AFTER THE FOG RECOVERY

When Your Mother Couldn't Be There for You

Understanding the difference between emotional immaturity and narcissism

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When a child is hurting, who becomes the center of the room?

That may be one of the simplest ways to begin noticing the difference between an emotionally immature parent and a narcissistically organized one.

Both may become overwhelmed. Both may react poorly. Both may fail to give a child what they need in the moment.

But what happens next can be very different.

THE EMOTIONALLY IMMATURE MOTHER

She may panic. She may become overwhelmed by your emotions. She may cry when you're crying. She may need reassurance when you are the one who needs comfort.

She may not know how to regulate herself well enough to immediately become the calm, steady adult in the room. And sometimes, that means you become the one taking care of her.

But underneath the overwhelm, there may still be something incredibly important: the capacity to eventually come back to you. To recognize that you were hurt. To repair. To learn. To feel remorse.

Her limitations may have hurt you. But the relationship is not necessarily organized around protecting her identity at all costs.

THE NARCISSISTIC MOTHER

With a narcissistic mother, your distress may quickly become about her.

Not necessarily *"What happened to you?"* But:

"How does this make me look?"
"Are you angry at me?"
"After everything I've done for you..."

The child's pain can become secondary to the narcissistic injury it creates in the parent. Sometimes the child begins to feel like the problem, because their hurt has created discomfort, shame, or vulnerability in her.

> *The child needs comfort. But the parent needs the child to stop having the feeling.*

The difference is not whether she ever made mistakes. Every parent makes mistakes.

The more important questions may be:

When you were hurt, could she eventually see you? Or did the conversation always return to her?

Could she repair? Could she say *"I was wrong. I hurt you. I understand why that affected you,"* without immediately defending herself, collapsing, or making you responsible for making her feel better?

Could she grow? Or did every attempt to address the relationship become further proof that you were difficult, ungrateful, or the problem?

Could you exist separately from her? With your own memories, your own feelings, your own version of reality, without those things being treated as a threat?

The Core Distinction

Emotional immaturity can create painful patterns. But where there is capacity for reflection, accountability, and repair, there may be room for something different.

Narcissistic patterns are not simply about a parent who is overwhelmed or doesn't know better. The relationship can become organized around protecting the parent's self-image, regulating their emotions, and preserving their sense of control.

And that can leave the child doing something no child should have to do: living their life around the emotional needs of a parent who was supposed to be living her life around theirs.

You do not have to decide whether your mother fits perfectly into a label to begin paying attention to what the relationship required of you.

The more important question may be: when you needed to be the child, were you allowed to be one?

Would you like to explore more? Take the **My Mom and I Quiz**, a gentle place to explore whether what you experienced was actually as "normal" as you've been told to believe.

If this was overwhelming for you, consider working with a therapist who specializes in CPTSD and narcissistic or emotionally immature parents. Dr. Karyl McBride keeps **a directory of trained therapists** you can search by location.

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