

Non-negotiables, narcissistic people, and boundaries.

Journal Prompts - Week of 7/24/23

Do you struggle in these two common areas coming from childhood trauma?

- Getting stuck in one-sided or narcissistic relationships- (friends, partners, family, or coworkers).
- Difficulty establishing your autonomy with non-negotiables. (saying no, being real, letting the chips fall)

Early in my recovery, I had several friendships and relationships that I had great difficulty speaking up about or leaving. I didn't know that either was an option. Sometimes I would get fed up and simply ghost, which wasn't good for me because it reinforced my belief that I wouldn't tell my truth to the person in an effective way.

Not that the person wouldn't have been defensive or continued to be difficult, but in therapy, I was learning that what is more important is being able to say our peace instead of only focusing on the outcomes of doing so.

This week's journal prompts will focus on finding our ground which can often feel scary yet profoundly empowering.

Our relationships change as we continue to work on ourselves into more childhood trauma healing. Unfortunately, difficult people don't change unless they are honestly working on themselves.

Let's take friendships, for example.

I've had many clients who grew up with a narcissistic parent struggle with narcissistic friends. They were caught up in dramatic one-sided friendships that exhibited any of the following issues:

- Time and attention were only partially reciprocated. (you were to show up for their birthday, but they half-heartedly acknowledged yours or ignored you)
- You were their project that they could guide, advise or criticize.
- You were either in trouble with the person or left out – real authentic care and focus on you never happened.

- The nature of the connection or conversations was more about them and their life or negative in the form of gossip, complaining, or some form of bypassing.
- Bringing things up or potentially disappointing them would cause big reactions where you learned to avoid issues or not disappoint.

While I don't believe we attract such friendships, there is the phenomenon of replicating dynamics from the toxic family system. You can possibly relate the one-sided dynamics in the bullet points above to your own family system.

I believe getting into narcissistic relationships for survivors is more about growing up without having anyone who was concerned for our safety. We didn't have the experience to watch out for ourselves because someone else was modeling that.

In addition to that form of neglect, many of our parents exhibited narcissistic traits. Telling the truth, pushing back, or establishing boundary lines were highly dangerous for children.

However, as adults, we can now practice and reclaim what was lost: simply having some power. That can be as small as changing plans or as big as letting a narcissistic person in our life go.

Journal Prompt #1

Create a list of partners, friends, siblings, coworkers, and family where you experienced a one-way street in the relationship. Create six columns in the following categories, like in an inventory.

1. The person
2. How it was one-sided (examples)
3. What did that cost you (money, time, triggers to feeling less than others)
4. What would happen if you pushed back? (their reaction)
5. What is the fear of being in conflict with such people? (they are hurt, they talk about you, you feel shame,)
6. Reserve a sixth column for journal prompt #6

Journal Prompt #2

What was your family's version model of the following healthy family issues?

1. Conflict resolution – (productive fights)
2. Affecting others – (a parent stops teasing you when you speak up and discuss it with them)
3. Negotiating preferences and responsibilities (working out logistics while considering all involved)
4. Helping with disappointment (considering another's feelings)

Journal Prompt #3

Focusing on your inner child and thinking of Journal Prompt #2, what does your inner child believe about any of the following in the context of narcissistic people?

My inner child believes this about:

- Voicing unfairness
- Being direct about another person's dysfunction or blind spots (being real)
- Having another person being mad at you and or talking negatively about you with others
- Disappointing them (being human)
- Abandoning them when they are abusive

Journal Prompt #5

Write about examples that you've seen others do that model good boundaries. These would feel intimidating as the inner child often reads empowered boundaries as selfish and unempathetic.

For context – a hypothetical.

John has had a troubled friend since childhood, Matt. In adulthood, Matt needs a ride or has to meet in his area whenever they get together. Matt says meeting halfway is too crazy with traffic. John is in the habit of not letting things bother him, so he does what's necessary for the friendship.

Matt will randomly borrow over \$400, which he never pays back fully but does pay some back in drips and drabs or pays %60 of a dinner they have together for a good show. John once calculated that he only received \$125 back from a \$300 loan to Matt. Matt has his own version of math.

Matt never shows up for John, even letting him know last minute that he couldn't make his wedding two years ago for vague reasons. Whenever John tries to let him know he is frustrated, hurt, or disgusted, Matt gets reactive and dramatic and shames John for not seeing that Matt is going through a tough time, and he can't believe he is bringing this up now.

John is triggered to shame and goes back to the cycle of doing for Matt, being taken advantage of and feeling it, and struggling with bringing it up again or not.

It's easier to think of boundaries for someone else than ourselves when we are experiencing what John is going through with his narcissistic friend Matt.

Write examples of what John could be doing if he were in his inner adult and fearless of Matt's reaction.

Examples of boundaries and non-negotiables in this example.

1. Not agreeing to lend money – it's not good for the friendship.
2. Only agreeing to lend money once all balances are paid back.
3. Bringing up why he didn't attend the wedding – seeking honesty – secrets create distrust
4. Declining getting together unless it's at a reasonable mid-way point.

5. Not taking in Matt shaming him about real issues. “We all have stuff going on; picking the right time isn’t healthy or realistic. I still need to know about paying me back despite your feelings.”
6. Make the statement - “You’re losing me as a friend.” – giving the person an opportunity to become emotionally sober, listing a few specific reasons (money, secrecy, drama).
7. Bring up the one-sidedness, not as a dump job or list but rather as simply the facts that affect John.

Journal Prompt #6

From your inner adult space, refer to the inventory (columns) in prompt #1 and write some examples of non-negotiables and boundaries. Write out what you could have done in retrospect. This is not to feel shame but to know what could have been some options if we were so focused on the person’s responses or the outcomes, like setting a boundary with a sibling who was struggling with substances.

Pay attention to what comes up here. You may feel anger or grief. Remember that you were set up in childhood to accept that you have nothing to work with. In the hypothetical, John is a childhood trauma survivor who is very familiar with picking up all slack for people who don’t see him.

Final thoughts.

*If you struggle with the fear of how people will respond – this is a process, but the most significant growth comes from pushing back against abusive people.

*That said, some situations aren’t as easy as John saying no. Sometimes it’s a forty-year marriage or a boss where the stakes or the power dynamics are different.

*Regarding letting someone go, it would be appropriate for John to let go of Matt when Matt is not taking anything in. This is triggering and painful, but unfortunately, we are often in a place of choosing ourselves and our self-respect over the same old same old.