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Triage and Toxic Behavior in the Team Setting: Diagnosis, Solutions, and Prevention

The Toxic One.

- Bad behavior and terminology: emotional abuse, malignant narcissism, bullying, non-violent abuse, and the culturally acceptable bully.
- The Toxic One's Mantra: "I will make you do what I want because I can."
- Example: the bully landlord. Identifying if/then ultimatums

The Role of ACT

- The triage model: Clients, Team, Individuals
- Cultural messages, SES, and power
- Power and erroneous beliefs of the mental health system: Client GAF = clinician skill/value
- Abuses of power on the team: ultimatums, withdrawal of services, empathy, or support
- Examples: "If you don't take your meds, you don't get your money" balanced against the collusion of the covert narcissist. (the difference between toxicity toward clients and toward co-workers)

Culturally-Approved Bullying

- Bully: "A person who uses strength or power to harm or intimidate those who are weaker."
- Culturally-acceptable abuse: passive, non-violent, emotions as leverage and camouflage
- Learned behaviors and roles
- Definition of emotional abuse: "... the systematic diminishment of another. It may be intentional or subconscious (or both), but it is always a choice of conduct, not a single event. It is designed to reduce a child's self-concept to the point where the victim considers himself unworthy..."
- Examples: the aggressor defines (thus compounding) the injury.
 - "In my view, it was proper this case was dismissed, primarily because I did not do what the U.S. Attorney in Los Angeles accused me of doing."
 - "Her biggest concern has always been that this not materially affect the victim or her child. She wants to make sure the way it's being handled doesn't make that worse."
 - "I don't like being cast in the role of martyr—as a noble Ayn Rand character... but my only crime is having wanted Spokane to grow."

Collaborators

- Appease and capitulate: “be nice and maybe they’ll stop”
- The Toxic One’s ultimatums gain strength with support

Passive-Aggressive Behavior

- Passive aggression is still aggression. Merely disguised.
- Bullies only want guaranteed results
- Is an attempt to re-establish individual’s equilibrium and repair damaged self-esteem. So what.

Narcissism

- The narcissist’s measurement of his own worth is a fluctuating distortion prompted by self-absorption, but not hindered by empathy.
- Does not seek self-improvement, but demands unconditional approval.
- “... these findings suggest that the dangerous aspects of narcissism are not so much simple vanity and self-admiration as the inflated sense of being superior to others and being entitled to special privileges.”
- Grandiose and covert narcissists: clinicians’ needs trumping clinical decisions

Victim/Villain/Hero roles

- Endless rotation as in DV case
- Super-clinicians and uber-cynics

Solutions

“Aberrance functions only within support groups. If aberrance is marginalized, it can’t metastasize.”

What you have to do, whether you’re the team leader or not:

- Be concrete. Ambiguity is the enemy and allows the culturally-acceptable bully to keep defining their own actions... “I didn’t say that, you misunderstood me,” etc.
- Document. Everything. Get in the habit of memorializing conversations that you think might disappear into the ozone. This is a protective measure... If someone is willing to change (or lie about) what they themselves said, why would they have any hesitation to alter what you said? They always have rotating responses to fall back on.
- Be aware when guilt is being used/ be mindful of your own emotional responses... we give in to be nice, even to the aggressor.
- Don’t be a martyr. That self-righteous indignation can feel good, true enough, but that should not be the goal. “Oh, she’s evil,” might feel decent, you get to complain, feel better by comparison, and build comrades among those have also been wronged. But it doesn’t stop the painful behavior.
- Don’t side with the bully in order to get off the firing range. This encourages the behavior (he/she got the desired results with little difficulty) and doesn’t protect you forever. The bully will turn when you’re in the way of something else...
- Maintain boundaries. Someone wants to be *bestest* friends with everybody...
- Set precedent for direct speaking.

If you are the team leader:

- The above applies doubly. Be concrete, specific. Document everything when things start getting worrisome. This is a double-edged sword. You have to be good to your word. If you said something, you have to stick to it. If you have to make a change (in assignments, in expectations) say so, clearly, upfront.
- Confront the Toxic One, sticking to observable behaviors and working toward solutions: “How are you going to fix this?”
- Avoid consensus decision-making... while being in a cluster hierarchy rather than a ladder sounds nice, someone has to make decisions.
- Pay attention to your own emotional responses. Be aware of your own history, your own default modes under stress.
- Be boring. Even if you feel a surge of adrenaline that would allow you to pull a fire hydrant out of the ground, do not show it.
- Kill the triangulation. Joe comes to your office to complain about Steve. You have two choices — tell Joe to figure it out with Steve, or, if this isn’t happening, get them both in your office, or have it out in a full meeting.
- The Toxic One should not benefit from bad behavior. We can perform behavior modification on our coworkers when we need to... The toxic one’s benefit can be preferred outreaches, a choice in caseload, or even to become a personal burden on the supervisor or veteran staff. The supervisor has to triage her own workload and prioritizing a person who has been sucking the life out of the rest of the team will only build resentment from the team.
- Interview *hard* -- we revert to our cores when under stress. Our defenses become more apparent.
- **Ultimatums cannot be ignored or appeased.** Challenge the Toxic One’s “If/ then” statements.

ANDREW Vachss: “Aberrance functions only within support groups. If aberrance is marginalized, it can’t metastasize. So, school bullying: if the bully were ostracized, if the bully was the lowest-status person, if the bully was someone no one wanted to associate with, bullying could not spread. When the culture actually supports bullying, when the culture considers bullying a sign of masculinity, then it spreads. It’s the same thing with an institutional [prison] community: what’s tolerated, what’s not tolerated, what’s supported, what is a sign of actual manhood? So, for the first time, they [the inmates of ANDROS II] were introduced to the concept that the most ‘man’ you can be is when you protect somebody weaker than you, and the least ‘man’ you can be is when you prey on them. Those were new messages, but they weren’t delivered in lectures; they were delivered by total bombardment, so the entire community reflected the culture. Essentially, you’re trying to overcome another culture by replacing it with a different one. In order to change the culture, you have to start *in* the culture. You can’t start from the outside. So, saying we disapprove of bullying—everybody always ‘disapproves’ of bullying. But as long as the bullies are embraced within the school culture, they’ll continue. If you look at bullying logically, then you can see it’s the root of all evil. Not money, but bullying. That’s all it takes: the imposition of your will, your desires, your wishes, on another human being by force or intimidation. You can see it in Rwanda just as easily as you can see it in the schoolyard. Different canvas, different color paint, but it’s exactly the same thing: I can make you do what I want you to do, because I’m stronger than you. It’s not a question that I’m smarter or I’m more ethical or I’m more entitled. I’m simply stronger.”

Excerpted from an interview of Andrew Vachss by Jake Adelstein, Correspondent, Yomiuri Tokyo Bureau (2002), focusing on ANDROS II, a maximum-security prison for “aggressive-violent” youth once directed by Vachss.

[Irreducible minima of ACT]

The Assertive Community Treatment Program operates as a team. And as a team, we are to provide services for a client population designated as the most needy in the field of mental health services. In order to effectively provide these services, the ACT program builds a therapeutic community for the clients.

This therapeutic community is for the benefit of clients, not clinicians. Clinicians are to put the clients first. Outside of any identified safety issues for the clinician or immediate danger presented by the client, our own problems, preferences, and beliefs cannot impact or hinder client care.

Triage demands this. ACT is a triage program. Every day we decide, "What comes first?"

Our schedules must be malleable. We, as clinicians, must be malleable if only to act as buffers between the client and the world.

ACT is not for every clinician; the work can be hard, unrewarding, frustrating, and seemingly without end. Clients keep coming and clinicians keep swimming for the horizon. If there is any clinician need that the ACT team can provide, it is the need to work with this client population.

To work with this population, clinicians must agree to:

- **Accept the responsibility of 24/7 coverage which can include weekend outreaches and crisis calls.**
- **Accept the responsibility to prioritize client needs over the clinician's personal beliefs and preferences.**
- **Accept the responsibility to one's own teammates .**
- **Accept the possibility that our own interpersonal comfort levels will be challenged.**
- **Accept the decision-making hierarchy of the team, which is not a consensus nor a democracy, but a tiered level in which the supervisor is ultimately responsible for clinical direction.**
- **Accept that how one "feels" is not used as a clinical decision-making tool (This does not include countertransference).**
- **Accept that clinical communication with teammates is needed on a daily basis.**
- **Accept that each clinician is willing and able to work with any client, excluding issues of clinician safety.**
- **Accept that each of us *will*, at one time or another, make mistakes; the only acceptable recourse is for the individual to accept the mistake, admit it, and fix it. The duty of the rest of the team will be to respect that response. After a mistake is made, the only unacceptable response is to deny that mistake, pretend it didn't happen, and blame someone else. That latter response is a conscious choice, one that asks other people to deny reality in order avoid conflict. We do not need to have reality questioned. We have enough of that without adding our own shared, non-bizarre delusions...**

Resources

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Self-Esteem, Narcissism, and Aggression: Does Violence Result From Low Self-Esteem or From Threatened Egotism?

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Abstract

A traditional view holds that low self-esteem causes aggression, but recent work has not confirmed this. Although aggressive people typically have high self-esteem, there are also many nonaggressive people with high self-esteem, and so newer constructs such as narcissism and unstable self-esteem are most effective at predicting aggression. The link between self-regard and aggression is best captured by the theory of threatened egotism, which depicts aggression as a means of defending a highly favorable view of self against someone who seeks to undermine or discredit that view.

Keywords

aggression; violence; self-esteem; narcissism

For decades, the prevailing wisdom has held that low self-esteem causes aggression. Many authors have cited or invoked this belief or used it as an implicit assumption to explain their findings regarding other variables (e.g., Gondolf, 1985; Levin & McDevitt, 1993; Staub, 1989). The origins of this idea are difficult to establish. One can search the literature without finding any original theoretical statement of that view, nor is there any seminal investigation that pro-

vided strong empirical evidence that low self-esteem causes aggression. Ironically, the theory seemed to enter into conventional wisdom without ever being empirically established.

The view of low self-esteem that has emerged from many research studies does not, however, seem easily reconciled with the theory that low self-esteem causes aggression. A composite of research findings depicts people with low self-esteem as uncertain and confused about themselves, oriented toward avoiding risk and potential loss, shy, modest, emotionally labile (and having tendencies toward depression and anxiety), submitting readily to other people's influence, and lacking confidence in themselves (see compilation by Baumeister, 1993).

None of these patterns seems likely to increase aggression, and some of them seem likely to discourage it. People with low self-esteem are oriented toward avoiding risk and loss, whereas attacking someone is eminently risky. People with low self-esteem lack confidence of success, whereas aggression is usually undertaken in the expectation of defeating the other person. Low self-esteem involves submitting to influence, whereas aggression is often engaged in to resist and reject external influence. Perhaps most relevant, people with low self-esteem are confused and uncertain about who they are,

whereas aggression is likely to be an attempt to defend and assert a strongly held opinion about oneself.

PAINTING THE PICTURE OF VIOLENT MEN

An alternative to the low-self-esteem theory emerges when one examines what is known about violent individuals. Most research has focused on violent men, although it seems reasonable to assume that violent women conform to similar patterns. Violent men seem to have a strong sense of personal superiority, and their violence often seems to stem from a sense of wounded pride. When someone else questions or disputes their favorable view of self, they lash out in response.

An interdisciplinary literature review (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996) found that favorable self-regard is linked to violence in one sphere after another. Murderers, rapists, wife beaters, violent youth gangs, aggressive nations, and other categories of violent people are all marked by strongly held views of their own superiority. When large groups of people differ in self-esteem, the group with the higher self-esteem is generally the more violent one.

When self-esteem rises or falls as a by-product of other events, aggressive tendencies likewise tend to covary, but again in a pattern precisely opposite to what the low-self-esteem theory predicts. People with manic depression, for example, tend to be more aggressive and violent during their manic stage (marked by highly favorable views of self) than during the depressed phase (when self-esteem is low). Alcohol intoxication has been shown to boost self-esteem temporarily, and it also boosts aggressive tendencies. Changes in the relative

self-esteem levels of African-American and white American citizens have been accompanied by changes in relative violence between the groups, and again in the direction opposite to the predictions of the low-self-esteem view. Hence, it appears that aggressive, violent people hold highly favorable opinions of themselves. Moreover, the aggression ensues when these favorable opinions are disputed or questioned by other people. It therefore seems plausible that aggression results from threatened egotism.

AGGRESSION, HOSTILITY, AND SELF-REGARD

Thus, the low-self-esteem theory is not defensible. Should behavioral scientists leap to the opposite conclusion, namely, that high self-esteem causes violence? No. Although clearly many violent individuals have high self-esteem, it is also necessary to know whether many exceptionally nonviolent individuals also have high self-esteem.

Perhaps surprisingly, direct and controlled studies linking self-esteem to aggression are almost nonexistent. Perhaps no one has ever bothered to study the question, but this seems unlikely. Instead, it seems more plausible that such investigations have been done but have remained unpublished because they failed to find any clear or direct link. Such findings would be consistent with the view that the category of people with high self-esteem contains both aggressive and nonaggressive individuals.

One of the few studies to link self-esteem to hostile tendencies found that people with high self-esteem tended to cluster at both the hostile and the nonhostile extremes (Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay,

1989). The difference lay in stability of self-esteem, which the researchers assessed by measuring self-esteem on several occasions and computing how much variability each individual showed over time. People whose self-esteem was high as well as stable—thus, people whose favorable view of self was largely impervious to daily events—were the least prone to hostility of any group. In contrast, people with high but unstable self-esteem scored highest on hostility. These findings suggest that violent individuals are one subset of people with high self-esteem. High self-esteem may well be a mixed category, containing several different kinds of people. One of those kinds is very nonaggressive, whereas another is quite aggressive.

The view that individuals with high self-esteem form a heterogeneous category is gaining ground among researchers today. Some researchers, like Kernis and his colleagues, have begun to focus on stability of self-esteem. Others are beginning to use related constructs, such as narcissism. Narcissism is defined by grandiose views of personal superiority, an inflated sense of entitlement, low empathy toward others, fantasies of personal greatness, a belief that ordinary people cannot understand one, and the like (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). These traits seem quite plausibly linked to aggression and violence, especially when the narcissist encounters someone who questions or disputes his or her highly favorable assessment of self. Narcissism has also been linked empirically to high but unstable self-esteem, so narcissism seems a very promising candidate for aggression researchers to study.

We have recently undertaken laboratory tests of links among self-esteem, narcissism, and aggression (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). In two studies, participants

were insulted (or praised) by a confederate posing as another participant, and later they were given an opportunity to aggress against that person (or another person) by means of sounding an aversive blast of loud noise. In both studies, the highest levels of aggression were exhibited by people who had scored high on narcissism and had been insulted. Self-esteem by itself had no effect on aggression, and neither did either high or low self-esteem in combination with receiving the insult. These results confirmed the link between threatened egotism and aggression and contradicted the theory that low self-esteem causes violence.

Narcissism has thus taken center stage as the form of self-regard most closely associated with violence. It is not, however, entirely fair to depict narcissists as generally or indiscriminately aggressive. In our studies (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998), narcissists' aggression did not differ from that of other people as long as there was no insulting provocation. Narcissism is thus not directly a cause of aggression and should instead be understood as a risk factor that can contribute to increasing a violent, aggressive response to provocation. The causal role of the provocation itself (in eliciting aggression by narcissists) is clearly established by the experimental findings.

Moreover, even when the narcissists were insulted, they were no more aggressive than anyone else toward an innocent third person. These patterns show that the aggression of narcissists is a specifically targeted, socially meaningful response. Narcissists are heavily invested in their high opinion of themselves, and they want others to share and confirm this opinion. When other people question or undermine the flattering self-portrait of the narcissist, the narcissist turns aggressive in response, but only toward those specific people. The ag-

gression is thus a means of defending and asserting the grandiose self-view.

Do laboratory studies really capture what happens out in the real world, where violence often takes much more serious and deadly forms than pushing a button to deliver a blast of aversive noise? To answer this question, we conducted another study in which we obtained self-esteem and narcissism scores from incarcerated violent felons (Bushman, Baumeister, Phillips, & Gilligan, 1999). We assumed that the prisoners' responses to some items (e.g., "I certainly feel useless at times") would be affected by being in prison as well as by the salient failure experience of having been arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced. These factors would be expected to push all scores toward low self-esteem and low narcissism.

Despite any such tendency, however, the prisoners' scores again pointed toward high narcissism as the major cause of aggression. The self-esteem scores of this group were comparable to the scores of published samples. The narcissism scores, meanwhile, were significantly higher than the published norms from all other studies. In particular, the prisoners outscored the baselines from other (nonincarcerated) groups to the largest degree on subscales measuring entitlement and superiority. (Again, though, the fact that the participants were in prison might have artificially lowered scores on some items, such as vanity, exhibitionism, and authority.) These findings suggest that the dangerous aspects of narcissism are not so much simple vanity and self-admiration as the inflated sense of being superior to others and being entitled to special privileges. It is apparently fine to love oneself quietly—instead, the interpersonal manifestations of narcissism are the ones associated with violence.

DEEP DOWN INSIDE

A common question raised about these findings is whether the apparent egotism of aggressive, violent people is simply a superficial form of bluster that is put on to conceal deep-rooted insecurities and self-doubts. This question is actually an effort to salvage the low-self-esteem theory, because it suggests that aggressive people really do have low self-esteem but simply act as if they do not. For example, perhaps murderers and wife beaters really perceive themselves as inferior beings, and their aggressive assertion of superiority is just a cover-up.

The question can be handled on either conceptual or empirical grounds. Empirically, some investigators have sought to find this inner core of self-doubt and reported that they could not do so. For example, Olweus (1994) specifically rejected the view that playground bullies secretly have low self-esteem, and Jankowski (1991) likewise concluded that members of violent gangs do not carry around a load of inner insecurities or self-doubts. Likewise, a number of experts who study narcissism have reported that they could not support the traditional clinical view of an egotistical outer shell concealing inner self-loathing. Virtually all studies that have measured self-esteem and narcissism have found positive correlations between the two, indicating that narcissists have high self-esteem.

Even if such evidence could be found, though, the view that low self-esteem causes aggression would still be wrong. It is by now clear that overt low self-esteem does not cause aggression. How can hidden low self-esteem cause aggression if nonhidden low self-esteem has no such effect? The only possible response is that the hidden quality of that low self-esteem

would be decisive. Yet focusing the theory on the hidden quality of low self-esteem requires one to consider what it is that is hiding it—which brings the analysis back to the surface veneer of egotism. Thus, again, it would be the sense of superiority that is responsible for aggression, even if one could show that that sense of superiority is only on the surface and conceals an underlying low self-esteem. And no one has shown that, anyway.

CONCLUSION

It is time to abandon the quest for direct, simple links between self-esteem and aggression. The long-standing view that low self-esteem causes violence has been shown to be wrong, and the opposite view implicating high self-esteem is too simple. High self-esteem is a characteristic of both highly aggressive individuals and exceptionally nonaggressive ones, and so attempts at direct prediction tend to be inconclusive. Moreover, it is unwarranted to conclude that self-views directly cause aggression. At best, a highly favorable self-view constitutes a risk factor for turning violent in response to perceptions that one's favorable view of self has been disputed or undermined by others.

Researchers have started trying to look more closely at the people with high self-esteem in order to find the aggressive ones. Patterns of narcissism and instability of self-esteem have proven successful in recent investigations, although more research is needed. At present, the evidence best fits the view that aggression is most likely when people with a narcissistically inflated view of their own personal superiority encounter someone who explicitly disputes that opinion. Aggression is thus a means of

defending a highly favorable view of self against someone who seeks (even unwittingly) to deflate it. Threatened egotism, rather than low self-esteem, is the most explosive recipe for violence.

Further research can benefit by discarding the obsolete view that low self-esteem causes violence and building on the findings about threatened egotism. It would be helpful to know whether a highly favorable view of self contributes to violent response by increasing the perception of insult (i.e., by making people oversensitive) or instead by simply producing a more aggressive response to the same perceived provocation. Further, research on whether narcissistic individuals would aggress against people who know bad information about them (but have not specifically asserted it themselves) would shed light on whether it is the critical view itself or the expression of it that is decisive. Another question is what exactly narcissistic people hope to accomplish by responding

violently to an insult: After all, violence does not really refute criticism in any meaningful way, but it may discourage other people from voicing similar criticisms. The emotion processes involved in egotistical violence also need to be illuminated: How exactly do the shameful feelings of being criticized transform into aggressive outbursts, and does aggression genuinely make the aggressor feel better?

Recommended Reading

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