from Gerard Manley Hopkins poem "As Kingfishers Catch Fire, Dragonflies Draw Flame"](#)

Adaptive Therapy provides family, marital & individual counseling in the Charles County, Maryland (MD) area. Counseling services are provided in our offices located in [La Plata, MD](#) (this is in the southern part of Charles County).

La Plata is nearby to the communities of La Plata, Waldorf, White Plains, Mechanicsville, Indian Head, Port Tobacco, Pomfret, Charlotte Hall, Hughesville, Leonardtown, Newburg, Lusby, Clinton, Swan Point, Cobb Island, Colonial Beach, King George (VA), Faulkner, Accokeek, La Plata, Great Mills, Nanjemoy, Marbury, Hollywood (zip codes 20646, 20602, 20695, 20611, 20677, 20637, 20622, 20617, 20693, 20601, 20603, 22485, 20662, 20640, 20659, 20603).

[| Are psychological problems genetic? | Anger management | Coping with a life changing injury or diagnosis | About Michael Etts, LCSW-C | Couples communication | Early childhood and trauma | About Olimpia Etts, LCSW-C | Eating Disorder Therapy | Emotions management diagram | Emotional invalidation | The false self and narcissistic defenses | Frequently asked questions | Growth after trauma | Blog | Home | Interpersonal boundaries | Couples counseling | Narcissistic rage, reconsidered | Overcoming anxiety Part 1 | Overcoming anxiety Part 2 | Self esteem | Retired or single living | Stress after trauma | Terms of use | Therapy for Anxiety | Therapy for Depression | Roots of anxiety | Trauma and revenge | Treatment for the false self | Self Help & 12 Step Groups | A visual guide to interpersonal boundaries | Visual Guide To Self Esteem | A visual guide to PTSD and Trust |](#)

Copyright © 2019 Adaptive Therapy, all rights reserved

DISCLAIMER: This website is meant to be a positive affirmation of human potential and as a way to communicate the philosophical perspective of Adaptive Therapy™. It is in no way a substitute for in-person psychological evaluation or advice and does not constitute the practice of any type of mental health counseling (psychiatry, psychology, social work, etc.). Please read [Terms of Use](#) for details.

PRIVACY STATEMENT: Your personal information will never be shared or sold to any outside party.

Some images from [Free-StockPhotos.com](#)

Unless otherwise noted, all content on this site is authored by Michael Etts, LCSW-C, ACH or Olimpia Etts, LCSW-C, ACH

Office and mailing address:

Adaptive Therapy
109 LaGrange Avenue, Suite 103
La Plata, Maryland 20646

phone 1-240-253-7051 or 1-917-576-7237

fax 1-301-934-2640

Page last modified: Tue Oct 01 2019 22:46:21 GMT-0400 (EDT)