

Narcissistic Defenses in Complex Trauma: *Treatment Strategies and Insights*

An interactive, clinical consultation training
with

Kathy Steele

Part of the "Clinical Pearls" Series

Zoom Webinar

12th March 2025, Wednesday

Times:

5:00 pm – 8:00 pm, London UK

1:00 pm – 4:00 pm, New York, USA

CPD hours: 3 / CE credits: 3

Early bird tickets at **£62**

Regular price: **£72**



Location: Online streaming only

(all our webinar tickets now include complimentary access to a video recorded version for 1 year)

Narcissism, often narrowly conceptualized as grandiosity or self-absorption, takes on far more complex and subtle forms in the context of complex trauma and dissociation. How do narcissistic defenses function as intricate survival mechanisms for those grappling with profound trauma? **How can clinicians work through these defenses to access the underlying vulnerabilities they shield—vulnerabilities rooted in low self-worth, shame, and deep emotional pain?**

In this advanced Clinical Pearls workshop, Kathy Steele will guide participants through a sophisticated exploration of narcissism as a protective response in trauma survivors. These defenses, though initially adaptive, often pose significant barriers to therapeutic progress. Viewed through the lens of compassionate curiosity, clinicians will gain deeper insights into working with the entrenchment of these defenses, particularly as they intersect with dissociation.

Exploring Narcissistic Defenses in Trauma

Narcissism, as it manifests in trauma survivors, is not about overt grandiosity but about self-protective mechanisms shaped by prolonged exposure to relational trauma. Clients may present with maladaptive self/other schemas, difficulties in mentalizing, and perfectionism—all designed to stave off feelings of low self-worth and vulnerability. These defenses can impede emotional processing and distort the client's sense of



agency. This workshop will delve into the intersection of narcissism and dissociation, where dissociative processes further complicate the therapeutic landscape, as clients use dissociation to escape overwhelming shame and fragility.

The webinar will illustrate how narcissistic defenses often manifest in clinical settings through distorted perceptions of the self and others, emotional detachment, and a heightened need to maintain control. These traits, although protective, hinder the therapeutic process by obstructing vulnerability and openness. Clinicians will learn how to work with these defenses to uncover the client's deeper struggles with shame and disempowerment.

The Challenges of Working with Narcissism

Narcissistic traits can stir strong countertransference reactions in therapists, particularly when clients present with grandiose or dismissive defenses. Participants will **learn how to use compassionate curiosity to manage these countertransference responses, maintaining** emotional equilibrium while allowing for a deeper exploration of the client's vulnerabilities. By recognizing the protective function of these defenses, clinicians can foster an atmosphere of trust that softens rigid defensive structures and enables more authentic therapeutic engagement.

Working with Maladaptive Traits and Dissociation

In this workshop, clinicians will develop concrete strategies for addressing the complex interplay between narcissism and dissociation. For example, clinicians will learn to:

- **Target narcissistic traits as treatment goals:** Identify key features of narcissism that serve as barriers to therapy, including maladaptive self/other schemas, poor mentalizing abilities, and emotional processing deficits. Clinicians will be equipped to treat the underlying causes of these defenses, helping clients move beyond surface-level symptoms.
- **Use compassionate curiosity to navigate countertransference:** Gain practical tools for managing countertransference when working with clients who exhibit narcissistic defenses such as grandiosity or perfectionism. Compassionate curiosity will be presented as a vital tool for maintaining therapeutic balance and addressing the client's underlying fears.

Learning Objectives and Advanced Techniques

By attending this workshop, participants will:

- **Discuss core narcissistic defenses:** Address key narcissistic traits that act as treatment barriers, such as perfectionism, distorted self/other schemas, and impaired mentalizing. Discuss how these traits intersect with dissociation and how they manifest as protective mechanisms in trauma survivors.
- **Apply therapeutic techniques for adaptive functioning:** Acquire **tools to help clients transition from maladaptive to adaptive functioning.** This includes improving emotional regulation, fostering mentalization, and challenging rigid defenses in a supportive manner.
- **Manage countertransference with compassionate curiosity:** Discuss how to mitigate strong countertransference reactions by employing compassionate curiosity, allowing for a more open and non-judgmental exploration of the client's defenses.

Case Supervision and Practical Application

As with all Clinical Pearls workshops, participants are encouraged to bring anonymized therapeutic cases for real-time supervision. Kathy will provide direct feedback, helping clinicians apply workshop principles to their



own clinical challenges. This hands-on component ensures that theoretical knowledge is immediately translated into practical skills.

By the end of the session, clinicians will have a refined understanding of how narcissistic defenses and dissociation complicate trauma therapy, and they will be equipped with the tools necessary to navigate these complexities with precision and empathy.

Kathy's approach emphasizes the importance of compassion, patience, and deep understanding in working with narcissistic defenses. This workshop offers clinicians a unique opportunity to deepen their clinical expertise, enabling them to help clients dismantle rigid defensive structures and move toward more adaptive, resilient functioning.

About the speaker

Kathy Steele, MN, CS has been treating complex trauma, dissociation, and attachment issues since 1985. She is in private practice with Metropolitan Psychotherapy Services and is Adjunct Faculty at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, US. Ms. Steele is a Past President and Fellow of the International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation (ISSTD) and has also previously served on the Board of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS). She has been involved with developing treatment guidelines for Dissociative Disorders and well as for Complex Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. Ms. Steele has received a number of awards for her work, including the 2010 Lifetime Achievement Award from ISSTD, an Emory University Distinguished Alumni Award in 2006, and the 2011 Cornelia B. Wilbur Award for Outstanding Clinical Contributions. She is known for her humour, compassion, respect, and depth of knowledge as a clinician and teacher, and for her capacity to present complex issues in easily understood and clear ways using an integrative psychotherapy model that draws from both traditional and somatic approaches. She is sought as a consultant and supervisor, and as an international lecturer.

She has co-authored three books as part of the acclaimed Norton Series on Interpersonal Neurobiology: *The Haunted Self: Structural dissociation of the personality and chronic traumatization* (2006, Van der Hart, Nijenhuis, & Steele – W. W. Norton); *Coping with trauma-related dissociation: Skills training for patients and therapists* (2011, Boon, Steele, & Van der Hart – W. W. Norton); and most recently, *Treating trauma-related dissociation: A practical, integrative approach* (2017, Steele, Boon, & Van der Hart – W. W. Norton). She has also (co)authored numerous book chapters and journal articles.

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