

The Unchosen Self

Sexual Jealousy, Erotic Exclusion and the Humiliation of Being Replaced

Dr Jan McGregor Hepburn

Zoom Webinar

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CPD hours: 3



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“Do You Think She Finds Him More Attractive Than Me?”

A client discovers that his partner is having an affair. He has drafted a message designed to expose the relationship and humiliate both his former partner and the other man. He knows sending it would make matters worse, yet he cannot stop imagining what it would feel like to hurt them back.

What troubles him most, however, is not the message. It is the question he keeps returning to in therapy:

“Do you think she finds him more attractive than me?”

The remaining evidence arrives online: photographs, weekends away, the other man’s body, clothes, confidence and apparent ease. The client begins to compare relentlessly. Is he younger? Better looking? More successful? More sexually exciting?

This is one form sexual jealousy can take after betrayal or romantic displacement. The distress is not simply that a relationship has ended. It is that **someone else has been chosen**, and their being chosen has begun to feel like evidence about the client’s own desirability.



When Jealousy Is Not the Whole Story

We might call this jealousy. But jealousy does not always describe the whole clinical picture.

Some clients are not only afraid of losing someone they value. They are devastated by the sense that they have been compared with another person and found wanting. At this point jealousy may become entangled with envy, rivalry, humiliation and shame.

The rival's age, body, confidence, sexuality, profession and photographs acquire disproportionate significance because each detail seems capable of answering the same painful question: *what did they possess that I did not?*

This webinar uses the idea of **erotic exclusion** to describe this more specific injury: the experience of another person's desire moving elsewhere and being felt not merely as loss, but as a judgement on the self.

Being left means losing someone we love. Being replaced can also threaten the version of ourselves that believed we were capable of being desired.

That distinction matters clinically. A client may remain confident professionally, valued by friends and secure in many areas of life while becoming profoundly destabilised by the thought that another person was found more sexually compelling.

General reassurance about self-esteem can therefore miss what has actually been injured.

When the Rival Becomes Psychologically Inescapable

Once comparison becomes central, the rival may cease to function simply as a real person. They can become idealised, persecutory and mentally inescapable — an internal figure onto whom the client projects everything they fear they themselves lack.

The rival may be imagined as younger, freer, more attractive, more sexual, more successful, less needy or more alive. In reality, the client may know very little about them. Psychologically, however, they come to embody a fantasy of superiority.

This helps explain why reassurance so often fails. Therapy cannot establish that the client is "more attractive", nor should it attempt to defeat the rival on the client's behalf. The more useful question is **why the comparison has acquired such authority**.

Jan will draw on psychoanalytic perspectives to illuminate these processes. Kleinian thinking can help us understand jealousy, envy and the destructive wish to spoil what cannot be possessed. Object-relational perspectives illuminate how the rival may become idealised or persecutory, while self-psychological ideas help explain why being replaced can become a narcissistic injury affecting coherence, worth and erotic vitality.

These ideas will be used as clinical tools rather than as theory for its own sake.

Humiliation, Rage and Revenge

Being replaced can be experienced as humiliating as well as painful. The client may feel compared, publicly diminished or foolish for not having understood what others seemed already to know. Rage may emerge precisely because humiliation creates such profound helplessness.

This can take the form of revenge fantasy, obsessive rehearsal, contempt for the rival, fantasies of exposure or the wish to humiliate the former partner in return. Such material can place considerable pressure on the therapist.



The task is neither to endorse destructive action nor to treat the fantasy itself as evidence of moral failure. Instead, therapists need to understand what the rage may be trying to accomplish.

Revenge fantasy can briefly restore agency where humiliation created powerlessness. Contempt can reverse the hierarchy created by comparison. Rage can protect the client from contact with grief, shame or helplessness.

Clinical work requires enough steadiness to remain with these feelings without colluding with them and without shutting them down before their function has been understood.

The Collapse of Erotic Self-Belief

For some clients, the deepest injury concerns their confidence in being sexually or romantically desirable.

The language of “low self-esteem” may be too broad. A client may not feel inadequate in every area of life. They may specifically fear that they are no longer sexually desirable — or perhaps that they never were in the way they had imagined.

After being replaced, clients may scrutinise their bodies, compare themselves with younger or more conventionally attractive people, seek repeated reassurance from future partners or withdraw from intimacy altogether.

What appears to be acceptance may therefore be defensive retreat: **if I never allow myself to want or be wanted again, I can never be compared again.**

Therapy may need to address not only the grief of losing the relationship, but the collapse of the client’s confidence in their own erotic place in the world.

Sexual Jealousy in a World Without Privacy

Jealousy, rivalry and humiliation are not new. The conditions in which they unfold have changed.

Social media allows former partners and rivals to remain permanently visible. Photographs can be revisited, profiles searched, bodies compared and timelines reconstructed. Mutual friends become sources of information, and algorithms may repeatedly surface the very material the client is trying not to see.

The rival can effectively be watched without end.

Yet no amount of information can settle the underlying question:

Why were they chosen instead of me?

Technology does not create the wound, but it can continually reactivate it. Clinical work therefore needs to address both the compulsive behaviour and the emotional need beneath it.

Simply telling a client to stop checking may miss what the checking is trying to establish. Treating it only as meaningful communication may underestimate the extent to which repetition itself keeps the injury alive.

The Therapist’s Pull

Sexual jealousy and erotic humiliation generate powerful countertransference pressures.

The therapist may feel drawn to reassure the client that they are attractive, that they “deserve better”, or that the affair says more about the former partner than it does about them. Such responses may be compassionate, but they can also bypass the injury by replacing one verdict with another.

Therapists may find themselves joining in contempt for the rival, becoming uncomfortable with revenge fantasy, or moving towards acceptance before the underlying humiliation has been understood.



There may also be pressure to avoid the erotic dimension altogether. It can feel safer to speak about attachment, abandonment or self-worth than to remain with the client's fear that they are no longer sexually desirable.

The work is not to decide who is more desirable. It is to understand why the comparison has acquired such authority — and to help the client recover a sense of self that is not wholly dependent upon winning it.

Moving Beyond the Rival

Therapeutic progress does not mean persuading the client that comparison is irrational, nor does it require convincing them that they remain attractive.

The deeper work involves loosening the equation between another person being chosen and the client becoming fundamentally unchoosable.

For some clients, this will involve mourning the relationship. For others, it will mean mourning the version of themselves who believed that being desired by this particular person guaranteed something stable about their value.

Therapy may also need to address the fear of future comparison. Withdrawal from intimacy after betrayal is not always indifference; it may be protection against ever again being sexually measured against someone else.

The aim is to help clients recover a sense of erotic and relational selfhood that can survive another person's choice without allowing that choice to become the final measure of their desirability or worth.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this training, participants will be able to:

1. **Differentiate sexual jealousy, envy, rivalry, humiliation, shame and rage**, and recognise how these affects interact following romantic or sexual rejection.
2. **Identify injury to erotic self-belief**, distinguishing disruption to the client's sense of sexual desirability from more general difficulties with confidence or self-esteem.
3. **Use psychoanalytic perspectives clinically** to understand how the rival may become idealised, persecutory or central to the client's sense of self.
4. **Work with revenge, exposure and humiliation fantasies** without colluding with destructive action, moralising the client's feelings or prematurely closing down exploration.
5. **Recognise defensive transformations**, including shame becoming rage, grief becoming contempt and fear of rejection becoming withdrawal from intimacy.
6. **Monitor countertransference pressures**, particularly the pull to reassure, take sides or move too quickly towards acceptance.
7. **Work with compulsive comparison and repeated checking**, attending both to the meaning of the behaviour and to the ways repetition may continually reactivate the injury.
8. **Support movement beyond the rival**, helping clients recover erotic and relational self-belief without allowing another person's choice to become the final measure of their desirability or worth.

Who Should Attend

This webinar is for psychotherapists, psychologists, counsellors and other mental health practitioners working with adults affected by infidelity, affairs, sexual or romantic jealousy, being left for another person, obsessive comparison with a rival, revenge fantasy, romantic rejection, sexual shame, repeated social-media checking or withdrawal from intimacy after rejection.

It will be particularly relevant for practitioners working with divorce, infidelity, midlife relationship change, betrayal and clients who remain psychologically preoccupied with the person who replaced them.

About Dr Jan McGregor Hepburn

Dr Jan McGregor Hepburn is a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, supervisor and trainer for the British Psychotherapy Foundation. Previously, she served as Registrar of the British Psychoanalytic Council for fifteen years.

She is the author of *Guilt and Shame: A Clinician's Guide*, published by nscience, and received the British Psychoanalytic Council's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2023.

Jan's teaching is distinguished by her capacity to remain with affects that are often easiest to judge and hardest to think about: envy, jealousy, rivalry, humiliation, rage, guilt and shame. Her work enables therapists to approach these experiences as psychologically meaningful communications requiring steadiness, precision and honesty.

Why This Training Matters

Some clients do not come to therapy simply because a relationship ended. They come because **someone else was chosen**, and that other person's body, age, desirability or apparent superiority has become evidence in an internal case against the self.

This is why sexual jealousy cannot always be reduced to insecurity, possessiveness or difficulty "letting go". Sometimes the deeper clinical question is how a client can survive being unchosen without allowing another person's desire to determine whether they can ever feel desirable again.

Join Dr Jan McGregor Hepburn live on **24 February 2027** for a clinically focused exploration of sexual jealousy, erotic exclusion, humiliation and the psychology of being replaced — and develop the steadiness and precision required to work with the feelings clients may find hardest to admit.

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