

Voiceless



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Many people spend a whole lifetime trying to repair a wounded self. For these "voiceless" people, every action and interaction serves the purpose of finding something of value within themselves. Traditionally, psychologists have termed such people "narcissists," but this is a misnomer. To the outside world it appears that these people "love" themselves. Yet, at their core they don't love themselves--in fact their self barely exists, and what part does exist is deemed worthless. All energy is devoted to inflating the self, like a persistent child trying to blow up a balloon with a hole.

Unfortunately, such people cannot "hear" others: spouse, lover, or friends, and especially not children. They focus entirely on repairing and protecting their own ego. Usually they are unaware of their deafness--in fact they may believe they hear better than anyone else (this belief, of course, is another attempt at self-inflation: damaging therapists often fit this profile).

Because they need proof of the significance of their voice, they must find people, particularly important people, to hear them. If they are not heard, they feel worthless, or worse, they feel they don't exist. They are interested in listening only to the extent that it allows them the opportunity to give advice or share a similar (and either better or worse, depending upon which has more impact) incident that happened to them. Many engage in "sham" listening, appearing to be very attentive because they want to look good.

Because of their underlying neediness, these people often work their way to the center of their "circle," or the top of their organization. Indeed, they may be the mentor or guru for others. The second they are snubbed, however, they rage at their "enemy" with venom.

What makes it difficult to help these people is their self-deception. The processes they use to protect themselves are ingrained from early childhood.

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As a result, they are absolutely unaware of their constant efforts to maintain a viable "self." If they are meeting with success (e. g., people respect and adore them) they are satisfied with life. Two circumstances bring this type of person to a therapist's office. Sometimes a partner who feels chronically unheard and unseen drags them in. Or, they have met with some failure (often in their career) so that the strategies they previously used to maintain self-esteem suddenly no longer work. In the latter situation, the depression they experience is profound.

Can people like this be helped? Sometimes. The critical factor is whether they ultimately acknowledge their core problem: that they grew up in a family where they were neither seen nor heard, and that they employed their perpetual self-building strategies to survive. Acknowledging this truth takes a great deal of courage, for they must face their underlying lack of self-esteem as well as their vulnerability. Then comes the long and painstaking work of building (or resurrecting) a self in the context of an empathic and caring therapy relationship.