

## The Psychotic Side of the Personality

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Saturday night I experienced the psychotic side of myself. Several events precipitated the episode. Earlier in the evening in one of my classes, I was required to role-play a therapist to a patient demonstrating borderline rage. In the session, the patient was distraught and brandished a rifle, threatening to kill me and then commit suicide. I found myself at a complete loss for words, unable to establish the most basic sense of connection with the patient. I felt a sense of shock overcoming me as well, and utter helplessness. I noticed myself beginning to dissociate and then requested to stop the exercise.

Later that evening, I felt deep emotional disappointment when a classmate with whom I am in confessed and unrequited love made no effort to connect with me. Also, a different man with whom I am just beginning a relationship sent me a text message denying my request to see him that night, ambivalently hinting to re-scheduling for the next evening. This is all in addition to a recent separation with my husband of 8 years, and I living alone for the first time in my life.

When I get home, I am feeling a bit numb, possibly still in mild shock from the role-playing experience. I notice my numbness and feel grateful for the reprieve, but suspicious as I know the disappointment and humiliation I am at risk of experiencing is deep. I sit down at the kitchen table in a vain attempt to study my notes for the next day's session, when I feel fast overcome with pain. The sensation is very intense, a hot knife searing through my gut. It is a physical, visceral pain, as if

a lead bowling ball is weighing on my chest, and a sickening of my stomach. I feel so angry and frustrated with myself. I harshly rebuke myself, "Why do I hope? Why do I continue to look outside for an answer – for something, anything, for some kind of feeling of relief and salvation? No one is going to save me from myself." I begin to cry. I keep crying, and it feels like I cannot stop. I review the items in my mind I think are causing the pain, and the humiliation I feel at being rejected and alone is almost unbearable. I get up from the table and pour a glass of tequila and began to drink it, still weeping. I feel a very strong destructive force well up inside of me. I grab the cell phone that had the ambivalent text and it takes an enormous effort not to throw the phone across the room. I want so desperately to cut off connections, and I find myself writing a text back to my lover telling him I do not want to see him the next evening. I look at what I write and then re-write it, over and over, trying to get some kind of relief from the imagined obliteration of the relationship without actually sending it. I fantasize sending it repeatedly, but hesitate, vowing to myself I *would* send it later that night. Still crying, I write an email to the man I am in love with, telling him that it "does not work for me" to stay in contact with him, that it is too painful. Similar to the text, I re-write it and fantasize about sending it, coming very close to sending it several times but before I do, I collapse into bed and fall asleep.

In this experience, numerous specific psychotic features manifested in my thoughts, feelings, and behavior, precipitated by the traumatic "failure" to react adequately in the role-play exercise, combined with the perceived loss of relationships. The still-new experience of living alone in an unfamiliar setting was

intensely felt as a lack of containment and holding. As I ventured into the psychotic domain, I lost touch with actual reality and instead created a world of negative reality, in which only failure, rejection, and loneliness felt real. I was overwhelmed by and present only to the source of my pain and my desperate attempts to obviate it – no other thoughts or sensations had any existence or meaning for me. I could not think rationally or hold the tension of opposites. In fact there *was* no opposite, only impoverishment, humiliation, and despair.

Specifically, as the shock of the role-play experience faded, I began to feel – and then desperately tried to avoid feeling – not merely shame, self-hatred, and humiliation, but a very deep terror underneath it. In failing to manage the situation in class, I was confronted with my impotence. My identity as a ‘good’ potential clinician felt threatened. “When the rubber meets the road, I don’t have what it takes to succeed as a psychologist.” In being overlooked by these men, I felt confronted by dread. “When it comes down to it, I really *am* ugly, unwanted, worthless.” But I could not tolerate these thoughts long enough to consider their validity, to do any *work*. Instead, I stopped short and allowed the self-judgments to be validated by the pain I felt. Crying allowed me to release energy and avoid thinking. Drinking alcohol represented a choice to reject thinking altogether, a general position of withdrawal. In harboring these ideas about myself, I brutally disavowed my own value. I utterly abandoned myself, not only losing faith in myself, but obliterating trust in my classmates and the men I loved. The searing hatred of both internal and external reality I felt allowed such a blanket disavowal of hope. I was trapped in a delusion of hopelessness and utter rejection, yet I would not let myself experience the

dissolution of my identity. *Anything but that*. I could tolerate negative reality, but not absence, not *nothing*.

The psychotic side of the personality includes many of the characteristics I displayed that night, such as an irrational reaction to loss, panic, disavowal, inability to tolerate the unknown, seeing only the negative as real, destructive rage (wanting to throw the phone and cut object relations, staying isolated, not asking for help), cutting mental connections (drinking alcohol, not wanting to work), wanting the suffering, and allowing such suffering to obscure the hidden thoughts and feelings of inner shame, inadequacy, and barrenness.

Faced with my own nothingness, with the absence of my own presence, I tried desperately to fill it up – with crying (sound, sensation, doing), with drinking (filling myself up with something external, distancing myself from my own sense of lack), and with writing (filling the absence up with words and language), obliterating any waiting space. I also used obsessive fantasy to avoid the absence. In repeatedly imagining the removal of the men in my life, I could focus on an imagined relief from pain rather than being aware. My psychotic destructiveness was intent on obliterating the painful objects from my psyche. Yet rather than the actual destruction and cutting off of the objects, which would have truly left me with absence, I used the fantasy of their destruction instead to avoid looking at my painful attachment and dependency upon them for my identity. I was grasping at straws, not guided by what I truly desired but only by my desire to avoid pain and dread. According to Dr. Avedis Panajian, “You only know what you really desire when you can tolerate no thing, absence. Only then will you begin to really listen to

what you desire, and begin to prioritize. Absence stays as absence and you need to make contact with that absence. Most people have no clue as to what they desire.” I was completely unable to tolerate or make contact with *no thing* and had no honest connection with my self.

Another component of psychosis is an inability to learn from experience, and refusing to draw any lessons from it. Because I would not quiet the torturous shrieking in my mind, it was impossible to reflect on what I was doing and thinking, In fully retreating to the comfort and protection of my suffering, my healthy curiosity and awareness were completely absent, resulting in an obstinate refusal to gain an ounce of consciousness or discover anything new.

A patient in psychosis often practices projective identification, a mechanism of evacuation from the psyche involving the projection of certain parts which seek to make their return through an identification with the projected parts. In perceiving harsh rejection from my lover, I had split off inner hatred of myself and projected it back into him, who then handily acted as a boomerang, so to speak, in bringing the hatred right back into me per my perception. Ironically, when I awoke the next morning, I saw that he had sent an erotic late night text to me. Right beside it was the rejecting text I had repeatedly rehearsed *but never sent*. My disconnection to actual reality was shocking to me.

Andre Green defines the *work of the negative* as including regression, negation, and splitting, noting the distinction between repression, which affects *instinctual impulses* and splitting, which is primordially the *disavowal of a perception*. Green also describes the different usage of the term splitting by Klein

and Bion compared to Freud's usage. Freud maintained the existence of both actual reality and a created, alternative reality in the patient's awareness. This is the type of splitting I was doing when I disavowed any perception of my own value, but at some level stopped short of fulfilling on that reality - I did not send the emails, I did not throw the phone. At some level, actual reality was still in my awareness, though disavowed. From a Kleinian perspective, in which splitting is more associated with projective identification, I experienced a splitting of internal objects, in the form of projection of animus figures onto the men that I desire and feel are rejecting me. The perceived rejection and loss of them leaves me with the dead ego parts I have substituted for them, and I am unable to properly mourn the actual loss of them and let go.

The psychotic side is not interested in any aspect of the mind that makes one become aware. Any aspect of the mind that helps one become aware of internal reality or external awareness is disavowed. Psychosis wants to destroy memory, discernment, feelings, attention, focus, and understanding. It is motivated to annihilate awareness of oneself and others, including the therapist. The psychotic side is an enemy of consciousness because consciousness brings one back to work, separateness, space and time, and frustration with one's narcissism. Awareness is the enemy of psychosis because it brings the possibility of pain.

What would the experience of a therapist have been in my presence? From the point of view of myself as a patient in an analytical session, I was utterly inconsolable. No one could have said anything to relieve me of my pain. In fact, trying to comfort me with words or touch and interrupt my suffering would only

have deepened my retreat into madness, robbing me of any dignity in choosing my suffering. The best thing a therapist could have done would not be to try to fix me or bring me back to sanity, but rather to be unafraid of my psychotic episode. My identity was completely threatened and dissolving, and I was terrified of what I might do, that I would be unable to make it back to my neurotic side. The therapist's *trust in me* to find my way through would be the most powerful gift they could offer—something I was denying myself.