

Affect Centered Therapy for Narcissistic Personality Disorder

Frank is an African-American man in his forties who has come for help with his rageful behaviors. He was raised in the rural South. He is the third child of four and the oldest male child. His parents were inconsistent, alternating between happy togetherness and rageful fighting. Both parents had extramarital affairs. Frank's father periodically left the family without an explanation and just as suddenly returned without saying why he had left. The mother often became uncontrollably sad but denied there was anything wrong. She regularly whipped Frank with switches and other objects, and when she did so, she apparently dissociated, as her face changed into a hideous mask. Frank has been married for 20 years. He and his wife have participated in therapy. The precipitating incident that brought Frank to see me occurred when they returned to couples counseling and his wife surprised him by disclosing a recent incident in which he had been rageful and she went numb and feared for her safety. Frank has sought help from anger management groups before. Although he completed the program, he felt invalidated because he was told "just don't get angry" as the primary intervention. Frank formulated two therapy goals: (1) "Not to be concerned with pleasing others in order to feel good about myself," and (2) "Have my wife say she does not feel in danger." Frank would qualify as Masterson's medium level narcissist in that he is not completely successful in creating an environment that provides his narcissistic supplies. His unrelenting marital problems have been sufficient to deflate him and bring him to therapy.

Frank and I met for five sessions of three hours each. In the first two sessions, I taught him the AMST skills. In containment (Skill I) he was able to endorse 40% of every disturbing thing entering the container. He said he would require the quality of trust to transfer more in, and he produced a very powerful image of a wise, old African woman, a sage, who embodied that quality. He developed an initial image of a safe place on an exposed hilltop by the sea, and when I asked him what comes up now after verbalizing "I am safe," he said, "OK, I'm safe, what needs to happen now? What do I do next?" Here was the first appearance of his inflated false self. At this point, Frank asked to change the safe place location to a cave beneath the hilltop. We brought in the Wise Woman, and after verbalizing

"I am safe" he stated, "I don't want to leave. I can stay. I have no desire to do anything else but stay here." In the remainder of session one, Frank acquired the AMST skills to recognize, tolerate, and regulate fear affect.

At the beginning of session two, Frank checked in, telling me he had used his safe place skills and realized he felt peaceful and grounded and that "I don't feel the need to do anything, to make phone calls, to get in touch with people, to get on top of my work." I called attention to this activity and asked if we could name the part that does these things. Here the client disclosed that at about age 8 his father began to call him "Rene" and that Rene was associated with affection from his dad, "significance" to his dad, getting things done and accomplishment and responsibility. We named this part Rene and continued with our work, completing AMST skills III-VII for anger, sadness, startle, shame, disgust, and yearning. During our work on anger, the client spontaneously verbalized "I'm questioning what's the purpose of the anger" when asked what comes up now after he had repeated "I am learning to decrease my anger." At this point we met a child part named "BeeBee." For BeeBee it wasn't safe to trust people, and he was unsafe because of surprises and abrupt changes in relationships. These included his father's leaving, fighting between parents, a nearly murderous fight between two aunts that he witnessed, etc. He stated that BeeBee felt frightened, that there was no grounding, that there was nothing to hold on to.

From an affect orientation, his verbalizations regarding shame were illustrative. He gave as his Target Scene for shame the time that he came with his wife for couples counseling and she disclosed his recent rageful behavior. Being exposed in therapy apparently elicited shame when his internal self-representation did not match the self being described by his wife. With the therapist present he was exposed and seen and his inflated false self was inadequate to the task of denying the incident. Shame was the affective motivator that brought him to therapy with me.

Phase one of affect centered therapy (ACT), which is the AMST skills, was now completed and we could enter phase two in which the disorder is dismantled.

My objective for the second phase was to bring up the ego states, Rene and BeeBee, uncover their functions and origins, assign responsibility to the parents for their part in creating these ego states, and negotiate a new working arrangement in which Frank accepted responsibility for managing affects and thoughts that the ego states had previously managed. We went to work first on BeeBee, focusing on a

time that his mother had been singing happily and then suddenly began to sob uncontrollably and denied there was anything wrong. I had Frank put his arm around BeeBee in the visualized scene. We identified BeeBee's feelings as "shocked, tense, unstable, ungrounded, afraid, lost, helpless." I asked Frank to check in with BeeBee and tell him "I understand," and when I checked in with BeeBee, he told me he was beginning to trust Frank. Frank was able to understand that there really was something wrong in his mother's life and that she was trying to protect BeeBee and to protect his image of her. When asked, Frank said that what was going on was the affairs, both Frank's father's and his mother's. I asked Frank to verbalize his compassion for BeeBee and what he had suffered through. Then I asked him to place his mother in the empty chair and hold her responsible for failing to tell him that something was wrong, to tell him in an age appropriate way what it was, to help him understand his emotions, and to transmit to him the skills, tools, and resources to recognize, tolerate, and regulate those emotions. Frank did this, and when I then checked in with BeeBee he told me he felt "rescued, justified, and righted." I asked Frank to verbalize to his mother, BeeBee, and me how the pattern of his relationship to his mother had become a pattern for other relationships. He told us that he would "feel betrayed when something is said contrary to what I think we've developed. Then I don't think I can be real."

When Frank believes that someone, especially his wife, is speaking differently than they've communicated he feels "disappointed" and thinks "It's not OK to be who you are" and then BeeBee goes into his shell and Frank becomes "loud, angry, unmanageable, and uncontrollable." This part was identified and Frank gave it a name, "Abraham." Abraham came into being at about age 13 in two traumatic incidents that occurred within a day or two. In one, an older boy named Abraham attacked Frank, and Frank apparently went into a dissociated rage and defeated Abraham. A day later, Frank's mother attempted to beat him with a broomstick, and he seized the stick, broke it, and stopped the beatings for ever. Abraham is assembled with stopping the abuse of Frank and BeeBee and with the thought "That's enough, the injustice must stop."

In session three we negotiated new contracts between Frank and BeeBee in which Frank agreed to take responsibility for emotions that had been sequestered in BeeBee. BeeBee agreed to signal Frank when he thought Frank was feeling an emotion and not noticing it, and Frank agreed to use his AMST skills. Frank and

Abraham also contracted for Abraham to signal Frank when “the system” was beginning to feel injustice and Frank would use his skills to deal with the injustice and the associated anger in a healthy way before annoyance became rage.

Checking in at the beginning of session four, Frank demonstrated greater integration of his ego states, using all his tools, working with BeeBee and Abraham, increasing insight, detaching from others. He volunteered the importance of having separated from his mother and letting go of her, especially as it impacted his marriage. He spontaneously identified jealousy he had felt towards another man in a meeting the previous day.

In session four I asked Frank for a scene where his father had called him “Rene.” We developed this scene. Frank reported that when his father called him “Rene” he felt special, unique, significant, and bonded. We contrasted this with how BeeBee felt when his father disappeared for periods of time, when his father had affairs, and when his parents fought. I now asked both Rene and BeeBee to be present with Frank as they viewed the scene, and I turned on the TheraTapper and left it on throughout the session. I had Frank place his right hand on Rene and his left on BeeBee. As they viewed the scene, Rene felt he was “succeeding, approved of, passing a test, making it through a gantlet.” I asked Frank to describe how Rene protected BeeBee, keeping him safe and compensating for what BeeBee’s not getting. I asked him to describe how Rene became more and more powerful over the years. Rene had become the star athlete in several sports, excelled in school, and became a community leader. I asked Frank what happened to BeeBee’s emotions when Rene is “forward” and he said Bee becomes numb, and although he’s well protected his unacknowledged emotions become fuel for Abraham’s eventual rages.

I asked Frank how it is that Rene gets to grow and develop and BeeBee doesn’t, and he said that although Rene says he’s doing everything to take care of BeeBee, that’s really a lie and he’s only doing it to look good and get approval. When asked, Frank identified Rene’s dominant emotion as “fear of not getting attention” and he agreed that the attention he gets is never enough, that Rene can never be satisfied.

At this point, I asked Frank to place his father in the empty chair and hold him responsible for creating Rene and to explain the consequences. Frank demonstrated the kind of awareness that spontaneously emerges in this work when he said “Dad, you use Rene so you can hide. Because of Rene, you don’t have to

look at how you've impacted my life. You never came to my games, but you told all your friends how great I am. You used the fact that I love you to manipulate me." I asked Frank to verbalize the feelings BeeBee had when his dad left and had affairs. During this part, Frank disclosed that his father had rage at Frank's mother, and I asked him to hold his father responsible for modelling rage out of control. I also asked him to hold his father responsible for failing to stop his mother from beating him. Then I asked Frank to separate from his father, telling him, "Dad, I've put you in that chair and I'm not letting you back in again."

I asked Frank to honor Rene for all he had done over the years for "the system" and then I facilitated a negotiation. Rene was willing to give up control of the system and to signal Frank that he was avoiding his emotions and mobilizing his narcissistic defenses. Frank agreed to use his new skills, to express his emotions, to listen to others. He agreed that Rene, BeeBee, and Abraham would like to go to the cave and be with the Wise Woman. I asked how that was, and he told me "The three of them are talking together and the Wise Woman is watching them." I interpret this to indicate that ego states that were previously separated into unconnected neural circuits were now communicating. I believe there is a neurophysiological basis for this clinical outcome.

We spent one hour of the fifth session on integrating this skills into events from his current life. We also accomplished Napier's Optimal Future Self Visualization in which he met "Frank, but the Frank the way the name was intended to have turned out." Frank's wife came in for the last two hours, and we spent the time integrating his changes into their relationship. She endorsed "resignation" tinged with some hope. We quickly developed some AMST skills for affect recognition of resignation and an image that embodied the quality of hope. The couple was able to accomplish active listening of resignation ("I've heard this before") and hope as well as several other emotions. I helped them contract together to spend some time (three times per week of at least one half hour) practicing non-sexual, communication intimacy. The couple will continue with couples counseling with the referring therapist who was present for three of the sessions. This will provide Frank the opportunity to practice his skills and to integrate the personality changes into a more positively and adaptively functioning, better integrated, more resonant self.