

# **“TRAPPED IN THE MIRROR”**

## **A WOMEN’S THERAPY GROUP FOR ADULT CHILDREN OF NARCISSISTIC FAMILIES**

What defines a narcissistic family? In this family, the needs of the parent take precedence over the needs of the child. The narcissistic parent, defending against an underlying sense of inadequacy, recruits her child to “complete” the parent’s sense of self. The child is asked to provide and/or be whatever the parent needs in order to feel whole. As a result, this child becomes an adult with such personality traits as a lack of self-confidence, a chronic need to please, difficulty being assertive, a vulnerability to depression, and she has great difficulty identifying and acting upon her own feelings, wants, and needs.

Sometimes a narcissistic parent is easy to spot. She is relentlessly critical and judgmental, in her attempts to mold a more perfect child. It is her way, or no way. Other narcissistic parents, however, are far more covert in their neglect of the child’s emotional needs. This parent may look good to the outside world, yet she is subtly manipulative, punitive, and withholding of love and approval in response to the child’s non-conforming behavior. In either situation, the child grows up with a harsh, negative sense of self, as if the withholding/critical parent lives on inside her.

Many adult children of narcissistic parents choose narcissistic partners, and then re-enact the childhood drama, trying to get volatile, self-centered partners to love them. As Dr. Elan Golomb has written in her book, Trapped in the Mirror, about her own and her friends’ struggles, “Our unconscious goal was to turn these men into loving, giving, and available partners. It was like trying to carve Mt. Rushmore with a toothpick.”

What are the goals of a therapy group for adult children of narcissistic parents? One goal is to challenge the negative self-image, which was put in place by endless parental demands for change. Also, when the adult child struggles to birth a self, she may worry that she needs too much and has become self-focused, like her narcissistic parent. She often wonders, “How much self-care is reasonable?” and “How much help do I have a right to ask for?” The group can be of considerable assistance with these questions. The members of the group, who have shared similar struggles, can function as more reliable mirrors, providing acceptance in place of critical judgments.

The adult child of a narcissistic parent needs a place in which to honor a positive self, where dreams and fantasies are encouraged, and where she can behave in ways that show who she really is and what she really feels. Describing adult children of narcissists, Dr. Golomb has written, “We are like bonsai plants, with prior years of confinements, suppression, and reshaping. What is our natural shape? It takes years to uncover, as we revert by degrees to growing.”

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**RECOMMENDED READING:** 1) Trapped in the Mirror: Adult Children of Narcissists in Their Struggle for Self, by Elan Golomb, Ph.D. New York: William Morrow, 1992. 2) The Narcissistic Family: Diagnosis and Treatment, by Stephanie Donaldson-Pressman and Robert M. Pressman. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.