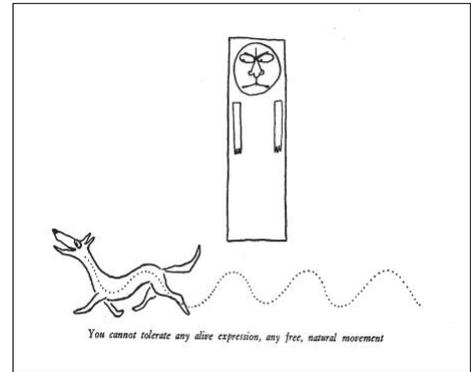


AN ESSAY ON THE EMOTIONAL PLAGUE & ITS RELEVANCE TODAY: ESPECIALLY AS APPLIED TO PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Introduction

Wilhelm Reich coined the phrase, ‘The Emotional Plague’ (Cpt. 16, *Character Analysis*, Reich, 1933: see [here](#)), though many others have also described similar ‘plague-type’ people and their reactions. He used the phrase to describe those actions (or reactions) of people that “... *cannot tolerate any ...*” interactions with any really ‘healthy’ life-forms: or “... *alive expression, [or] any free, natural movement*”.^[1] Life-energetic practices or presences are actually painful (or an anathema) to them, because such interactions set up within them (not positive parasympathetic reactions, like empathy, pleasure, or resonance) but intense sympathetic reactions within them (fight-or-flight, with degrees of severe distress and dissonance).^[2] These emotional plague characters have – in effect – “gone over to the Dark Side”: they have re-programmed themselves (via their ANS) towards the negative ‘Force’.



For the ‘plague’ person, that level of discomfort becomes absolutely intolerable; and so – instead of changing, or adapting, or looking rationally at whatever the cause of this discomfort is within themselves – they react by either [a Flight reaction] withdrawing, cutting off and shutting down their own libido, or life-force, or life energy (a mild form of slow suicide), or – more often – by [a Fight reaction] acting ‘against’ the positive life-force that they have encountered and/or then trying to destroy or eliminate everything about that external life-force which distresses them. This dynamic can work on an individual level (via their Autonomic Nervous System), and also on a much wider socio-political level.

Peter Crist (2009), a Reichian, describes Reich’s views in that: “*The emotional plague is driven by an intolerance of spontaneous life, emotions, and pleasure.*” (Reich, 1949, pp. 248-280). Another well-known Reichian therapist, Dr Elsworth Baker, describes the emotional plague in people: “*We can say that, to the degree that an individual tries to tear down other people or control their lives, he is functioning as a plague character*” (Baker, 1967, p. 154).

¹ The illustrations by Steig are taken from Wilhelm Reich’s (1949) “*Listen, Little Man!*”

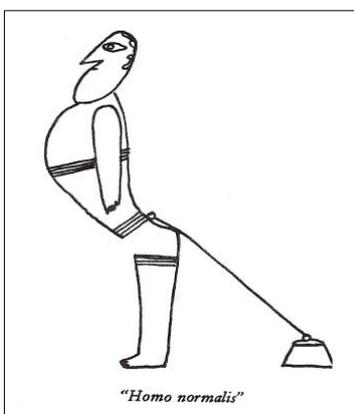
² ‘Parasympathetic’ and ‘Sympathetic’ here mean the two different parts of the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS).

All this indicates – perhaps – where one might, most often, meet the emotional plague in psychotherapy: probably not in the client in front of one, but also in those people around the ‘plague’ person: their partners, colleagues, and (sometime even) children. These are the people who are most affected (infected) by the emotional plague, and the ‘client’ is the person most in need of help in order to counter the emotional plague and for them to heal.

One of the other features of the Emotional Plague is the denial that surrounds their inner torment: *“This can’t really be happening!” “It is all too much for me!” “I don’t understand how someone could do that!” “These people are not ‘proper’ and therefore should be destroyed.”* With regards to the social level, Crist further writes:

“This destructive behavior [often] starts with just one person who is a catalyst. That afflicted individual is compelled to stifle or destroy those people or things in the environment that stir up unbearable feelings. These feelings include unfulfilled longings and desires that in turn result in intolerable anxiety, frustration and eventually murderous rage toward those who stir them up. This compulsion to destroy, serving as an emotional defense for that individual, is the essence of the emotional plague.”

We all have an idea what this Emotional Plague is, as it can manifest in our worse (almost paranoid) fears, as well as in various mythic forms. There are, in particular, many projections of the Emotional Plague in myth and literature: e.g. Satan: the Dark or Fallen Angel; Sauron, *“The Lord of the Rings”* in the trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien of the same name; the Magisterium in Philip Pullman’s *“His Dark Materials”* trilogy; the character of Iago in Shakespeare’s *“Othello”*; and perhaps also O’Brian, the interrogator from the Ministry of Truth in George Orwell’s *“1984”* etc. We have also seen the reality of what can actually happen – historically – when the Emotional Plague rules supreme – in the 12th century’s French, Italian & Spanish Catholic Inquisitions; in the 20th century’s rise of Fascism leading to World War 2 and the Holocaust; in the post-WW2 Iron Curtain countries, especially East Germany, when a child might ‘report’ on their parents; possibly also in the ‘Cultural Revolution’ in ‘Red’ China; and in other oppressive regimes that can often lead to genocide or the mass murder of their own populations.



The ‘rigidity’ of the Emotional Plague – the hardening of the heart towards others, towards life itself – can also (possibly) be ascribed to about 7,000-8,000 years of patriarchy, patrilineal, or ‘patrist’ cultures (as opposed to matriarchies, matrilineal or ‘matrist’ cultures). There is very little significant evidence of many of the ‘Emotional Plague’ features in society: child-abuse, sexual repression, mass-slaughter, enslavement, social violence (and such); occurring before this period, but any such lack of evidence could also be the result of the very limited

historical records from those periods significantly before the ‘Common Era’).

There are a number of significant differences between such patrilineal cultures and the more humane matrilineal cultures (see DeMeo, 1988, 2006, p. 5). Some of these are (possibly) sociological, psycho-historical reactions that can logically be ascribed to an extreme period (c. 4,200 years) of drought (a significant ecological-stressor) that started about 10,000-12,000 years before the present era (BPE) and one that probably triggered the (present) Holocene era, the current 'warm' period, and that prompted the gradual sociological & cultural transition from the previous period of essentially hunter-gatherers (potentially more matrilineal) cultures into (new) cultures with (potentially more patrilineal) fixed settlements, agriculture and animal husbandry.

Other more recent examples (or side-effects) of the Emotional Plague include: the 'Bacchanalian response', as illustrated by Daniel Defoe in his "*A Journal of the Plague Year*"; and as noted in Boccaccio's "*Decameron*"; and as a social reaction towards 'Others' taken by some in reaction to a social catastrophe, or to a real plague. Michel Foucault calls this reaction the 'orgiastic moment' when – instead of caution – people respond with heedless revelry and/or with public disorder (in Cooke, 2009, p. 45). An additional example of the side-effects of the Emotional Plague is in the complacency exhibited by people in the face of disaster, as represented in Camus' "*The Plague*"; and the complacency that Fascism breeds (as outlined in Reich's "*The Mass Psychology of Fascism*").

Reich dubs this [complacency] as a form of social hypnotism; Brecht likens it to 'a sleep or a trance'; in the Bible, it appears in the characters in the tale of the Good Samaritan who, when seeing the wounded traveller, pass by on the other side; yet these examples are all rhetorical names for a common complacent passivity, enthralled by the 'authority' of the state on the one hand and by the overwhelming 'spectacle' of the stage on the other (Cooke, 2009, p. 66). However, these reactions happen – over and over again – and on a much smaller scale as well. Jessica Williams (#63) writes:

It [the Emotional Plague] is communicable through propaganda and hate-speak and is propagated readily in a climate of poverty and fear. Its salient features are bigotry, militarism, patriotism, rigid religious dogma, the oppression of women, control of news media, repression of individuality, banality and mediocrity in the arts, government seizure of private property, unreasonable drug laws, the oppression of the very young and the rejection of the very old, hostility towards self-expression in any form, and the 'purification' of racial types by restrictions on interpersonal relationships. These are the most obvious features of a Plague-ridden society or individual. ... and, A person probably has the plague if: (1) They are observed avoiding certain 'groups' of people, while favoring interaction with a group to which they claim exclusive membership; (2) They use 'descriptive' nouns to describe ethnically, philosophically, physically, or psychologically diverse groups of people. These nouns are usually profane and derogatory; (3) They are repressed and repressive, and insecure in their expression of love; (4) They will usually believe in someone's innate superiority over someone else; (5) A belief in the inferiority of women [or any other identifiable minorities] always indicates a plague-ridden individual; (6) All [such] 'isms' are related to the same malady. They are all rooted in the deep fear of love (which is at the root of a healthy life). ... He

was a clear-cut victim of a disease that he wrote so eloquently about and fought against tirelessly and effectively; the 'emotional plague of mankind'.

At this point, we can – perhaps – conclude that there is – probably – sufficient evidence to acknowledge that there are people (and even significant aspects of our culture) that are predominately “anti-life”, “anti-pleasure” and socially ‘repressive’. We are calling these aspects the “Emotional Plague”. People with the “Emotional Plague” seem to have a significant (severe) psychological disturbance, which also strongly affects their partners, children and some of their close associates (though these are usually limited to those whom they have authority over).

There are a great number of different ‘positive’ reactions towards any ‘healthy’ (positive) life events: pleasure, humour, empathy, openness, etc.; there are also a number of possible ‘unhealthy’ (negative) reactions: fear, envy, retreat, rejection, etc. Wilhelm Reich (1949) – the person who coined the phrase “The Emotional Plague” – described three basic types of reactions to any particular energetic ‘event’ (positive or negative):

- 1. A healthy reaction:** Here, one strives for satisfaction oneself and overcomes whatever is preventing one from having that satisfaction; there may also be feelings of altruism, companionship, connection, a ‘shared’ or expansive sense of self, a sense of ‘serving’ the greater good, etc.;
- 2. A neurotic reaction:** Here, one stifles or prevent one’s own anxiety by clamping down on oneself to prevent those intolerable feelings; i.e. a process of armouring oneself to block out these feelings that cause distress or anxiety; or, in effect, the neurotic person kills a part of the life within themselves and suffers an inhibited, constricted existence; and then;
- 3. An emotional plague reaction:** Here we see an attempt to destroy and kill anything outside of one’s self that stirs up such intolerable or uncomfortable feelings; i.e., one tries to destroy the source of any such intolerable excitation: it is too painful to experience ‘good’ feelings, so one is ‘forced’ to kill the source of these.

These three conditions are not absolute: any one particular situation can have a mixture of healthy, neurotic, and/or emotional plague reactions. It is important to understand that emotional plague reactions are relatively commonplace, and they can happen to anyone, anywhere, and at any time. These can range from minor (‘I don’t want to know’) reactions to severe ‘pogroms’ against religious groups, or even genocide. For example, if you are having a particularly ‘bad’ day, you might want to stifle the person who comes into your office whistling, happy and cheerful. When, in such a ‘contracted’ or ‘fixed’ state, anyone may easily be irritated by – and want to put a stop to – the expansiveness and pleasure that they can see in others: however, most people are able to recognise that they are just having a bad day: unfortunately, a very few people will respond by attacking or condemning the ‘Other’ – their ‘irritant’ – and react very negatively ... as a result of their own distressing from their inner conflicts. Crist (2009) writes:

“If kept to oneself, this is a ‘Little Man’ reaction.³ If acted out interpersonally, socially, this then is an emotional plague reaction. Though this is a seemingly minor example, it illustrates on a small scale the very same emotional motivation that is behind the more extreme, destructive reactions.”

The classic example of the Emotional Plague in literature (as mentioned) is the character of ‘Iago’ in Shakespeare’s tragedy, *‘Othello’*. Here, Iago, the trusted subordinate, is so possessed with envy at Othello’s success as a general and also by having such a beautiful wife in Desdemona, who he (Iago) obviously fancies – that, because he cannot possess these things for himself, and because, he cannot bear the pain of not possessing these, he sets out – methodically, deliberately – to destroy them both, which he eventually does: this is the tragedy! And this sort of ‘evil’ dynamic is also at the basis of many such tragedies.

One can also see parallels in the ‘real’ story of Macbeth (meaning the ‘Son of Life’) whereby Malcolm (later Malcolm III) is determined to destroy him, come-what-may, even by betraying the whole of Scotland (and the Scots) to the English; and similar sorts of dynamics can be found in the rise and fall of innumerable ‘heroes’ who fight against repressive regimes; people like Robert the Bruce, Simon Bolivar, Robin Hood, Giordano Bruno, Galileo Galilei, and – of course, as noted by Reich himself – as he illustrates in his (1953) book, *‘The Murder of Christ’*.

In psychological terms, this type of ‘plague’ reaction – the wish to destroy what one cannot have – can often be seen in individuals with (let’s say) ‘compulsive’ Narcissistic Personality Disorder – indeed, M. Scott Peck defines such people as ‘evil’ in his 1988 book, *‘The People of the Lie’*.

These descriptions (and definitions above) – when translated into psychological terminology – echo something of the psycho-pathology that is described in the American Psychiatric Association’s DSM-IV: 301.81 Diagnostic Criteria for Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). The DSM-V (which has been largely discredited for other reasons) re-labels the NPD character as an ‘Antisocial Personality Disorder’ and the description is even longer, though not as clear (for details of both, see Appendix 1).

The ‘strange’ thing about the Emotional Plague is that the ‘plague character’ feels morally and totally justified in all of his/her/their (distorted) feelings, ‘negative’ reactions, or even acts of ‘destruction’. Rational talk does not work when trying to deal with an ‘Emotional Plague’ person: emotional ignorance is also commonplace in ‘plague characters’: many of the ‘negative’ elements of Fascism (as well as the ‘far-to-the-right’ or ‘fundamentalist’ viewpoints) carry some of these components; nowadays we could probably include some of those “populist” viewpoints that have brought people like Donald Trump, Victor Orbán and Silvio Berlusconi into power, and also those

³ This is a reference to a 1952 book by Reich called: *‘Listen, Little Man.’*

political groups and right-wing parties^[4], who currently threaten the stability of some of more liberal democracies in Europe. Dictatorships, oligarchs, successful businessmen, some of the (so-called) ‘Pro-Life’ and/or ‘Animal Liberation’ activists, urban terrorists and organised criminals, can also embody many aspects of the Emotional Plague. These people do not care anything much about other people’s lives, or indeed other people; only about their own views ... usually concerned with money and power; or with their own particular ‘agenda’; or even just their (narcissistic) themselves.

There is a lot of fear that can be generated in people (in general) when they are confronted with (or confronted by) the Emotional Plague: one fears for oneself and for one’s loved ones; and also, for all the healthy values that seem so fragile against such a terrible ‘negative’ onslaught. Our fears can be (and often actually are) used against us; the ‘agent’ (or agents) of the Emotional Plague almost seem to ‘know’ where these (our) weaknesses and vulnerabilities are.

There is therefore a tendency to ‘armour’ oneself (as a form of protection), but this ‘armouring’ also has the effect of cutting us off from the healthy pulsations of life, from the tender feelings, and from the capacity to give and receive love. Thus, we can – oh so easily, in defending ourselves – become somewhat like our oppressors.

In a recent conference on Reich’s Orgone work, Dr. Tina Lindemann spoke about ‘The Emotional Plague Today’.^[5] She lists several characteristics: “*It is biological in origin. It is a physical phenomenon manifesting in ill will. Aggressiveness is a signalling characteristic. This condition is often combined with a feeling of serving a good purpose. It is directed against the natural expression of life: expressed as hatred toward life.*” It is also – like a real plague – highly infectious. Crist (2009) again writes:

It only takes one such highly energetic, clever person to tap into, bring out and organize the repressed rage and destructiveness in the masses of neurotic people, to infect a larger group. Hitler did it in Germany; Stalin in Russia; Mao Tse-Tung in China; Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran; Khadafy in Libya; Saddam Hussein in Iraq; Milosevic in Serbia; Yasser Arafat in Palestine; and Osama bin Laden along with Taliban leaders in the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan; and we can go on and on with many examples [throughout history]. Also, it is important to remember that [such] a dictator cannot take power without the support of the masses of people, either through their active assent, or [because of] their passivity, dependency and silent helplessness.

It is due to the Emotional Plague that these ‘charismatic’ leaders can ‘use’ (or abuse) the ‘stirred-up’ fears and prejudices of their populace in order to gain power for themselves.

Both the passivity (mentioned earlier) and the fear of (retreat from) any such negatives attacks – especially when faced with the ‘anger’ or ‘rage’ of the plague or their active supporters, and

⁴ Populist parties include: UKIP (K); National Front (France); Danish People’s Party; Podemos (Spain); Syriza (Greece); Five Star Movement (Italy); Fidesz (Hungary); Law & Justice (Poland); etc.

⁵ www.orgone.org/Pages/Conference/All.htm#jones

especially when these have been whipped up by propaganda, as ‘crowd (or mob) manifestations’ of the Emotional Plague – are completely understandable, but these dynamics are almost doomed to become disastrous because the Emotional Plague (as an ‘energetic entity’) gains strength and power from the mass of ordinary peoples’ weaknesses or fears.

What is exceptionally difficult to contend with is that the ‘Emotional Plague’ character often rationalises his (or her) destructive goals in the name of some ‘higher’ attainment: the ‘purification of the race’; ‘resistance against the Oppressor’; ‘re-establishment of the Caliphate’; ‘for the Glory of God’; for the ‘Fatherland’, or the ‘Proletariat’, or (even) for the benefit of the ‘People’; – or as individuals (like Mary Whitehouse⁶) who campaign to stop this ‘modern’ trend of what they claim as ‘sedition and evil’: they should know!

It is all seemingly very rational, but only if you can accept the basic premise that some people are ‘better’ than others; however, as this is totally against any ‘good’ ‘humane’ feelings about others – compassion, empathy, understanding, love, etc. – regardless of who they are: and then that is where their ‘negative’ logic breaks down.

These (so-called) ‘rationalisations’ are genuinely believed by the ‘plague’ person(s): they believe that they are doing the ‘right thing’ and (often) that “the ends justify the means”; their intentions to ‘attack’ (that which causes them distress) is almost certainly genuine, but their true motives – *because* that ‘thing’ causes them distress – are not so clear or disclosed. Their behaviours and thinking are actually irrational, but they are also driven: therefore, they are not open to discussion, debate or reason.

Since the ‘goal’ or ‘end’ that is envisaged by the Emotional Plague person (or group), be it: – “Make America Great”, or “Cleansing Europe of Jews”, (on behalf of the ‘pure’ Aryan race) – or President Mugabe’s so-called ‘Land Reforms’ in Zimbabwe – or the 1994 Hutu massacre of the Tutsi people (and others) that ironically led to the establishment of the International Criminal Court – or the Communist Chinese “Cultural Revolution” – or Pol Pot’s “Killing Fields” in Cambodia – or the 1572 “St Bartholomew’s Day” Catholic massacre of the French Huguenots – or the Ottoman Empire’s 1915-1922 ‘Turkification (involving the Armenian, Assyrian and Greek genocides) – or Rome’s destruction of Carthage (in 149-146 BCE) – or Israel’s destruction of the Midianites (in 2,000 BC) – or Genghis Khan’s destruction of other Mongols (and Bukharans and Afghans and many others) – or Tamerlane’s 14th century genocidal massacres – (and/or there are many – all too many – other historical examples) – since these basic messages are essentially ‘populist’, often also a ‘racist’ – these atrocities, often instigated by little ‘Napoleons’ or war-lords, take – as their legitimate mandate – the ‘right’ to do anything (absolutely) anything – in order to achieve their goals: they believe that

⁶ Mary Whitehouse was a British campaigner in the 1970s against ‘liberalism’ (that she called ‘obscenities’) in TV and the press.

they are ‘right’ and (somewhat amazingly) they manage to convince a significant part of their populace about their ‘rightness’ ... to ‘rule’ and to do unspeakable, inhumane things.

And (there) right there – they also expose themselves: it suddenly becomes ‘right’ or ‘justified’ to have a pogrom; or to put people in a concentration camp; or to institute something like Guantanamo Bay; or to indulge in ‘ethnic cleansing’; or ‘mass rape’; or ‘genocide’; or whatever ... in order to ‘create’ or ‘achieve’ their populist goals. This is the ‘Emotional Plague’ – working in rampant, deeply anti-human, policies and actions.

Any living creature can (all-to-easily) develop an aggressive impulse (fight-or-flight; territorial; etc.) as a response to some degree of traumatisation, but – in humans – we only act on this ‘destructive’ impulse, deliberately and destructively, when we really want to ‘destroy’ the source of our supposedly threatening danger, or when a supposed threat is pointed out to us. Reality and history (strongly suggest) that making something (or someone) into such a threat – is primarily in order to gain power, which is their real motive.

From a different perspective: what emotional distortion, or invalid rationalisation, or degree of hatred, is otherwise possible in order to open the first four of the Seven Seals (according to the ‘Christian’ Biblical book of Revelations), thus releasing the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Conquest (Pestilence or Plague) being traditionally the first rider on a White Horse; followed by War (on a Red Horse), Famine (the Black Rider on a Black Horse), and then Death (riding upon a Pale Horse).

In this sort of case, the destruction or killing of the hated object, the ‘Other’, is the ‘purposeful’ goal. The original motive is not necessarily to take pleasure in the other’s destruction: rather the destruction serves to re-inforce the ‘plague’ person’s sense of their own (weak or threatened) “life instinct” ... and it is an attempt to; *“avoid anxiety and to preserve the ego in its totality. I destroy in a dangerous situation, because I want to live and I do not want to have any anxiety. In short, the impulse to destroy serves a primary biological will to live ...”* (Wilhelm Reich, *The Function of the Orgasm*, 1927), but a ‘will to live’ at the expense of another person’s ‘life energy’.

In the same way that anyone – however innocent or healthy – can become affected by a ‘real (viral)’ plague, anyone playing on another person’s fears, insecurities and/or distress can ‘trigger’ a plague reaction in that person, and then this weird form of rationale can be utilised by a plague person to spread fear of, and antagonism towards, the “Other” – and thus the ‘emotional plague’ spreads – just like a real plague. This is also especially true when a particular grouping (often in a minority) feels especially threatened: such groupings can include factions, social groups, political parties, religions, pressure groups, neighbourhood watch, etc. These ‘threats’ – often backed up by some recently experienced hardship or catastrophe – are then ‘projected’ onto an ‘Other’ – “*They’ did*

this”; “*They’ are the Enemy*” and thus “*They’ need to be destroyed or got rid off.*” R.D. Laing brings this out well in his descriptions of “us” and “them” thinking in *The Politics of Experience*.

Such a ‘plague reaction’ is often stimulated, or initiated, by a particular, often quite charismatic, individual: these individuals are instinctively – or neurotically – drawn to such positions of influence out of their strong drive, an internal feeling of rage and/or humiliation, and almost certain deep personal insecurity, all of which to a compulsion to control others, to change their social environment, and to stay in power. Their polemics also become simplistic and contagious: “*The ‘thing’ that is ‘wrong’ is ‘out there’, and all we need to do is to ‘stop’ it ...*”

These charismatic individuals often have an inherently high energetic charge, and they are often drawn to potential areas of conflict where there is intense emotional excitement: they feed on this, and they also capitalise on this. They just cannot leave the ‘Others’ alone. There cannot be – as we saw in the 1990s, with the break-up Yugoslavia – any real degree of ‘live-and-let-live’.

Crist (2009) again: “*Also, organizations with positions of public influence such as political parties, religious organizations, educational institutions, and news media are more likely than other organizations to become infected and to attract people with emotional plague tendencies and outright emotional plague characters.*”

The Emotional Plague can be easily identified in certain, isolated individuals, such as some of those mentioned herein. But there are wider, more prevalent ways in which the ‘emotional plague’ can be seen to be working. Charles Konia, another ‘Orgonomist’ (i.e. a follower of Reich’s work), wrote an excellent 2008 book, *The Emotional Plague: The root of human evil*, specifically about this particular topic:

Dr. Konia’s ground-breaking, highly original book examines and explores from a unique, non-psychological perspective the pathology in human nature that has not only given us the likes of Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot and Saddam Hussein, but also explains how brutalizing despicable acts have been perpetrated upon children and adults over the centuries right through to the present. Everyday examples of emotional plague behavior include not only obvious torture, murder and social mayhem, but also the father who humiliates his happy, hardworking son, the so-called “friend” who spreads vicious gossip, the teacher who constantly “puts down” students, the small-minded who engage in acts of discrimination.

One of the *raison d’être* and fundamental structures of a modern democratic society is to try to provide a reasonably free, open and accepting environment, yet with a number of inherent checks and balances, separations of power, divisions of influence, collective decision-making, that all go together to provide a healthy balance between the interests of the many different groupings in that society – this is a way of avoiding any ‘demagogic’ tendencies.

Demagogues are those (often charismatic) individuals who manage to gain popularity, usually by exploiting prejudice and ignorance amongst the common people, whipping up the passions of the crowd, and – in effect – shutting down any reasoned deliberation. Demagogues usually advocate

immediate (and sometimes violent) action in order to address a national crisis (often exaggerated, or even potentially created) while – on the one hand, creating an ‘enemy’ and, on the other, accusing (the putting down) any moderate and thoughtful opponents of ... (for example) weakness or disloyalty. Demagogues can – all too easily – overturn the established customs of proper political conduct or promise or threaten to do so ... in the name of the ‘good’ of the people: however, the ‘people’ seem to end up suffering – maybe in the ‘cause’ of the demography. Most demagogues, who have been elected to high office, have also (subsequently) changed their constituent constitutional democracy into some form of personal dictatorship. So, we have to be very, very careful about how we give away our individual power into the shared collective and to whom we give such power. Does any of the above sound familiar?

Over time, we have seen – over and over again – the wholesale use of “theocracy” or “morality” or “social conformity” or “revolution” in order to effectively – and for no other real purpose – suppress ‘people’: the little people, Reich’s ‘*Little Man*’. A classic case is the use of “The Inquisition” in medieval Italy, France and Spain; another classic example was the rise of Fascism in Spain, Italy and Germany in the 1930s, culminating in the Second World War. One can also cite the distortion of the original precepts of ‘Communism’ into Stalinism in Russia, and the different types of ‘Communism’ as practiced in post-WW2 Yugoslavia, Albania, Cuba, China and North Korea.

We have also seen elements of this Emotional Plague in men’s homophobia and their revulsion about homosexuality, seeing it as some sort of ‘betrayal’ of (their) masculinity. The fight against Fascism reverted (or re-bounded) in America to the fear against Communism and the McCarthy era of oppression of the freedom of expression in the 1950s; and we – again – see something similar happening with the post-2000 rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the Taliban, Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Qaeda, and, more recently, the resurgence of an ‘Islamic State’ (ISIS, ISIL or Daish) in Iraq and Syria (that seems more interested in oppression, than in ruling), complicated somewhat by the ordinary people’s resurgence against repressive regimes in the ‘Arab Spring’ of 2010. Unfortunately, many of these populist movements or uprisings justify (or also feel justified in) ‘killing’ and ‘suppressing’ their opponents – or anyone who does not believe in the way that they do. Konia (2008, p. 141) describes another instance of the Emotional Plague:

We are living in the age of the glorification, with everywhere a demand for individual rights. On the political left, pseudo-liberals, socialists, and psychopathic politicians use ideological issues of freedom defensively (“freedom peddling”) against individual or personal responsibility, encouraging social and political license. These individuals espouse a socialistic premise based on a neurotic attitude of entitlement: People have a right to say and do whatever they please without any thought any thought to the possible destructive consequences of their words and behaviour, either for themselves or for society. Litigiousness is endemic in today’s American society. As Philip Howard has put it, “Individual rights have become an epidemic, spreading from their original role as protectors of freedom to the nooks of our daily choices ... Modern rights seem limitless.

For the price of a lawyer, anyone can transform his sense of entitlement into a legal claim. This has changed the way we live, infecting our choices with legal fear. Our playgrounds are being stripped of seesaws. Paranoid doctors order unnecessary tests. ” As a result, “America, so proud of its rule of law, no longer provides legal rules to defend reasonable conduct. We no longer have a sense of what we can and can’t do.” ^{17]} The socially destructive consequences of this distorted view of individual rights are self-evident.

Again, recently, the increasingly frequent use of “political correctness” can also be seen as a universally demagogic form of intellectual and/or societal attack against any form of individualism, spontaneity, diversity, etc. – which ‘virtues’ form the quintessential variety that gives an incredible richness and vitality to life. We have seen how the use of the word “should” and “ought” can signify another (subtler) level of control or conformity. Of course, in a general sense, something of this (morality) is correct: “Thou *should* not kill” ... or commit adultery, or whatever, of course: but, to be socially ostracised, condemned, put down, attacked, persecuted, shunned, or condemned for being – in some way ‘different’ from the norm – is another thing all together. George Orwell’s ‘Newspeak’ and ‘Crimethink’ (to commit a ‘thought-crime’) becomes increasingly prophetic when we see people being prosecuted for just thinking about terrorism (Tigar, 2007).

The other aphorism to remember is “*Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely*” (Lord Acton: 1834-1902). He also is quoted as saying:

“There are two things which cannot be attacked in front: ignorance and narrow-mindedness. They can only be shaken by the simple development of the contrary qualities. They will not bear discussion.” ... and ... “Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority: still more when you add the tendency or the certainty of corruption by authority. There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it.”

And finally: *“In the moral sciences, prejudice is dishonesty. A historian has to fight against temptations special to his mode of life; temptations from country, class, church, college, party, authority of talents, [and the] solicitation of friends. The most respectable of these influences are the most dangerous. The historian who neglects to root them out is exactly like a juror who votes according to his personal likes or dislikes. In judging men and things, ethics go before dogma, politics or nationality. The ethics of history cannot be denominational. Judge not according to the orthodox standard of a system religious, philosophical, political, but according as things promote, or fail to promote the delicacy, integrity, and authority of conscience. Put conscience above both system and success. History provides neither compensation for suffering nor penalties for wrong.”*

Atrocious deeds were done, in which religious passion / persuasion was often the instrument, but policy was the motive. Fanaticism displays itself in the masses; but the masses were rarely fanaticised; and the crimes that are ascribed to them were commonly due to the calculations (machinations) of dispassionate politicians.

However, a lot of this is historic, descriptive, academic and even poetic; what is more pertinent and immediate is how to protect oneself and counteract the Emotional Plague, without being affected

⁷ The quotation quotes: Phillip K. Howard. “Too Many Rights Make a Wrong.” *Wall Street Journal*, April 26, 2001.

by it. It is – unfortunately – all too easy to become polemic (and ‘plaguey’) about what to do and what not to do. The ‘fight’ against the plague can become as destructive as the plague itself. When ‘fighting the plague’, one can easily become a victim or a part of ‘the plague’: one can easily get infected by the plague, however strong one is. The historical / medical parallel is of excellent health professionals risking their lives treating people with (say) the Black Death (bubonic plague), Cholera, or Ebola, and then succumbing to it themselves.

A nice literary example of the prevalence of this moral type of ‘infection’ comes in Tolkein’s *Lord of the Rings*, where the character of Boromir, a noble king’s son from Minas Tirith, succumbs (momentarily) to the lust for power and for being in possession of the ‘Ring’ when the Fellowship make a stop at Parth Galen, near the Falls of Ruros on the river Anduin.^[8]

The Emotional Plague in Society

Reich posited his own solution to the Emotional Plague in society: he called it “Work Democracy” – by which he meant anyone who was doing vital work, trying to move things forward, should / must also be the person making the decisions: there is no ‘against’, not even against political ideologies: however, one can take a firm stand, on a factual basis, against irrationalities of any sort: this stance is ‘for’ the formulation and solution of concrete tasks:

What is new in work democracy is: that for the first time in the history of sociology, a possible future regulation of human society is derived not from ideologies or conditions that must be created, but from natural processes that have been present and have been developing from the very beginning. Work-democratic "politics" is distinguished by the fact that it rejects all politics and demagogism. Masses of working men and women will not be relieved of their social responsibility. They will be burdened with it. Work-democrats have no ambition to be political führers, nor will they ever be permitted to develop such an ambition ...

Work-democracy adds a decisive piece of knowledge to the scope of ideas related to freedom. The masses of people who work and bear the burden of social existence on their shoulders neither are conscious of their social responsibility nor are they capable of assuming the responsibility for their own freedom. This is the result of the century-long suppression of rational thinking, the natural functions of love, and scientific comprehension of the living. Everything related to the emotional plague in social life can be traced back to this incapacity and lack of consciousness. It is work-democracy's contention that, by its very nature, politics is and has to be unscientific, i.e., that it is an expression of human helplessness, poverty, and suppression.

⁸ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boromir: Quotation: Finally, he succumbed to the temptation to take the Ring for himself, justifying this with his duty to his people and his belief in his own superiority. “True-hearted *Men*, they will not be corrupted. We of Minas Tirith have been staunch through long years of trial. We do not desire the power of wizard-lords, only strength to defend ourselves, strength in a just cause. And behold! In our need chance brings to light the Ring of Power. It is a gift, I say; a gift to the foes of Mordor. It is mad not to use it, to use the power of the Enemy against him. The fearless, the ruthless, these alone will achieve victory. What could not a warrior do in this hour, a great leader? What could not Aragorn do? Or if he refuses, why not Boromir? The Ring would give me power of Command. How I would drive the hosts of Mordor, and all men would flock to my banner!”

It remains to be seen what part politics will play in the eradication of the political emotional plague and what part the consciously organized functions of love, work and knowledge.

(Wilhelm Reich: *The Mass Psychology of Fascism: Cpt. 10.*)

Jessica Williams^[9] lists some practical suggestions to protect oneself and to combat the Emotional Plague (see Appendix 2). These can easily be turned into a regular practice of self-cleansing & self-protection, with focussed self-awareness: something like a meditation on both the past and present day's events and interactions; mindfulness practice; maintaining a healthy body and a healthy mind; constantly referring to one's core values; avoiding conflicts, whilst exercising respect, openness, honesty, discussion, and mediation, if needed.

However, there are also certain 'caveats' – as always: a certain level of vigilance and dedication is needed – a level of constant awareness, but not a paranoid form of 'witch-hunting'. A 'positive' focus that helps and heals, rather than anything else: this 'stance' demands quite a high level of self-awareness; and/or an instinctive feeling for 'rightness' or 'goodness'. Only a few people have this naturally, instinctively: and – as we have seen – they are not always immune. It also helps to be living and/or working in a community of people with similar views, who are equally self-aware; or in an intellectual and emotionally supportive environment. We are social animals and thus it is all too easy to 'bleat' – along with the other sheep: *Four legs good; Two legs bad*"^[10].

The 'Emotional Plague' in Psychotherapy

As Scott Pack has indicated, and as Konia and others have pointed out, the 'Emotional Plague' can also (often) be found in individuals, as well as in groups. The individual psychotherapist – unless he (or she) sets themselves up as a leader of a socio-religious cult – is probably (hopefully) fairly immune from the sort of compulsive narcissism that lies behind the 'Emotional Plague' in an individual. Neither will the compulsive narcissist probably come into any form of committed therapy: as s/he is much more likely to dismiss it, or the therapist, as being inadequate or foolish.^[11]

However, as psychotherapists, who and what we quite often see – perhaps more often than we realise – are the 'victims' of the covert or 'normal' narcissist. In many cases, it is the oppressed wife, who is continually told that she (or he) is not 'good enough', that everything she does is 'wrong'; that she is 'stupid'; and that it is her fault that the marriage is not working, who comes to psychotherapy. Alternatively, it is the child of a narcissist parent (now an adult), who is still feeling constrained from the mental and psychological abuse they experienced: Stines (2018) writes:

⁹ www.jessicawilliams.com/currents/ep.html

¹⁰ A quote from George Orwell's (1945) *Animal Farm*.

¹¹ The 'requirement' – especially in the more humanistic psychotherapies – that the therapist (as a trainee) needs to experience the type of therapy that they will be practising, is a necessary (but not always sufficient) safeguard against 'narcissistic' therapists.

“In a dysfunctional household there are some rules which are passed down from generation to generation. These rules are severe and uncompromising. If you have been raised in a narcissistic family you may find that you have been raised by some, if not all, of the following rules: ...”

According to her, these rules are that: **(1) Children are taught that someone must be blamed for any mistakes that occur.** There always needs to be a scapegoat; **(2) The narcissist always gets his or her way during any decision-making.** There is no cooperation, collaboration, or compromise; **(3) The narcissist is always allowed to have his or her feelings** and “dump” them on other family members; **(4) Family members (other than the narcissist) must justify why they feel the way they do;** yet the narcissist will never validate anyone else’s emotions; **(5) “Discipline” of children is harsh, shame-filled, destructive, inappropriately expressed, and hurtful;** there is never any escape; **(6) Family members are conditioned to meet the needs of the narcissist:** all family members have to learn this expectation; **(7) Children are taught, not to look within themselves, but constantly to scan the horizon** – in order to determine the narcissist’s mood prior to making a decision: this teaches children to “walk on eggshells”; **(8) Everyone in the family learns that making mistakes is shameful:** on top of that, “mistakes” seem to be arbitrary, based on the narcissist’s state of mind; **(9) Narcissistic homes have rigid rules:** flexibility is not encouraged; changing one’s mind is not permitted; **(10) Image is the highest priority:** what the ‘neighbours’ might think is more important than the feelings of any family members.

The child of a narcissistic parent – be it mother or father (or both) – often turns out to be the narcissistic partner in a relationship. He or she then ‘finds’ a partner who will become their ‘victim’ – often also the child of narcissistic parents. At this point, the cycle starts again and then repeats itself. The narcissistic partner (often male) takes over the role of the narcissistic parent; the child of the narcissist (often female) becomes the ‘victim’ of their narcissistic partner.

This sort of dynamic gives the husband (in many cases) a degree of license to feel superior and a rationale to take control of the family money; to make decisions about the children’s schooling; or even to have a series of affairs; etc. In the case of a narcissistic parent, we might get to see the adolescent child, who is struggling to assert their own identity, but who is also not able to leave home yet; however, the narcissistic parent cannot allow their child to become properly independent, as then they would lose the power and control (over the child), which is the source of the parent’s identity.

In psychotherapy, all of these (above) ‘rules’ – such as they apply – will need to be teased out of the client’s psyche, and these will then have to be re-written – not by the therapist, but by the client.

There is one ‘Golden Rule’: The therapist must **not**, repeat **not**, take any sort of leadership role. Their ‘job’ – as a therapist – is to ‘tease’ out the essence of a properly autonomous person, who becomes able to emerge out the (previously disempowered) narcissist’s victim. If the therapist is not very, very careful, she (or he) could – all too easily – become ‘infected’ by the Emotional Plague:

because the narcissistic role (and power) is infectious: we come up against the maxim, “Power tends to corrupt” again. If the therapist ‘abuses’ their power and influence – in any way whatsoever – over their client, they are – in effect – replicating the power and control of the narcissist.



The therapist’s ‘role’ – which includes all of their interventions within the therapeutic dynamic – are absolutely crucial. The therapist must, repeat **must**, be very, very careful. They can help their client (the narcissist’s victim) to realise that the door of their ‘cage’ is open, but they must not, repeat **not**, ‘induce’ the client (bird) to fly – until s/he (the client) feels absolutely ready to fly for themselves. The client / victim has to emancipate themselves. Gerda Boyesen¹² called this: “Guiding from behind” (i.e. not from in front: don’t ‘follow me’; you can go that way, or this way: there is ‘that’; over here is ‘this’).

For the therapist, this is very hard – even difficult – as it is the therapist’s role – only – to help the client to see that they (the client) can liberate themselves, or they can fly (as their ‘cage door’ is open); but it is not, repeat **not**, the therapist’s job to take over the client’s decision to fly.

This is very similar to the dynamics of a therapist’s role for a client with an addiction: the therapist can indicate the consequences of the client’s choice – to drink or not drink, but the therapist cannot make the decision for the client. The therapist just stays ‘there’ with the client – at the point of decision – and is with them precisely, in their decision, or indecision.

The Link between the ‘Emotional Plague’ and Narcissism – in psychotherapy

Nearly always, in such cases, when the suffering partner (or child) is shown – by the therapist – the DSM-IV list of the symptoms of someone with a Narcissistic Personality Disorder (see Appendix 1) – without being told what they are – they will go down the list saying “Yes”, or “at least 50%”, or “Definitely”; eventually realising that it is not ‘them’ who **is** the problem: it is the narcissist who is the problem: their partner, or their parent, or their boss.

Either way, this realisation is perhaps the first step towards them beginning to be able to assert their autonomy; or strengthening them in asserting their autonomy – their perspective; and it is also the start of a potential fight (though not to the death) but for increased self-esteem, self-determination and the lack of controlling forces. One of the therapists’ ‘tricks’ is – probably – to say (something like):

There are no magic wands. However, there are four magic words – if you want them. You then write them on the inside of your forehead, in letters of gold, so they are the first thing

¹² **Gerda Boyesen** (1922-2005), a Norwegian psychotherapist and physiotherapist, and the founder of Biodynamic Psychology & Psychotherapy.

you think of. These are: 'What Works For Me?' So – in any decision-making moment – you can say: either "Sure, that works" or "No: that doesn't work for me." The ball is then back in the other person's court.

Of course, much of any individualistic narcissistic abuse usually happens “behind closed doors” and is therefore largely “covert”: who is then able to ‘believe’ that such a ‘nice’ person (narcissists are often very charismatic) could really behave in ‘this’ way, or to have done ‘that’. Of course, it is the supremely important dynamic of the narcissist (narcissistic abuser) to ensure that that their victim doesn’t escape, or ever ‘speak out’, or ever refuse the ‘control’ of the narcissist. This is just one dynamic: but, at this point, we enter the realm of smoke and shadows. The dynamic of the abuser is still more powerful than that of their victim.

Contrast this with the therapist, who should believe – absolutely – in what their client is telling them. It is therefore totally ethical for the therapist to support the client in their distress: it is not for the therapist to ‘assume’ or ‘judge’ whether the client is telling the truth. The therapist (hopefully) will never meet the so-called abuser: will never ‘know’ how nice they are; or how charismatic; or how much they ‘love’ the client. It can be really difficult to show the client the way out of the narcissistic ‘trap’ – and how they got in it: and then wait for the client to choose the right moment. It is like opening the door of the bird cage, but the caged bird needs to choose to fly free – and it is much harder work and much more dangerous than staying in the narcissist’s cage.

But the problem is much more complex than that: the ‘victim’ has been ‘coerced’ by the ‘abuser’ into believing that it is their fault; that they – the victim – needs help; that the victim really needs therapy. Of course, the abuser is taking a risk, bringing a third person into the ‘marital’ (or ‘familial’) dynamic: but this third person (the therapist) happens also to be independent, professionally aware, and is usually not ‘controlled’ (or hood-winked) by the abuser. They are – totally – on the victim’s side: that is their professional and ethical role – and it is ‘this’ that is the significance of the role of the therapist (as an independent voice) in such cases. However, only a minority of such cases of narcissistic abuse manage to get to this point: the narcissistic abuser does not often ‘allow’ their ‘victim’ to get into therapy, or for their story to be ‘heard’ by an independent person.

However, this creates a potential paradox: the ‘victim’ (of the narcissist) is obviously ‘crazy’ to assert that there is anything ‘wrong’ in such a ‘perfect’ marriage (or such a ‘perfect’ family), and therefore the ‘victim’ obviously needs psychological help, but ... any such psychological help means that a third person will be (must necessarily be) introduced into this sort of (covert) familial dynamic

and might therefore – potentially – ‘expose’ the narcissistic abuse and thus also the abuser for what he or she is.^[13]

There are a number of interesting books and articles^[14] (including one of my own) that try to explore the dynamics of recovering from narcissistic abuse. Many of these books and articles focus on what one might have to do in order to restore one’s sense of self-esteem, or one’s autonomy, or one’s sense of power and control – how to ‘disarm’ the narcissist (Behary, 2013). Only a few of these explore the dynamics of ‘why’ the narcissist seemed to be attractive, or what was behind one’s (sort of) ‘surrender’, or what prevented you from saying, “*What a Wanker!*”, or from saying “*I really admire a powerful independent woman – even though she controls me*”, or “*It is such a relief to be able to totally rely on someone else*”, or ... whatever. Unfortunately, there is – potentially – something of a latent narcissist inside the ‘victim’: one who was (overly) ‘well-educated’ in the power & control dynamics within their family-of-origin and, therefore, still yearns for ‘something’ that was missing within these intimate dynamics.

We often label what we miss (from our childhood) as ‘love’, but what sort of ‘Love’. Unfortunately, what was usually missing were significant degrees: of respect, freedom, independence, autonomy and a lack of conditional (unconditional?) love and affection, etc. ... and a whole lot of other factors that need to be ‘reclaimed’ in order to feel one is – at last – true to one’s ‘Self’.

The narcissistic parent will (almost inevitably) say, “*Of course we loved you; we gave you everything; we did everything to help you*”: without saying, “*... as long as you did what we wanted you to do.*” There is – inevitably – in the narcissistic parent – a desire to be the ‘perfect’ parent, which means that they have to have a ‘perfect’ child – come what may! The whole parent-child dynamic is irrevocably skewed in favour of the parent’s needs.

In England & Wales, there is now a law against “Coercive Control”.^[15] This is a very major and significant step towards creating a much better balance between individuals within a familial situation, which is not just limited to spouses (or adult partners), but can certainly include forced (or arranged) marriages. Whether this can be extended to parental control of children is yet to be determined. Anyway, the official definition of this type of behaviour is:

¹³ Unfortunately, Sigmund Freud ‘succumbed’ when confronted in his psychotherapeutic practice with the disturbing possibility that sexual abuse in families [the ‘seduction theory’] was a lot more prevalent than expected in ‘Victorian’ Vienna and therefore Freud abandoned this theory and substituted it with the ‘theory’ of the Oedipus complex. (see Masson, J.M. (1984). *The Assault on Truth: Freud’s suppression of the seduction theory.*)

¹⁴ Try ‘Googling’ “Recovering from Narcissistic Abuse” => 22.6 million results.

¹⁵ §3.1: Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 - Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship: see www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/controlling-or-coercive-behaviour-intimate-or-family-relationship

- Coercive behaviour is an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim
- Controlling behaviour is a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour.

As with many criminal cases, there may be different interpretations as to whether the law has been broken in any particular instance and, of course, ‘proper’ evidence would need to be supplied so as to make any criminal conviction “beyond any reasonable doubt”.

There does not have to be a total out-and-out war waged against the narcissist (or the Emotional Plague person). Much will depend on the level of contact or relationship that has one with them and – of course – on the level of ‘infection’ that they carry.

There is – absolutely necessarily – a need to be very watchful and/or on one’s guard. Yes – there is an extreme lack of empathy in the narcissist; or an inflated sense of entitlement; or even a degree of exploitation; or a lack of self-responsibility; or even a degree of magical thinking. These are all the traits of a narcissist – but they might not be indicative of someone with the Emotional Plague. It may just be possible to use compassionate, empathic communication with the narcissist; the narcissist is potentially very sad and lonely inside and desperate for love and affection (albeit being well defended against these): the narcissist just goes about trying to get their needs met in totally inappropriate ways. Narcissists can be frustrating, or intimidating, but – if, one is in a relationship with them – they may also have to be communicated with.

There are ways not to trigger their aggression; there are ways to side-step their duplicitous patterns of behaviour; there are ways to ‘validate’ some of their concerns – that they exercise as controlling behaviour; there are also many ways to keep oneself safe – even in the face of threats; and there are – even – ways to cope with their predilections and misbehaviours (Behary, 2013).

However, some narcissists have acted ‘beyond the pale’ and should (perhaps) never be excused. Someone with a truly narcissistic personality – an Emotional Plague person – can never have (or even pretend to have) the ‘love-worthy’ human qualities that make up the beauty of life. Such a person can (and probably has) deliberately and methodically managed all of their relationship expectations (with you), so that you – the person in relationship with them – would expect less and the narcissist would get away with more. The narcissist will (usually) use the ‘Silent Treatment’, the ‘Non-Stop Badgering’, the ‘Apologetic Tactic’ (until the next time); the ‘Outrage & Anger’; the “It’s All Your Fault : You’re Never Any Good”; or similar demoralizing methods of control – to punish those who might dare to call them out (or even question) on their actions or behaviours; or they may possibly create chaos (even during good times) as a tactic for keeping their partner in a constant state of co-dependent anxiety. They can (and will) often juggle many relationships at once – and often for

years – with no-one being the wiser and may (well) lie, even when the truth would be better (Ballard, 2013). These narcissists are displaying ‘Emotional Plague’ behaviour.

The Emotional Plague in Therapy

The Emotional Plague person will never, ever come into therapy: they are totally in the right. The ‘narcissist’ will rarely come into therapy, as there is nothing ‘wrong’ with them: they don’t need therapy; it is their partner who needs help, or who is crazy. More often than not, it will be the narcissist’s victim who is the person who is much more likely to come into therapy.

What is the role of the therapist? What is the goal of therapy? What help can the therapist give? How can the therapist possibly ‘support’ the victim – often the wife – against her husband? There are a few good books: some are self-help; some refer to therapy for the narcissist; and ... some of them are very anti- ... and some are a bit too pro- ... (Keys, 2013; Jaye, 2014; Loric & Grannon, 2015, 2016; Arabi, 2016; Quintana, xxxx; Cone, xxxx; Simon, 2016; Torres, 2016; Mirza, 2017; Stines, 2018; Gabbard & Crisp-Han, 2018; Vankin & Rangelovska, 2018)

Ethics in Therapy

However, coming back to the therapist’s role in all of this: how do we ‘determine’ that the therapist is acting ‘properly’. Who is determining what is (or isn’t) ‘coercive control’; or whether the “people of the lie” are present; or whether this is another case of the Emotional Plague. It is easy to be wise after the event: it is not easy to determine – in the midst of a complicated (and probably chaotic) social upheaval; family dispute; legal case; or potential oppression – what is the evidence for believing the Emotional Plague is present; or that certain individuals have a Narcissistic Personality Disorder; or that ‘this’ or ‘that’ is anti-life? I believe – firmly – (as an experienced therapist) that offering a client, who is potentially a ‘victim’ of the Emotional Plague (or of a family member with NPD), such a ‘diagnosis’ is a potentially legitimate therapeutic intervention.

Therapists are key in helping those who are experiencing abuse: not only to help find the right mental health support or to get legal aid, but also to gain the strength to decide whether (or not) to leave their relationship. The physical effects of abuse heal within a few months, but the psychological effects from abuse can linger for years and hinder the growth of self-esteem and identity. The therapist needs to be both informed and familiarized about these issues, even though this was not part of their original training: this may mean taking a specialised short course or ‘reading up’ about these issues (Herman 1992; Bancroft, 2002; Stark, 2007; Lambert, 2016).

It may seem that the therapist might be imposing their own perception or their thought forms or ‘structures’ on to the client; and – indeed – occasionally the narcissistic partner / parent may even claim that the therapist has ‘alienated’ the affection of their partner (or child). However – surely – in

therapy – it is the victim’s (or the client’s) dynamic that is important and if such an intervention helps to empower the client and to start them on the ‘tricky’ road towards greater autonomy and independence, then it may be a worthy intervention.

There is often a flash of realisation when someone professional – with a degree of knowledge, experience and insight – is (at last) supporting them and telling them that their views and perceptions are not crazy. For the ‘victim’ – the child or partner – of a narcissist, their whole perception of reality has been ‘conditioned’ by the narcissist: they have been ‘infected’ by the Emotional Plague and they may need some help and support.

Oh, no: he really loves me! It is just that – sometimes – when I do something wrong (or something that upsets him) – he gets so angry that he loses control. He is always very apologetic afterwards and hates this type of behaviour in himself. It is that he can’t stop himself.” (An imaginary – yet often heard – type of comment from abused partners/spouses)

The impact of domestic violence and abuse on women’s mental health can be profound. Many women feel that they were losing their sanity, because their partner would tell them something and then deny it; or say one thing and then do the opposite. This dynamic sometimes called, “gaslighting”.^[16] They would also twist women’s words to make them appear stupid. Women have also described how their partners even invented a cancer diagnosis to make sure they stayed to look after them. Frequently, men denied having an affair despite evidence to the contrary, or blamed the woman for not trusting him, saying it was *‘All in her mind’*.

So, how do we – as therapists – help our clients to ‘expose’ the Emotional Plague in such situations? How do we – and on what grounds do we – say: *“This may be unacceptable!”*; *“This is sounds wrong!”* or, maybe even, *“This is Evil!”* And – is ‘this’ enough? Or by ‘not acting’ – are we condoning something?

As professional therapists, we are often ethically ‘required’ to help expose (though in some cases,^[17] it is legally or ‘mandatory’ to ‘report’ cases of suspected child abuse to the police or appropriate authorities.^[18] It is now mandatory (in England & Wales), that all regulated health and social care workers and teachers have a duty of care to report any suspected cases of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) on children under 18.^[19]

¹⁶ The phrase ‘gaslighting’ comes from the 1938 play, *“Gaslight”* by Patrick Hamilton and there were also 1940 & 1944 film versions. It refers to a form of psychological manipulation that deliberately sows doubt in the ‘victim’s’ mind, making them question their own memory, perception and sanity, using persistent denials, misdirection, lying and contradictions.

¹⁷ Mandatory reporting laws (about possible child maltreatment r abuse) exist in a large number of countries internationally, including Australia, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, France, Hungary, the Republic of Ireland, Israel, Norway and the United States. Legislation may exist at either a federal / country level or a state / territorial level, or sometimes a combination of the two.

¹⁸ Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse: www.iicsa.org.uk/key-documents/7025/view/mandatory-reporting-seminar-existing-obligations-reporting-child-sexual-abuse.-briefing-note.pdf

¹⁹ Section 74 of the Serious Crime Act 2015.

There are – additionally – huge issues about counter-transference and how the therapist can ‘receive’ or ‘distort’ their client’s thinking in a number of potentially destructive ways: this is particularly true for incest ‘survivors’ and already abused clients/patients, who can be (or are) very susceptible to subsequent, vicarious traumatization – this time coming from the therapist – adding (in effect) insult to injury (Adler, 1994; Perlman & Saakvitne, 1995). This is – unfortunately – not such an unlikely phenomenon as might be expected and the issues of counter-transference towards already abused clients, who have then subsequently been abused by their therapists, need to be considered extremely carefully (Jorgenson, 2005). All these examples also need to be considered in the light of ‘Emotional Plague’ reactions.

You may disagree that these (above) examples are possible manifestations of the Emotional Plague in (so-called) ‘ordinary’ human beings, and/or especially in therapy: and – of course – you are entitled to have your own opinion and belief-systems. However, we all ‘know’ that it is ‘wrong’ when a therapist seduces their client (or – occasionally – succumbs to their client’s seduction) – as our professional ethical codes tell us so. But ... how do we know? Is this a purely intellectual ‘knowing’ – because the Ethical Code says that we shouldn’t do ‘this’ (or we should be clear about ‘that’)? Or do we ‘know’ – somehow – emotionally and more fundamentally; do we have a gut feeling that ‘this’ or ‘that’ is ‘wrong’? It is this gut-feeling reaction – our human (‘humane’) reaction – to ‘this’ or ‘that’ that can tell us that ‘this’ or ‘that’ – however desired or rational – is, in effect, another manifestation of the Emotional Plague. That we are – in some way or another – putting our own wishes or desires ahead of another (often more vulnerable) person. It takes courage to resist the ‘Emotional Plague’, particularly if those around you decry your particular stance. *“Don’t be so silly; it will be fine.”* *“Everyone does it. You’ll lose out if you don’t.”*

Follow the voice of your heart, even if it leads you off the path of timid souls. Do not become hard and embittered, even if life tortures you at times. There is only one thing that counts: to live one's life well and happily. ... (Wilhelm Reich (1948), Listen, Little Man!)

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APPENDIX 1

Narcissistic Personality Disorder DSM-IV

“A pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behaviour); a need for admiration, and lack of empathy; beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by five (or more) of the following:

- (1) has a grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements);*
 - (2) is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love;*
 - (3) believes that he or she is “special” and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions);*
 - (4) requires excessive admiration;*
 - (5) has a sense of entitlement, i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favourable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations;*
 - (6) is interpersonally exploitative, i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends;*
 - (7) lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others;*
 - (8) is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her;*
 - (9) shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes.”*
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Antisocial Personality Disorder DSM-V

The essential features of a personality disorder are impairments in personality (self and interpersonal) functioning and the presence of pathological personality traits. To diagnose antisocial personality disorder, the following criteria must be met:

A. Significant impairments in personality functioning manifest by:

- 1. Impairments in self functioning** (a or b): (a.) Identity: Ego-centrism; self-esteem derived from personal gain, power, or pleasure; or (b.) Self-direction: Goal-setting based on personal gratification; absence of prosocial internal standards associated with failure to conform to lawful or culturally normative ethical behavior.

AND

- 2. Impairments in interpersonal functioning** (a or b): (a.) Empathy: Lack of concern for feelings, needs, or suffering of others; lack of remorse after hurting or mistreating another; (b.) Intimacy: Incapacity for mutually intimate relationships, as exploitation is a primary means of relating to others, including by deceit and coercion; use of dominance or intimidation to control others.

B. Pathological personality traits in the following domains:

- 1. Antagonism**, characterized by: (a.) **Manipulativeness**: Frequent use of subterfuge to influence or control others; use of seduction, charm, glibness, or ingratiation to achieve one's ends; (b.) **Deceitfulness**: Dishonesty and fraudulence; misrepresentation of self; embellishment or fabrication when relating events; (c.) **Callousness**: Lack of concern for feelings or problems of others; lack of guilt or remorse about the negative or harmful effects of one's actions on others; aggression; sadism; (d.) **Hostility**: Persistent or frequent angry feelings; anger or irritability in response to minor slights and insults; mean, nasty, or vengeful behavior.
- 2. Disinhibition**, characterized by: (a.) **Irresponsibility**: Disregard for – and failure to honor – financial and other obligations or commitments; lack of respect for – and lack of follow through on – agreements and promises; (b.) **Impulsivity**: Acting on the spur of the moment in response to immediate stimuli; acting on a momentary basis without a plan or consideration of outcomes; difficulty establishing and following plans; (c.) **Risk taking**: Engagement in dangerous, risky, and potentially self-damaging activities,

unnecessarily and without regard for consequences; boredom proneness and thoughtless initiation of activities to counter boredom; lack of concern for one's limitations and denial of the reality of personal danger.

- C. The impairments in personality functioning and the individual's personality trait expression are relatively stable across time and consistent across situations.
- D. The impairments in personality functioning and the individual's personality trait expression are not better understood as normative for the individual's developmental stage or socio-cultural environment.
- E. The impairments in personality functioning and the individual's personality trait expression are not solely due to the direct physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse, medication) or a general medical condition (e.g., severe head trauma).
- F. The individual is at least age 18 years.

Source:

http://www.psi.uba.ar/academica/carrerasdegrado/psicologia/sitios_catedras/practicas_profesionales/820_clinica_tr_personalidad_psicosis/material/dsm.pdf

APPENDIX 2:

Strategies & Treatments for the Emotional Plague *

1. **'Wear your white coat':** This means to remember that, as disgusting, demoralizing, and socially destructive a person is, they actually have an illness. If you learn to diagnose the Emotional Plague (EP) as an illness, it helps you to gain distance and maintain some small degree of objectivity while dealing with it. This person or group has an emotional 'disease', which is as virulent and life-negative as Anthrax. Treat it with respect and care. It can only be fought with Knowledge and Love. If this treatment does not work, you may be getting the plague yourself:
2. **'Get Away To Fight Another Day':** Choose your battles, and choose your 'patients'. This is not to be dismissive of their core humanity, just to remind yourself that a person with the EP is Dangerous and can be Violent and Destructive. Sometimes the best form of defence is to retreat, or just get out.
3. **'You are NOT the King of the Castle':** You cannot change the world, or you would have done it long ago, but perhaps not to everyone else's liking. Who is to say 'Your Way' is the 'Right Way': indeed, anyone who claims that 'Their Way is the Right Way', is probably an Emotional Plague character; particularly if they try to destroy anyone else who doesn't agree with them, or who posits a more gentle and benevolent message. Remember that you can get the EP on a fairly regular basis; that you can even get a mild case from: watching 'bad media' or reading very biased literature; listening to life-negative music or seeing violent images in a book. There is a lot of 'hate' – especially 'out there' in the media. It's a bit like air-pollution; no one is totally free of it.

It's advisable to: *

1. Maintain a **'bull-shit detector'** to avoid any serious infection from Emotional Plague influences – often through mass media, social antagonisms, prejudice, etc. – as well as from more insidious sources. If someone in your life (like a partner or a line manager) always seems to make you feel bad (and may even seem to get pleasure from it), they probably should **not** be in your life. Trust some of your gut feelings; they may be correct.

2. Stand up for **'core human values'** when it is appropriate. Judge your safety; try to protect it. But remember too that sometimes social change is risky. The rights of other humans include their own freedoms – as well as yours: that is worth fighting for. It may, at times, even be a fight worth risking your life for, in order to regain your life.
3. As long as people live in slavery, no-one is truly free. This sounds trite in an age of cell-phones and palm-pilots. It is not. Digital media will **not** save us from spiritual poverty. The freedom of individual people comes before any other consideration. It is the only way to heal the planet, as its wounds have been caused by centuries of abuse by EP-ridden individuals, who consider themselves and their needs to be more important than all others.
4. If – or when – a person gets infected by the plague, they should **'quarantine'** themselves, as some 'alone-time' – at some point – is possibly the best or easiest way for a basically healthy person to 'get over' a bout of the plague and re-find their own – more pleasant or loving – thoughts and perceptions. For someone who has been 'infected' for some time, the victim may need some considerable emotional support – well away from the narcissist ('Plague' person) – before they can do this.
5. Form **'support networks'**: so that when one is (you are) attacked and wounded by the EP, you can call for help and consolation. Make sure that you **'do not'** carry the plague into your support network. This is all too easy to do. Your support network should not reject you or condemn you; it should help you to fight the EP. However, if it is also suffering from the same sort of attack, and your support group rejects you, then either it is plague-ridden and needs healing; or you are completely plague-ridden and beyond help.
6. However, it is possible to tell the difference by examining the desired outcomes. If person 'A' wants to change, destroy, eradicate, convert, ... person 'B', then person 'A' may well have the plague, and person 'B' may be their victim.
7. **Do not** use substances (drugs, alcohol, tobacco) or any other (often addictive) behaviours to try to make the Emotional Plague experience any less painful. These substances can just drain you of your healthy life-energy and can create depression, loss and even illness.
8. Do not blame yourself for 'catching the plague' – or becoming involved with it – in whatever way it may have presented itself. It is often 'wrapped up' in a charismatic format. Narcissism is superficially attractive – especially to the oppressed. However, you may have to extricate yourself from the 'plague' and then cleanse and protect yourself.
9. We all have the supreme human right to live, free, unharassed, unfettered, and without constraint or coercion – at all times.
10. If you feel coerced, frightened, shocked, persuaded, bribed, attacked, converted, seduced or whatever other means may have been used, to do, feel or say something that you wouldn't normally agree with, just Walk Away. Once you are well away – in space and time – then you can sort out your true feelings and cleanse yourself of this attempt by the Emotional Plague to embroil you.
11. "Go Set a Watchman" – both in the sense of the Biblical book of Isaiah (21:6), and in Harper Lee's 2nd book of that title. You / we all may need to set somebody up as a 'watchman' – as a moral compass – to declare warning whenever they see or hear the immoral voices, the hypocrisy, the hate, and the mass violence that Lee describes her father 'Atticus' as standing up against.

* Adapted from: www.jessicawilliams.com/currents/ep.html