

Daughters of Narcissistic Mothers

Stephanie Kriesberg: [00:00:00]

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Debbie Sorensen: That was Stephanie Kriesberg on Psychologist off the clock.

Yael Schonbrun: We are three clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science-based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work and health.

Debbie Sorensen: I'm Dr. [00:01:00] Debbie Sorensen, practicing in Mile high Denver, Colorado, author of Act Daily Journal, the Act Daily Card Deck, and the upcoming book Act for Burnout.

Yael Schonbrun: I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston-based clinical psychologist, assistant professor at Brown University, and author of the book Work Parent Thrive.

Jill Stoddard: And from Coastal New England. I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard, author of Be Mighty, the big book of Act metaphors and the Upcoming Imposter. No more.

Debbie Sorensen: We hope you take what you learn here to build a rich and meaningful life.

Jill Stoddard: Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock.

Debbie Sorensen: Hi everyone, this is Debbie, and today I'm bringing you a conversation with Stephanie Kriesberg and she has a lot of expertise on working with women who have mothers who are narcissistic, and she has a book out on that topic. And I'm here with Yael to introduce the episode and talk a little bit about some of what impacted us about this conversation and about Stephanie's.

Yael Schonbrun: So she uses acceptance and commitment therapy to talk about [00:02:00] how she helps patients who come into our office who have mothers who.

Are narcissistic and one of the moments that really stuck with me was towards the end of your conversation where she talks about how many of her, the people that she works with, say, you know, I can accept that my mother has these certain characteristics that make it hard for me to relate to her in the ways that would be satisfying for me.

if I can accept it, why do I still feel so bad? And she says, well, it, there's kind of multiple levels of acceptance. And one part of the acceptance is accepting the feelings that go along with having a relationship that is so important that can't meet your needs in the ways that we would want it to meet your needs.

And there's something about that, like accepting the feelings and accepting that it's not gonna be comfortable and not gonna be the way that you want, and allowing for those feelings to be. not liking them. Not saying it's okay, but allowing for that experience to happen that I think is, it's just so poignant and, and it is so painful.

And just [00:03:00] so powerful. So I think there's so much in this book and in this conversation that's powerful, but, but that, that part really has stuck with.

Debbie Sorensen: I think that these kinds of relationships, you know, clearly the mother daughter relationship is a big one, and we talk about why that, why that is in this conversation with Stephanie, but, but I think anytime you're in a really complicated and difficult relationship like this, I mean, it can be really emotionally draining and

One of the things that people sometimes really need to do for themselves, you know, to kind of protect themselves and to take care of themselves and and nurture their own needs, is that they need to learn how to speak up and set boundaries. You know, and it. Big boundaries sometimes in a really.

difficult situation, like, you know, cutting off contact to some degree or another in extreme cases, but it could also be smaller boundaries. Like, I'm not gonna answer the phone right now, or I'm gonna tell this person no, that I'm gonna speak up for my needs. And I think that doing that takes a lot of courage.

It's not easy to speak up. I think it can be really hard and scary, [00:04:00] especially if there's a decades long pattern of it not going that way. I think it can

be, you know, you have to sort of use all of your emotional willing. Skills. It's very courageous, I think.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, a hundred percent. And that is why acceptance and commitment therapy, the, the treatment that we practice and the treatment that Stephanie uses as the framework of her book is so powerful because it helps you to sit with the uncomfortable feelings, but also to be clear on what kinds of actions would be valuable, aligned, given this circumstance of having this super important relationship that.

Perform in particular ways that would be ideal, that would be more satisfying, that would be more healthy. The other thing that I just wanted to say is I, I think this topic of mother-daughter relationships is such an important one, and it's actually not something we talk about a huge amount. We talk about parenting, but not specifically adult daughters and their mothers.

But I was just thinking that there's, um, I know that you recently read this book. By Jeanette [00:05:00] McCurdy. I'm glad my mom died and I was just listening to a podcast interview with Peggy Orenstein about her new book, unraveling What I Learned About Life while Shearing Sheep Dying Wool and making the world's ugliest sweater.

And I just think in the bookstores, this is such a common topic and it's something, you know, you, me and Jill are all adult daughters of mothers. It's an important relationship and it, it's such a great opportunity on this podcast to, to sort of dive into some of the complications of this super important relationship.

Debbie Sorensen: Absolutely. Yeah. Actually, that book, I'm glad you mentioned that book. I wasn't even thinking about it, but that book that I read, it's a memoir. I'm glad my, my mom died. It is such a powerful, it's kind of gut-wrenching, so it's not for the faint of heart. If you, if you be wa be aware of that. But if you want a memoir that really shows, I think a pretty extreme version of this, but also one that really, uh, that really powerfully illustrates what it's like to have a, a mother who's on the extreme end of [00:06:00] narcissism, um, is definitely worth a read.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, so I guess our audience members can pick up both Stephanie's book and Jeanette McCurdy's

Debbie Sorensen: That's right, . That's right. We have no shortage of book recommendations on the podcast, do we? If you listen to this podcast, you probably end up buying more books than you know what to do with. Um, and

actually, speaking of, I don't know if our listeners all know this, but , we have a psychologist off the clock page on bookshop.org where we list all of our books that have been featured by our guests , as well as our psychologists off the clock book club selections.

We link to that on our webpage. If anyone is interested in looking at all the books that we feature on the podcast, check it out.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. And it also features the books that we ourselves have written.

Then you have a great one coming out next year too, and Jill has one coming out in the fall,

So we hope you check out that bookshop.

Debbie Sorensen: And in the meantime, we hope you enjoyed this conversation with Stephanie Kriesberg.

Debbie Sorensen: My guest today, Dr. Stephanie Kriesberg, is a clinical [00:07:00] psychologist who has practiced for over 25 years with a private practice outside of Boston, Massachusetts.

She helps adults with narcissistic parents lead healthier, happier lives. She is currently the president-elect of the New England Society for Clinical Hypnosis, and she has written a book called adult Daughters of Narcissistic Mothers. Quiet the critical voice in your head, heal self-doubt, and live the life you deserve.

Stephanie, welcome to Psychologists Off the Clock. Thank you so much for being here today.

Stephanie Kriesberg: Well, Debbie, thank you so much for having me. As I've told you, I'm a longtime listener and I'm just really delighted to be here.

Debbie Sorensen: Yes, well, thank you. We appreciate that. Stephanie just said she's a. A longtime listener, first time guest. So we're excited to have a, a fan of the show on today to talk to us about your really interesting work. Um, and I was just saying to you before we started the conversation, you know, I do see this in my clinical practice, [00:08:00] um, occasionally.

I don't specialize in it, so I probably don't see it as much as you do, but this. Women coming in who have had this experience that you write about of having a mother who has narcissistic traits, and I know that you were telling me that that is something that you work with quite a lot in your practice as well.

Stephanie Kriesberg: Mm-hmm.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah.

Stephanie Kriesberg: That's right. And you know, really how I came into this is I spent, you know, many years working with kids, teenagers, families, and, you know, individual women. And then over time I started seeing some patterns in some of the issues that women, the women were struggling with and realizing the, issues that I saw in terms of their relat.

With, uh, relationships with their mothers and, what we call narcissism. And I just got intrigued, started studying more [00:09:00] about it, learning more about it, and that's how this work came about in terms of the relationship and the impact of having a narcissistic mother and how women feel in their adult lives.

Debbie Sorensen: Okay. And we're gonna get into that a little bit later in the, the interview. Some of some examples of the types of patterns that you've seen with, with the people that you've worked with. I wanna start off with some basics though, just so that the listeners are oriented to what, what this means and what it looks like.

And actually, I wanna start with something even more basic, which is why mothers and daughters, you know, you could have written a book. about daughters and fathers, about mothers and sons, fathers and sons. But there is, does seem to be something specific and maybe something important about the relationship between daughters and mothers is, why do you think that that was an important area to focus on?

Stephanie Kriesberg: Well, I mean, I will have to say for one thing, that's certainly what showed up more in my [00:10:00] practice. I mean, I think we all know in the field that, um, women come to therapy much more often than men. and so I was seeing a lot more of that in my practice. But yes, there, you're right, Debbie. There is something more particular.

at least in, my, the work that I found, I poignant in what I was seeing in how women felt invisible, unseen in their adult lives, not knowing what they felt,

having difficulties, setting boundaries, feeling a great sense of shame, and mostly struggling with this constant, critical voice in their. And many of them would actually say, I can hear my mother's voice.

I know it's my mother's voice in my head. And I just, I can't turn it off. And so that's really how this came about. They really felt like their mother was on their shoulder even though they were fully grown, functioning [00:11:00] women.

Debbie Sorensen: You know, it's interesting because I think even if a mother doesn't have a lot of narcissism going on, sometimes it is true that I think that the mother's voice is really loud for women.

Stephanie Kriesberg: Mm-hmm.

Debbie Sorensen: men too, probably. But for women, I think, and I often think that mothers even, generally good moms, you know, sometimes they do have a little, they're, they're maybe trying to be helpful, but sometimes there is a little criticism.

And I know Deborah Tannen has written about this, I don't know if you're familiar with her

Stephanie Kriesberg: Oh, I am with her wonderful books about language. Yes.

Debbie Sorensen: Yes. And about how specifically sometimes conversations between mothers and daughters can, you know, in can have a critical edge to them, which can then turn into kind of a self-critical voice.

Do you agree?

Stephanie Kriesberg: Oh, absolutely. And One thing I wanna say, and this brings me to a, an important point, is that this is not a book about mother bashing and saying, [00:12:00] oh, these are terrible mothers and, you know, we should hate these mothers. Um, that, you know, The mother-daughter relationship is very particular and very intense.

And, you know, women who struggle with these, you know, traits of narcissism, which I know we'll discuss more later. Um, you know, no one means no one wants to be a narcissistic mother. This is not, uh, a fun or rewarding way to live. Yet it has a big impact on their. on their daughters. I mean, I'm a mother myself.

I have two daughters in their twenties. I know it's a really hard job and I would certainly do some things differently if I could. So I just kind of like to give that caveat at the beginning.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. And you mentioned that in your book and I'm, I'm glad you do give that caveat that it is. Room for I think empathy and understanding here because it is, first of all, yeah, I have two daughters as well, and it's hard to be a mom and also that it's hard, the, the, maybe [00:13:00] some of the behaviors that you see in a narcissistic parent are coming from a place of suffering.

You know? It's not something that people are wanting to be like this or choosing to be like this. I appreciate that.

Stephanie Kriesberg: Yeah. Thank you. I think that, you know, people come into parenting with good intentions. And so, this book, you know, the book and, you know, and this conversation, it's really about understanding and helping women understand themselves and learn skills and strategies to, to move forward.

Debbie Sorensen: Well, and that's a great segue into understanding narcissism because I think that words like narcissism and constructs like narcissism can be helpful to understand. . Okay, I understand this behavior pattern now I see what's going on here. Um, when it comes specifically to narcissism, I'm really curious your thoughts on this.

I think sometimes, I think sometimes people use it without really understanding what it means, and then [00:14:00] there are also people on the other side who are. Really reluctant to use the label because I think they associate the word narcissism with, you know, the most extreme version of narcissism. So I was wondering if you could give your point of view about that.

You know, what are some of the core features of narcissism and could you kind of talk about it in terms of that continuum that we see?

Stephanie Kriesberg: Yes, absolutely. And I'm glad that you brought up the fact that it's a continuum because you know, I certainly agree with that point of view. And you know, it's psychology and you know, so there are certainly are different perspectives. So I will give, you know, my perspective on it. So, If we talk just in general about, you know, what's personality, it is a constellation, a group of traits or characteristics, sort of like a puzzle.

And so the traits are different pieces of that. Puzzle. Okay. And so in [00:15:00] narcissism, I agree with the perspective that the main trait inside these people is what, Dr. Romney, who talks a lot about narcissism calls pathological. Insecurity. Okay. And that is the core feature. And then everything else that surrounds it, kind of comes from that.

So, and usually this pathological insecurity comes from a combination of, you know, your temperament, your wiring, how you came into the world, and then your experiences growing up, which were often, you know, not, not very good. Okay. You didn't get ideal parenting yourself. So then we have basic two different. Styles one we call grandiose or overt, and [00:16:00] that's the kind of person that most people tend to think of. Okay? That is a person who has a really big personality, is really full of themselves, thinks they're really great, talks about themselves all the time. Maybe the kind of person you see on like a reality TV show or a politician.

All right. And. Then we have a very different style, and this is important because often people say, I didn't know that could be a narcissist. That's kind of like what my mother was like, this person can be very depressed, anxious, needy, and they're narcissism, they're insecurity. Their need to be the most important person shows up in having other people.

Have to take care of them. Okay. They're very vulnerable. So that's sort of a main overview. I'll just stop for there for a moment.[00:17:00]

Debbie Sorensen: Okay. Yeah, no, I, that's really helpful. So this, so sometimes it might not be what you think of when you think of that very extreme, over the top grandiose narcissism, which I think is the, kind of the stereotype of narcissism and also it's, you know, the, to the level where it's maybe considered narcissistic personality disorder, but a lot of times it's, it's a little bit more. what's,

Stephanie Kriesberg: It might be. It might be more subtle. It might be hard to see it just, it might be something that you wouldn't identify it because the core is, the core features of the world revolves around me. I am the most important person, whether it's because I seem so brash and confident and I just kind of whip my way through the world, or because I'm very needy and vulnerable and I need everyone to take care of.

You mentioned it occurring on a spectrum, so some people might [00:18:00] have just a few traits or it might show up some of the time. So if somebody's life is going well, their narcissism, for instance, their self-esteem, Might not be that

impacted. So really what we know about narcissists, this is, uh, important, is that their self-esteem is regulated completely from the outside. in now. That's true to some degree for all of us. You know, if something really good happens to us or to a loved one, we feel good, right? Of course. But inside we have a sense of self that is relatively solid, that isn't so fragile that if something, You know, not good happens that we just fall apart or we become angry and enraged at someone else that we always need other people to.

Buffer us [00:19:00] up to keep us feeling like we are decent, that we are good people. So if you are on the far end of the narcissistic spectrum, then you are constantly looking for other people. To make you feel good about yourself. So if you can imagine if you're someone's child, then your accomplishments or you're paying attention to your parent, or you're meeting your parents' needs is paramount because that's what keeps your parents good inside.

That is a really hard way to grow up. And if you need. Most of the time, that's really problematic. Now, maybe you don't need that all of the time. You just need it some of the time. Then maybe that's not so hard on the child. You're not quite as fragile. It's still problematic because then it's confusing to the child.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. I think actually that's a question [00:20:00] I was gonna ask you. I'll just go ahead and ask it now, is this idea of the relationship is a little bit, the dynamic between the, the parent and the child is a little bit off of what you usually see because I think you call it the upside down family, right? Where the child is kind of.

There to meet the needs of the parents. Could you say a little bit more about that? About how the child, you know, when, when you're growing up, how you interface with a parent like that? Typically,

Stephanie Kriesberg: Right. So it might be that, you know, you are there to kind of feed the parents' self-esteem. Maybe you know it's really important to your parent that you. Be an accomplished athlete. And so even if that's not really your thing or not something that you're really good at, you know you have to meet. You have to do that to make your parent feel good.

And if you are not doing that well or well enough, That parent is gonna be really upset with you and you know that you [00:21:00] know that you are not good enough. If you can't meet the parent's needs in that way, maybe the parent is gonna feel really upset or angry or depressed if you don't perform well at a certain, you know, game or meet.

And that brings us to another, some of the other key characteristics of people who struggle with narcissism is one they have. Difficulties with emotion regulation. So they don't know what they're feeling. They can't identify their own feelings, so they might get really angry, but just explode and then just deny their own emotions.

They don't have any self-awareness of their emotions, so they might put everything onto the child. It's the child's fault. So the child then feels responsible for the parent's wellbeing. and happiness. So that's why it becomes upside down rather than the parent being there to say, wow, that was a tough game, but you [00:22:00] know, it's okay and maybe the next game will be better.

Or the child feels bad for disappointing the parent.

Debbie Sorensen:

What are some of the other indicators? You've mentioned quite a few already, but what are some of the other indicators that there might be, you know, some narcissism going on?

Stephanie Kriesberg: Okay, so some of the other key indicators, are that your parent would, you might have a parent who would find that takes advantage of other people, is very entitled, cannot tolerate criticism, and that's because they're. Um, so sensitive. They're so sensitive because their own, we're all going, we're constantly going back to that inner sense of self that is so fragile.

They might exaggerate their own. Importance. They might blow it out of proportion. They need a lot of attention and [00:23:00] admiration, and that might be whether they're grandiose or fragile. And they're mostly, the world revolves. Around them. Okay. And it just depends on what the style is on the outside. And the most, you know, I think important, one of the most important characteristics is a lack of empathy.

Okay. That's sort of another. Theme is that they don't understand their own emotions and they're really unable to understand or empathize with or validate their child's emotions. And that's so often why adults who are raised by narcissistic parents grow up not understanding their own emotions or feeling that their emotions. are valid and that leads to so many of the things they [00:24:00] struggle with, as adults.

Debbie Sorensen: I made a note of this from the book, that a parent can't teach emotional intelligence skills she doesn't have. Right. So I think it's really important if the parent is struggling in some of these ways with understanding their own emotions and having that kind of emotion, regulation skills and that type of thing, the child needs to be learning those along the way, but sometimes they may have missed that.

I think that's really interest.

Stephanie Kriesberg: Right. And you know, we as parents, we as mothers, you know, we don't have to be perfect at that. Right. And you know, a lot of us were not, certainly not taught that growing up.

But with a narcissist, what you will find is that they, they truly have, such little access to their own inner world, or if they do, their emotions are really focused on themselves. How do I. about something and another thing that may [00:25:00] happen as far. Empathy goes, is that in psychology, you know, we're starting to have a more nuanced understanding of empathy.

So we used to just kind of think of empathy as something we call emotional empathy, which is just being able to, you know, which is being able to understand someone else's feeling, put yourself in their shoes, and then hopefully validate. Really validate meaning, being able to say that in words, I, I get what you're feeling.

It doesn't mean you understand, you agree or condone it, you just, you get it. But now we have an understanding of something called cognitive empathy, which some people call it cold empathy. I don't really like that term so much, but cognitive empathy means you get it intellectually, but you don't feel it. and research is showing that, showing that that's something that narcissists can often attain. They [00:26:00] can get somebody's emotions intellectually and maybe say it, say their feelings back, but it's not something that someone else really feels. it's not really felt, and that is often very confusing to a child, an adolescent, a young adult, because they're saying, well, my parent is saying the right words, but I don't feel, I don't feel warmth, I don't feel validated, and it's.

confusing, and then you begin to doubt yourself.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, I think that's so important because I do think that word confusing is really helpful because sometimes they might look on the surface. kind and caring, or they're, like you said, they're saying the right words or they might appear, like you said, vulnerable, the vulnerable types. [00:27:00] And so,

you know, in the book you, you have some mention of gaslighting and that idea of sometimes you can't quite trust your own experience because what you're feeling is not reflecting.

What's being, or because what you're feeling is being sort of dismissed in that way or something like that.

Stephanie Kriesberg: Right, right. And gaslighting is something, and I think gaslighting and you know, is very common in, well, when, often when you're dealing with a, a narcissist and, and with narcissistic parents. And I think it's much more subtle in the parent, child, parent adolescent, relationship than what we think of.

Debbie Sorensen: Just for people who may not be familiar, what does gaslighting look like? What does that mean?

Stephanie Kriesberg: Okay, so what what gaslighting is, is it's when [00:28:00] someone denies your reality, but not just your, actual reality. Like it's, , they turn off the light and it's dark in the room and, but actually tell you, oh, it's perfectly bright in here. I don't know why you're saying it's dark. And that comes from the original movie and play where the term comes from, which we can talk about if you, if you want.

Um, so the, where the term comes from is, which was originally a play back in the NI 1940s. And there's this terrible husband who decides he wants to drive his wife literally crazy, because he wants to get her money. So throughout the movie, he does these various things to make her feel like she's going crazy.

So one of the things that he does is they have gas. [00:29:00] Back then in the house and cuz it really takes place much earlier. And he will turn the lights off or lower the lights and she'll say It's dark in here. All of a sudden, why is it dark? And he'll say it's a dark. Something's wrong with you. What's, what's must be something wrong with you?

And he does things like this throughout, so by the end she starts to, you know, just fall apart. And so that's where the term Gaslight came, came from. And it was, you know, just became part of our, our terminology. But in truth, gaslighting is more than just denying sort of your sense of reality. It's denying your emotional reality, your sense of self, your sense of your own mind, and it happens over and over when.

it comes from your [00:30:00] parent who is raising you so that it really, affects how you feel about yourself, your sense of security, your sense of your own, abilities. So here, you know, could be, a perfectly good example. Let's just say, you know, You're growing up and your sister gets, the lead part in the school play.

And so, you know, everyone's excited and you say to your mother, oh, I'm so excited. That's great that Susie got the lead. She's real. She was really practice hard for her audition. And your mom turns to you and says, are you jealous? You've always been jealous of Susie. And then, you know, you're completely taken aback because you didn't say anything about being jealous.

You didn't think you were jealous. Doesn't make any sense, but you are jealous because mom. [00:31:00] Maybe she heard something in your voice. It sounded like you were jealous, and now all of a sudden you start, you start doubting yourself. Uh, maybe you are a jealous person. Maybe you really aren't happy. Maybe you're a bad person and you're really jealous of your sister.

And so these are the kinds of. Things that you know might be happening, or maybe your mom is talks to you and is angry at you about a grade on a test, and you say like, you know, why are you so angry at me? You know, I really studied, I did the best I can. I'm not angry. I, I don't understand why you're saying that.

I'm, I'm angry. So, you know, you're just so sensitive. Uh, so. You start to doubt your own perceptions of what does an emotion sound like? Your own feelings about it hurt you because you knew your mother sounded angry at you. So [00:32:00] this gets layered on, you know, year after year experience after experience.

So then as you grow up, you feel like maybe, I don't know what I. Maybe it's not okay to speak up because you know who is going to really care about my opinion. If you do wanna speak up about something you think, well, maybe, maybe that's not really okay. What I want, or what I think, or what I feel, which makes it so hard to set boundaries or limits, or to take care of yourself.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. Yeah. It kind of turns the tables on you and gets you really out of touch with, you know, your own needs and with your own ability to trust yourself. Right. With what's going on. Yeah. You know, one thing that I thought was so interesting from your book that I didn't really. Think about before I read it, is [00:33:00] how that dynamic when you're a child growing up

in a home with a narcissistic mother, how that impacts the other relationships within the family.

And I don't know how common that is in your experience. It seems like it might be. But just in terms of, you know, siblings or the other parent and the bonds that are formed in the family, could you talk a little bit about that? Because I thought that was really.

Stephanie Kriesberg: Yeah, sure. , if there is another parent in the family, um, you know, that can go different ways. Sometimes the other parent is really, just. Kind of silenced by the narcissistic parent and just sort of, you know, they're a very intimidating person and just. Exist to sort of serve that parent's need.

And the daughter will describe that the other parent just was [00:34:00] not there for me. That they really were also just sort of, kind of under the domain of the other parent. That's, that's a pretty common. Scenario. Often, unfortunately, sometimes there are two narcissistic parents be because you know the two of them.

Are drawn to each other. , in terms of siblings, if there's more than one sibling in the family, I see a few different kind of patterns established. So one of them is, I call birds of a feather flock together. And this is the best case scenario when, the siblings really can re. , you know, sort of, we are in trouble here and this is not good.

And they can join together. And that is hard to do because what happens in this family with this dynamic is the parent with narcissism, who's very [00:35:00] critical. That's one of the characteristics I didn't touch on before, but it's very critical, will strive. the siblings apart, there's gonna be a lot of comparison.

And you know what, that is not unusual in families, right? The smart one, the athletic, the athletic one, the, you know, popular one, but it gets really exaggerated, in a family with a narcissistic parent. , but in this case, the pa, the siblings kind of band together to protect themselves. Sometimes. Splitting, um, where you are the, you are the, you are the bad one. You are the good one. You are the one I like. You know, I don't like you understandably, just divides the siblings and they don't really wind up with a relationship. and that's really sad. Um, [00:36:00] so that's, that's kind of like the two patterns that can happen.

They either feel like, thank goodness we have each other, they might be unusually close. , or they really just are just completely divided.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. That's interesting. I, I was, I, in my mind I thought of the meta a metaphor that the, sometimes maybe the narcissistic parent kind of sucks all the energy of the family toward themselves and then, Everybody else, you know, there, there's almost like a lost opportunity for other people in the family to have a close relationship with each other.

You know, if it goes that direction of, of being more split and less united

Stephanie Kriesberg: Mm-hmm.

Debbie Sorensen: the family.

Stephanie Kriesberg: Yeah. I mean that can certainly happen. But in some cases, you know, the siblings like bond together, you know, kind of, and you know, that's best case scenario.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. Cuz then at least you have an ally who's , who's in it with you. And you do form a a close relationship. Yeah. [00:37:00] You've talked about some of the different things that you've seen in your practice in terms of how this impacts people later in life, and I just kind of wanna go back to that question cause I feel like there might be a little bit more there to take a look at.

So, you know, again, you, you have this kind of childhood. that, that you've described, and then you fast forward to later and maybe people come to your office at a point where they're having some sort of trouble. What are some of the different things that you've seen in terms of patterns, maybe relationship patterns or other areas of life where people might be struggling years down the road if they had a, a narcissistic mother.

Stephanie Kriesberg: Mm-hmm. . Okay. Well that's a really important question and for one, I find often women often come to my practice at sort of milestone points in their life. You know, getting engaged, getting married, having. A baby, even, you know, older, when they're older, putting their mother maybe if they have to in an assisted living or [00:38:00] a nursing home, because these are, you know, the points in our lives, these transition times when we're really confronting maybe the relationship. With the mother and how the outside world, um, views us and comes into our relationships. You know, you're, you're planning a wedding and what do other family members have to say about what's going on? You know, how are you interacting with your mother? Things like that. So, and it just, those things stir up a lot of emotions at the best of times.

I'm the best of relationships. So, but what I find, you know, women come in with is feeling like one. I would say the most important thing is feeling alone, feeling isolated, feeling I have this really difficult relationship and yes, you know, maybe some people talk about. You know, challenging relationships with their mothers, but it's not like this, that it's [00:39:00] so painful and that they keep it private, that they don't talk to anyone about it.

So they feel a lot of shame in the relationship and then a lot of shame within themselves. Maybe there's something wrong. With me. Not everybody feels that way, but a lot do. And one woman described to me, it's like we're a secret society, that we just keep this problem, , to ourselves in having such a, a difficult relationship with our mothers that, you know, especially comes up around the holidays.

So then there's problems maybe knowing who they are. what direction they wanna go in in life. As I mentioned before. A really common one is what I describe in the book is repetitive negative thinking, constantly hearing [00:40:00] a critical voice in their head, self-critical voice that they feel like they just can't turn off.

Being very, very hard on themselves, taking on too much because they're kind of trying to prove themselves. Difficulty setting boundaries, saying no, constant worry, and a sense of, of shame that we often kind of figure out is like this grief for a childhood and a relationship that they never, that they never had and that they never will have.

And that they wanna kind of work towards kind of letting go of the hope. something will be different one day.

Debbie Sorensen: You have so many examples. I think in the book and, and of situations that people are in with their relationship with their mother and how it's impacting them. I think that just reading through and they're very different each, each scenario that you [00:41:00] give is really different from the others.

I think reading through some of those was really helpful to me, and I could imagine people who read it who have had this experience.

Stephanie Kriesberg: Mm-hmm.

Debbie Sorensen: Resonate with some of the examples, and you also give some ideas and strategies and exercises that people can try on for themselves to try to

heal from this, right? To try to move forward with in their lives and to, to respond to their thoughts and emotions.

Um, so anyone who might be interested in this, I think it's, it's really. Helpful to look at the ideas you get from your book. Many come from Acceptance and commitment therapy, which we talk about a lot on the podcast as you know, Stephanie. But I thought what we might do is, um, actually go through a couple of examples starting with that.

you know, that self criticism, that repetitive negative thinking that you talked about. So when you have a client who comes in who is really stuck in that [00:42:00] self-critical place, just really a lot of automatic negative thoughts, how might you help someone, you know, deal with those kinds of thought patterns?

Stephanie Kriesberg: Mm-hmm. . Okay. Well, honestly, one of the first things that I, that I start with is some really simple, or very big mindfulness practices. And I, and I start with that and I almost, you know, when I talk about the power of, just noticing your thoughts, um, without judging, Criticizing them, just being in the present moment with them and just even hearing that whole concept of just noticing thoughts, um, as they come up without judging or criticizing them or yourself is sort of, is really revolutionary, to people who struggle with that.

So much. I mean, I think it's revolutionary to all of us. That's why it's, it's [00:43:00] such a powerful idea. And we do grounding with five senses where we press our feet into the floor and right in the session, , whether it's in person or online. We'll notice I'll have them notice, you know, three things you can see smell. Taste touch here. We go through all the senses and then we talk about, you know, how you can break this down and practice it in, you know, in real life in a really user-friendly way. So maybe this week you're just going to practice every morning when you have your tea, you. Practice drinking your tea with your five senses, smelling it, holding the cup, , tasting it, you know, noticing the sun outside your window.

[00:44:00] And I find that these, that just making it very just user friendly and simple, like this is really a powerful. To start, it's not overwhelming and you realize like, okay, I can shift my attention in the tiniest way. And, it's, it can be pretty, actually really radical.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. And when people are really stuck in that place of going over and over and over with those kinds of thoughts to have that shift, it definitely can be huge. I think that's really powerful and I'm just kind of

thinking about what you're saying here and wondering if even just. That awareness piece, that mindfulness piece is so important for people to be able to hear what you have to say and identify those early patterns, like where that voice came from.

I mean, do you find that that's helpful for people as well?

Stephanie Kriesberg: Yeah. And you know, when it comes to the whole idea of [00:45:00] shame, you know, we will kind of track it. If, uh, you know, we'll talk about an experience, something that came up, something that perhaps they had a very strong reaction to, you know, during their week and. and then we can just kind of slow down and said and talk about the idea of triggers, emotional triggers, and what does that remind you of?

And, you know, we'll, we'll do a lot of education, I'll do a lot of education, um, which I find is so important. I just wanna say that I find that education about narcissism and about how basically trauma gets stored. In our brain, without words, without logic, get stored in the emotional part of our brain.

And when something comes up in our current life that might remind us of something we experienced [00:46:00] earlier, that it is easily triggered without even are being aware. Sort of, I call them feeling memories and this type of education. And then being able to put the, those pieces together for themselves is also very powerful.

, people feel empowered, and, and kind of like, oh, there's nothing wrong with me. This is how our brains work. This is how our brains store and process really difficult. Experiences. So maybe if somebody, you know, for one, you know, compliments me, but actually, you know, my mother always made me feel ashamed.

If I tried to feel good about myself, then compliments are, I just wanna, you know, run away from them. They make me feel, feel bad and we, we track that.

Debbie Sorensen: And then when people [00:47:00] have intense emotions, so shame is a great example. There's so many emotions that. could probably come up. When you're working with people around these issues, what's your stance toward helping people, experience their emotions in maybe a new way that might be more helpful to them?

Stephanie Kriesberg: Yeah. You know, I think that, you know, strong emotions, well, I think there's a few different things. One is to be able to really,

to name them, to label them to know that p emotions come in different, Shades and different levels and to kind of expand your emotional difficulty. I mean, you can feel ma mad, but you can feel furious and you can feel irritated and to, I like to think of emotions as being like one of those paint strips from the store where you can have like the pale of shade of blue, or you can have midnight,

Debbie Sorensen: Hmm.

Stephanie Kriesberg: midnight, blue.

And so helping people put more words. To [00:48:00] their emotions. So when they feel something, just to give it a name. And I think one of the most important things is for, to help people understand, and this is all stuff I do with myself, you know, this is all stuff that's helped me tremendously throughout my life, is that all emotions have a beginning, middle, and an end.

They have a half-life. And I often use the concept of, you know, it's not something I made up, of being able to ride out our emotions like a wave

Debbie Sorensen: Mm-hmm.

Stephanie Kriesberg: and all emotions, just like waves rise peak. And subside, none of them last forever. And we can find ways to ride them out, whether they're a tiny little wave or, you know, a huge tidal wave.

Um, and when we're in the thick of an emotion, it's, it feels like it's, I'm never gonna get through this. [00:49:00] And it's really important to know that, you know, they're, they're chemical, you know, they, they don't last forever. And that's very empowering to people.

Debbie Sorensen: This too shall pass. Right,

Stephanie Kriesberg: two shall pass.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. Yeah. I'm just thinking the power too of what, what you're doing with your clients to help them name and recognize their emotions. If their emotions have been. put on the back burner, you know, as a child, if they didn't really get the attention to their emotions, that, you know, I think you say in the book that in the ideal family situation, the kids are valued and their, their emotions are valued, but that's not always happening.

And to have someone help people with that, I could just imagine that you've seen a lot of trans transformation through that process.

Stephanie Kriesberg: And you know, similar to the wave, I mean, acceptance and commitment therapy teaches us that, you know, the more we fight, you know, our emotions, the harder. It is. [00:50:00] And I guess a turning point for being in my practice was, you know, women would come in and say, I, I, I accept my mother's a narcissistic. Like, why am I still so upset?

Um, I accept it. And then I realized with ACT acceptance and commitment therapy, the key difference was accepting the feelings. About it. And that was really the turning point, um, is accepting the pain and letting it be there, or the anger or the grief, and it's gonna come. and it's gonna go and you can observe it.

And that made all the difference in my practice. And for me as a, just a human being in life with my own emotions, being able to realize like, oh, these emotions that I have, just be there and I don't have to f And the more I fight them, The more they're gonna stick around. [00:51:00] And the same holds with all difficulties that we have, um, including having a narcissistic mother.

Debbie Sorensen: I'm glad you mentioned the word grief because we haven't really talked about that today. Do you find that often there's grief work to do just in terms of the the parent you had versus the parent you would've wanted, or what was something that was missed out on? Is that often something that comes up in your work?

Stephanie Kriesberg: Yeah. You know, the, the grief, the grief work we do is in terms of, and again, is for so many, Women, especially if their mother is, is still living there is so often a hope that if I just do the right thing, she will change and, and things will get better. And, and so it's really, you know, letting go of that, of the longing of the hope and accepting what is and. And often they're not aware that they were [00:52:00] hoping, you know, that if I just do the right thing, if I just do this, I will get a different mother. And kind of bringing that to awareness so they can stop trying to twist themselves into a pretzel, to change somebody else. And, and then you have to mourn the relationship, the mother that you never.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. Well the, that, that actually leads me to, I guess the final thing I wanted to talk to you about today. Which is about how people form a new type of relationship with your moms, with a new type of relationship with their mother. So sometimes you have a chapter on setting boundaries. asserting yourself.

So that seems to me like it's a really important thing and I'm just wondering your thoughts on that, on the importance of setting boundaries, if, if your mother fits this profile, and how do people go about doing that? What, what's sort of the goal?

Stephanie Kriesberg: [00:53:00] Yeah. And first I just wanna say in the book we talk about boundaries just with all different kinds of people and situations in your life because, you know, you'll probably struggle with it in different areas, but in terms of setting boundaries with your mother, if she's still living, you know, of course it really depends on the situation.

For some women, they may feel like it's just not possible to have. Relationship, they may feel like the most minimal of relationship is possible. You know, it might mean, you know, just a phone call every once in a while. I, I mean, it really depends, on where your parent is on that spectrum. , but, some people it may be as they start to take the pressure off themselves to be somebody else, to fix the mother, to try to have her be somebody else and learn to let the feelings come that come up inside the.[00:54:00]

Them around the mother shift, or to be able to let them be that they may find that being in the mother's present is different, in her presence is different. That doesn't mean you're gonna say, I will tolerate abuse, or I will tolerate bad behavior, but that they may find it easier to set clear. Limits to say, you know, that's not okay.

You can't say that to me to leave, you know, to make plans. Like I will, you know, go have dinner with my mother at a restaurant, but if she starts saying certain things, And won't stop. I'm gonna go. You know, really being able to be proactive, uh, in certain situa in certain situations and that can make all the difference in the world.

You know, I know it's acceptable to me and I know how I'm gonna handle it. For instance, one woman, , I worked with decided. I'm [00:55:00] going to this family dinner at a restaurant, but instead of having, you know, someone else pick me up, I'm taking my own car. And that way if my mother starts behaving in ways that I don't like, I'm out of there.

and she'd always driven with her cousin. And so really learning ways to take care of herself.

Debbie Sorensen: I'm even thinking of an example. One of the scenarios in your book of someone who just sees that her mom is calling and says, I'm not

gonna talk to her right now. I'll call her later. This isn't a good time for me and I'm not gonna invite her to my childhood soccer game because of the way she has. Acted last time and just kind of deciding for yourself where it's like, okay, this is where I'm gonna set this boundary for me, you know?

Stephanie Kriesberg: Exactly. Right. Which, you know, ha might have been really hard, if not impossible in the past.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, yeah. For some people, something even that, you know, not answering the phone call, for some people that's no big deal, but for someone else, that might be a really [00:56:00] big shift to just say, yeah, this isn't a good time for me.

Stephanie Kriesberg: Right, exactly.

Debbie Sorensen: yeah. Well, Stephanie, I really recommend that people pick up your book again, because the examples and also the exercises and information, I think is really helpful.

And for me as a therapist, I think I'm really gonna take some pieces of this book into my work moving forward when I, um, hear about these kinds of things with my clients. So I really appreciate it and I appreciate you coming on today.

Stephanie Kriesberg: Well, Debbie, you know, thank you so much and I really appreciate, the work that you and Yael and Jill do for all these years bringing, you know, your podcast to the world and I'm just very grateful to have been on the podcast.

Debbie Sorensen: Well, thank you. It was really nice talking to you today.

Stephanie Kriesberg: Okay, bye-bye.

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