Developmental and Psychopathological Issues of Intrapsychic Loneliness and Aloneness during Midlife: A Clinical Case

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This paper begins with exploration of the origins of psychic loneliness and aloneness and presentation on a developmental line of human experiences from infancy to midlife. The theoretical section is followed by the presentation on detailed clinical materials obtained from the ongoing analysis of a fifty-one year old male patient who is unable to deal with issues related to aging. Prior to receiving treatment, the patient attempted to alleviate his increasing feeling of isolation and loneliness by leaving his wife and having affairs with other women. When his symptoms intensified, he reluctantly sought treatment. Unresolved abandonment issues lead to the formation of an elaborate compensatory fantasy life in both childhood and adulthood. The paper concludes with a detailed developmental discussion on the patient’s psychopathology and the analytic process.

KEY WORDS: Midlife · Loneliness · Aloneness · Countertransference · Development · Metapsychology · Transference.

Introduction

The paper opens with an exploration of the origins of psychic loneliness and aloneness and presentation on a developmental line of the human experience of both from infancy to midlife. In addition, by referring to the works of Freud, Klein, Winnicott, Mahler, Spitz, Jaques and Colarusso and Montero, we describe the normal and pathological responses to these two complex mental states. These considerations are followed by the presentation of detailed clinical material from the ongoing analysis of a middle-aged man. The closing section of the paper is devoted to a detailed discussion that links developmental information from childhood and midlife and the clinical data to the patient’s difficulties with intimacy, loneliness and aloneness in midlife.

About Loneliness and Aloneness

Freud on being alone and the feeling of loneliness

Freud’s first reference to loneliness is found in Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905d). In a footnote, speaking of a child who is afraid of the dark, he states that “what he was afraid of was not the dark, but the absence of someone he loved; and he could feel sure of being soothed as soon as he had evidence of that persons’ presence”. A second reference appears in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920) where Freud describes a child playing with a reel to manipulate the disappearance and reappearance of his absent mother.

These early fears, which are experienced as loneliness and helplessness in Freud’s [1933 (1932)] view, are universal and life-long. “When a human being has himself grown up, he knows, to be sure, that he is in possession of greater strength, but his insight into the perils of life has also grown greater, and he rightly concludes that fundamentally he still remains just as helpless and unprotected as he was in his childhood, that faced by the world he is still a child” (p.163).

These three quotes from Freud can form the basis of a developmental line of helplessness which is deeply linked to both loneliness and aloneness. Three phases of this progression are 1) The need for the real presence of the object, 2) The regulation of the distance to the object as evidence of a working-through activity related to its absence, and 3) The awareness that adult life faces the individual with the human paradox that real strength is always fused with weakness.

Two theoretical approaches: loneliness and aloneness

A psychoanalytic explanation of loneliness and aloneness is enhanced by an understanding of normal development and...
psychopathology. These frames of reference are useful and complementary since aspects of both are often seen intertwined in clinical material, as will be demonstrated in the case presentation later in this paper.

Our theoretical discussion will focus on the thinking of Melanie Klein (1963) and Donald Winnicott (1958) whose developmental and psychopathological stance is primarily influenced by experiences in infancy. Following them we will consider the work of theoreticians such as René Spitz (1965), Margaret Mahler (1975), Peter Blos (1979) and Calvin Colarusso (1992), who integrate experience from later stages of development in their theoretic stances. As a bridge between these trends Elliot Jaques’ ideas about midlife will be considered because he proposed the term “midlife crisis” and addressed both developmental and psychopathological themes.

Klein, Jaques and Winnicott: thoughts on loneliness and aloneness

Our adult world and other essays (1963) by Melanie Klein, who was working on this paper when she died in 1960, and The Capacity to Be Alone (1958) by Donald Winnicott, deal with both concepts from different vantage points. Klein’s says “by the sense of loneliness I am referring to the inner sense of loneliness - the sense of being alone regardless of external circumstances, of feeling lonely even when among friends or receiving love” (p.300). In Winnicott’s terms: “This experience is that of being alone, as an infant and small child, in the presence of mother” (p.418).

From a developmental perspective Klein suggests that: “In order to understand how the sense of loneliness arises we must focus on early infancy and trace its influence on later stages of life” (p.300). Klein believes that feelings of loneliness are experienced by everyone: “These anxieties exist in some measure in every individual but are excessively strong in illness; therefore loneliness is also part of illness, both of a schizophrenic and depressive nature” (p.300). Klein’s statement that “throughout life the fear of death plays a part in loneliness” (p.304) is highly relevant to an understanding of midlife. The core of death anxiety, as experienced in extreme psychopathological states is felt as a fear of death. In healthier individuals the increasing midlife awareness and realization that personal time ten in the mid-thirties. Jacques related midlife contemplation, and the sense of being alone and feeling lonely that followed, to the realization that one will die and lose the sustaining connectedness with loved ones and life.

Winnicott describes the capacity to be alone as “one of the most important signs of maturity in emotional development” (p.417). In this sense he focuses on “the positive aspects of the capacity to be alone” (p.417), rather than those aspects dealing with the fear or the wish to be alone.

According to Winnicott “the basis for the capacity to be alone is a paradox; it is the experience of being alone while someone else is present” (p.418). He describes this as ego-relatedness, a two person relationship: “one of whom at any rate is alone; perhaps both are alone, yet the presence of each is important to the other” (p.418).

A developmental line of loneliness for the life cycle

The first experience with loneliness emerges side by side with the beginning of the separation of self from object in the first year of life. In Mahlerian terms (1968) this happens during the symbiotic phase, and in Spitz’s terms (1965) with the emergence of the second psychic organizer, stranger anxiety.

Spitz spoke of stranger anxiety - a recognition that the other was not mother- and Mahler spoke of the need for rapprochement, a refueling or strengthening of the tenuous internal representation of the provider of love and security which cannot yet be safely sustained for long intervals in her absence. When negativism, Spitz’s third organizer which occurs at about eighteen months of age, precipitates an unwise withdrawal of love and affection by mother the toddler is quickly plunged into despair. For the first time, he feels the intense pain of rejection, and with it a new intensity of loneliness and aloneness that he is not prepared to manage.

As the child moves through the third year of life brief separations become less painful and lonely because of the growing emergence of the capacity for object constancy (Mahler 1968), the ability to sustain complex, affective-laden mental representations of the loving object in her absence.

If the primary objects of the pre-oedipal years have been loving and constant, the three year old moves into the oedipal years with his internal world full of multiple, stable internal representations of loved ones, particularly mother and father. This new capacity allows him to enter into the complex emotional, intrapsychic world of the Oedipal Complex.

But competitive wishes toward the parent of the same sex, and heightened loving wishes toward the parent of the opposite sex, bring new dangers and a heightened sense of loneliness brought on by one’s own desires. For the first time, the oedipal child experiences loneliness in the physical presence of the loved object because of the infantile belief that mother or father
may somehow be aware of his aggressive and sexual thoughts and retaliate.

As the Latency peer group becomes a powerful influence on internal emotional states the child feels the terrible sting of the loneliness of exclusion. The pain is mitigated in the most solid and secure individual with strong self-esteem but it is never entirely eliminated.

Blos (1979) wrote of the second individuation, the movement away from the primary objects who provided sustenance and closeness throughout childhood, toward friends and lovers who are often less available and dependable. These relationships inevitably produce feelings of loneliness as attempts to begin relationships are rebuffed and first love relationships end, as they inevitably must.

For most individuals there is a gap of years between the time of leaving the family of origin and the creation of the family of procreation. The years in between are characterized by the loneliness of young adulthood: “Thus, unable to rely on the real parents or their diminished intrapsychic representations for emotional sustenance, guidance, and direction, and not yet intrapsychically anchored to their adult replacements, the young adult in transition experiences an intense, normative loneliness. This is a continuation of the loneliness experienced during the second individuation when the intrapsychic separation from the infantile objects precipitated by physical and sexual maturation began, but it differs because the young adult, having engaged and mastered many of the developmental tasks of adolescence, is increasingly capable of genuine intimacy, the emotional foundation on which the third individuation rests (Colarusso 1990, p.182).

In midlife, there are new and inevitable experiences of loneliness. Slow and unavoidable body changes trigger thoughts about old age. The death of parents leaves one next in line to face the grim reaper. Young children emerge into adolescence, pull away emotionally and then leave for good. These losses produce a depth of loneliness that may be intellectually anticipated but once experienced produce intra-psychic disorganization and a slow, painful reintegration of the self.

The central development task of midlife is coming to terms with the awareness of time limitation and future personal death. Integrate of the notion of the loss of all of what life has promised on midlife and are a subject for another occasion.

Clinical Case

Clinical case

X was a 51 years old accountant who began psychotherapy for the first time in his life four months after leaving his wife of twenty years. For the last seven years of the marriage he had been involved with another woman. X explained that he was conflicted because he was unable to tell his wife clearly and directly why he had left. He was fearful because his wife, who had asked him to return, was depressed and had threatened suicide. For these reasons X continued to meet with his “ex”-wife twice a week.

X was also struggling with his feelings about his lover. He felt “free” of his wife and did not want to become involved in another entangling relationship which would replicate what he had just left at home. X’s reluctance to become more involved with his lover was intensified by the fact that she had a teenager son whom X couldn’t stand. It seemed that each relationship was tied to the other in a way that greatly upset X. His anxiety and conflict over these relationships caused him to seek psychotherapy, even though he had been always someone who doubted the efficacy of therapy.

X looked older than his stated age despite the fact that he was in good shape and had a weekly routine of swimming and working-out. He described symptoms of esophagitis and irritable bowel syndrome and volunteered that he had always been satisfied with his sexual performance.

X never had a clear career goal in mind. He had worked as an accountant for an insurance company prior to becoming self-employed in private practice fifteen years ago. He was an educated man who had several philosophical interests. He defined himself as a solitary man who has never had friends and was “proud” of this tendency toward loneliness. His primary hobby was collecting arms. He was an expert target shooter.

After several sessions X mentioned that he had been an obese child, and that during adolescence he lost weight but instead of feeling relieved he began to feel deeply ashamed of being small and short. His shame and embarrassment were obvious as he imparted this information and added that he has never told anyone about these feelings. During childhood he had an imaginary group of friends whom he called the Gang of the South. X spent all day with these “friends” in search of imaginary adventures.

During adolescence and the first years at university X wanted to become an aircraft pilot but could not afford the costs involved. With a smile he told the analyst that he finds consolation through solitary play with flight simulator games on his computer.

X’s father was a lawyer who died at age 69. His mother was a teacher at a college and lived into her 80s. X was in his late thirties and early forties when his parents died. He has a younger sister who had never had a relationship with a man. She is an aggressive alcoholic woman who had lost several jobs. X communicates with his sister through monthly phone calls.
and a yearly Christmas meeting.

X always felt an emotional distance from his parents, particularly from his father, whom he never kissed nor embraced. When speaking to his father X used polite terms which are used in Spanish to address elderly individuals and new acquaintances. X said his parents “were there but not there” and that he always felt them to be distant. Eventually he came to see that he was the one who had created the distant. X felt he had “old” parents, the meaning of which will be clearer as the clinical material progresses, parents who were unable to play and communicate with him and his sister in a personal and specific way. If we consider these statements as a whole, he always felt rejected by both of them. From the very beginning of the treatment the analyst felt a sense of distance in the transference relationship that X was establishing.

Despite numerous medical interventions X and his wife were not able to have children. His wife suggested adoption but X said he could not accept an adopted child. “I would never bring up the son of another man”. From the moment that it was clear that they could not have a child X never spoke of the subject again and told to himself that “the problem had really disappeared”.

After several months of treatment X was still unable to decide what to do about his relationships. Each day he would try to leave one or another of the two women. X was uneasy and depressed because he thought they both found ways to keep him involved, with apparently no idea that he was seeing both of them simultaneously. He met his “ex”-wife on Fridays and Sundays and his lover on Thursdays and Saturdays. X felt trapped in a prison of his own making, controlled by cell phones, messages and sexual pressures to perform since he often left one woman and went directly to an encounter with the other.

Interpretations that he was afraid of loneliness and true intimacy fell on deaf ears. But one day while he was listening to the analyst’s interpretation about his fears of involvement he unexpectedly said that he had always thought that “growing old is despicable, I have always felt a strong dislike of old age, it is something to be avoided. Old age is helplessness and loneliness”. The analyst was struck by the depth of this heart-felt revelation and commented: “You told me that you had been a lonely child because of the distance between you and your parents. Perhaps you are displacing it on to old age, that is, putting into your future what really happened in your past.”

X responded. “I have always felt the need to be self-sufficient, perhaps because of the reasons you just mentioned. I always wonder what is the sense of life if in fifty years nobody will remember me. I suppose I might live another ten or twenty more years. I don’t know... It’s OK to die when you are old. I really felt helpless and lonely as a child. Both of my parents worked outside the house and my maternal grandma died when I was five”.

The analyst interpreted: “It seems that you can’t imagine a life beyond seventy because you haven’t had a child. You’re afraid of oblivion because a son or a daughter would guarantee that you would be remembered”. X rejected the interpretation stating that it was nonsense. A son or daughter would also eventually be doomed to die. “You need to understand that life is nonsense” he said, “not because death is the final stage but because old age may be long and full of weakness and illness. There should be a natural law saying that when you reach age fifty you must die. A natural “human” law! Do you understand me?”

When he was in his sixth month of treatment X revealed the following new information. His wife and lover were not the only women in his life. He had become quite successful in seducing women by using the Internet. X always disguised his real identity by using different names and invented professions. He complained with a laugh that sometimes he couldn’t remember what he said to each of these women. Generally these relationships ended abruptly when the women asked for a commitment. At that moment X immediately withdrew and disappeared from their lives.

X said that he loved his “recruiting methods” which allowed him to “play” with women. This was interpreted as a “hunting” activity equivalent to the pleasure he gained from target shooting and the flight simulator games. Through these interactions he brought his Gang of the South fantasy play from childhood into the present. The analyst interpreted these relationships as an attempt to protect himself against deep fears of loneliness and aloneness as he coped with the idea of growing old, exactly the opposite of his “proud” boast of loving his loneliness. X matter-of-factly rejected the interpretation, as he had done with others of a similar nature; but it was clear from his affective response that it was registered. He reluctantly admitted that “it might be one of the reasons”. This was the first time that he gave any indication of accepting an interpretation. The analyst thought the interpretation was effective because from that mo-

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1X’s analysis was conducted in a Spanish speaking country. The Spanish language allows for two different ways of addressing people: one distant and polite, used with strangers and casual acquaintances, indicating reserve and respect; the other familiar and friendly used with friends and family indicating confidence and closeness. During the first half of the 20th Century parents and children used the first form of address when communicating each other. From mid-century to the present they began to utilize the second, more intimate, form of communication. However, X and his father did not make this change. They continued to use the more distant form.
portion on X began to speak of a feeling of nostalgia, something
that he said he tried to avoid experiencing because it came from
deep inside and was upsetting.

The analyst also interpreted that in the past and in the pres-
ent, X created fantasies in which he was never alone. These
fantasies protected him against painful feelings of loneliness.
X did not enjoy being alone, as he had suggested. He was ac-
tually afraid of it. X was not able to become involved in an
intimate, lasting relationship with a woman because she could
not be with him every moment of every day and night and
thus could not protect him from his feelings when she was not
there. His fantasies could do that, but only for short periods.
This schizoid “solution” which involved living within himself,
although unsatisfying, was better than risking the terrifying feel-
ing of being abandoned. Thus, his psychopathology sprang
from abandonment anxieties similar to those that occur in indi-
viduals with borderline and narcissistic disorders, an issue which
will be addressed later in the paper.

After eighteen months of treatment X still felt resigned and
depressed and decided to return to his wife, who welcomed him
with open arms. He felt defeated. Leaving had not helped him
find what he was looking for.

But once he returned home X increased his use of websites
to find women. At first, he only looked for women his own
age, never seeking younger women as is often the case with
men who are dealing with fears of aging. However, X began to
seek younger women after the analyst interpreted that X was
afraid of someone younger because she would think of him as
an old man. Surprisingly, he accepted the interpretation, was
relieved, and from that moment on he increased his efforts to
date younger women.

X spent a great deal of time during his sessions describing
various details of these activities. He spoke of what he would
write to them and what they would say in response. X de-
scribed the mental tricks he used to remember the fictitious
name given to each woman and what he told her about himself.
He reveled in leading up to the moment when he asked the
woman to meet him. Once the contact was made and they had
sex he felt triumphant; but if the occasional woman fell in love
with him X immediately disappeared from her life.

X greatly enjoyed telling the analyst the details of his con-
quests, assuming that the analyst was surprised by his success
and interested in his adventures. He appeared like a child tell-
ing his father about his accomplishments, expecting interest and
praise. The analyst found himself becoming very interested in
these adventures and struggled to maintain analytic neutrality in
the face of his countertransference fascination with X’s success
with women. This transference-countertransference interaction
was interpreted later in the analysis as an attempt to bond with
father, thus undermining the sense of loneliness and isolation X
had experienced as a child.

The following detailed interaction between patient and ana-
lyst illustrates the themes just described:

X: “What I’m looking for is not only sex. For example, if a woman
offers herself just for sex I discard her. I love the preparations. This
is what I really enjoy. To become confident, to build a bond, this is ex-
citing. I want sex but sex just for sex is not interesting to me.”

A: “Perhaps what you are most interested in is in a kind of enchant-
ed activity that creates a special world, full of emotion and connect-
ness that you need in order to feel alive. It seems that you are at-
tempting to breathe new life into yourself because otherwise you
feel lonely, empty and dead. Your world needs to be populated by a
number of women at any one time in order for you to ward off lone-
liness and feel connected to another human being.”

X: “Yes, it might be. And when the woman falls in love I feel an
urgent and violent need to end things with her abruptly. When they
fall in love I think that women can’t understand this game. Why?
Please, tell me why they always misunderstand the game they are
playing so well (laughing)?”

A: “I really don’t know why. They certainly are attempting to play
a different game than you. But I do understand why they fall in love
with you. You seduce them slowly and your behavior gives them
the impression that you are interested in a meaningful emotional rela-
tionship.”

X: “Yes, that is your theory, something that I can’t stand. Why
don’t they understand the game, my game? It would be such a
simple thing if they didn’t change as the game went along.”

A: “I think I understand what you need. Perhaps you remember a
session six months ago when I told you that your activity with wom-
en resembled a kind of hunting activity. Well, in some ways you be-
have like a serial killer (X laughs openly)! Do you know serial killers
don’t kill by chance? They select their victims, relate to them, feel
confident and in control and then kill them. Well, your “game” with
these women reminds me their activity. Of course, I haven’t for-
totten that you are an arms collector and an expert target shooter.”

X: (Laughing with pleasure) “Well, it may be. I enjoy this activity. It
creates a complete new world of expectations. I have a sense of
foreseeing what is going to happen, of how things evolve, of what
is going forward and backward. I enjoy this game a lot because I do
it with an aim. The killer wants to kill and I want to seduce them into
having sex.”

A: “But it seems that you only really “kill” the woman in question
after she falls in love with you. When she wants a commitment you
withdraw immediately and “kill” the relationship, thus getting rid of
her.”

X: “OK, I understand. It may be. I think I felt the same thing with
my lover. Everything was fine until we reached a point where I felt
the need to “kill” her. I don’t think I can love anybody. You told me
several times that you doubted that I had ever really been in love
Developmental and Psychopathological Issues during Midlife

with a woman. I don’t think I’ve ever been in love or that I’m able to be in love. Also, I don’t think I’m interested in falling in love.”
A: “Perhaps you are really afraid of falling in love because that means giving another person access to and some control over your deepest feelings. You’re reluctant because you’re certain that you will be abandoned and ridiculed.”
X: “Yes, I agree. You must always be cautious with other people.”
A: “And, remember that we have already spoken about this: Do you remember one year ago when you phoned to tell me that you won’t continue your treatment? Do you remember that I told you at that moment that what you were feeling was absolutely natural because each time you felt someone become interested in you, you feel an immediate sense of mistrust and a need to end the relationship?”
X: “Yes, I remember quite well what you said then. And I also remember that at that moment I told you that you were wrong.”
A: “Well, at that moment you needed to “kill” me and “eliminate” me because you felt I was really interested in helping you with your troubles. But, please, keep in mind that you will surely have that feeling again in regard to me and your treatment, probably as we begin to explore the unconscious meanings of your “serial killings”.

Equivalent interpretations were made when the analyst asked the patient to use disguised details of his treatment for scientific purposes. X agreed to the request but continued rejecting this kind of interpretations.

Discussion

X’s analytic treatment began as a twice per week, psychoanalytically based psychotherapy. This decision was made after it became clear during the diagnostic sessions that X was distant and hesitant to become involved. He seemed to lack the proper words to express his thoughts and feelings; as though talking about himself with another human being was foreign to his nature. The analyst felt that if he asked the patient to lie on the couch X would have become frightened, disorganized and unable to return.

From the beginning of the treatment the analyst felt an intriguing, but disquieting feeling of fear as he waited for X to appear. This despite the fact that X came to his sessions and cooperated in the treatment process. As he analyzed his countertransference reaction the analyst discovered that his response was related to X’s fears of abandonment and the need to “kill” every significant bond that he built.

Colarusso (1994) suggested that midlife individuals “become tinged with loneliness and an inexplicable desire for sustained closeness” (p.122). The growing loneliness of midlife “drives most individuals to fill the intrapsychic void with relationships that plumb the depths of their being and reconnect them to the sense of total belonging they had experienced in the past” (p.123). These quotations refer to the working-through process demanded by this midlife realization. The result may be one of two very different outcomes. “Human beings are individuals alone with themselves, separated and individuated from all others. The most basic human experience is to be alone. For the immature this isolation may be a prison, cold and depriving; for the mature, it is a palace, full of the inexcusable richness of human emotion and thought” (p.262).

X’s problems with abandonment anxiety, which originated in early childhood (parental rejection, emotional distance and schizoid withdrawal into the Gang of the South), affected his life throughout his adolescence (shame related to being short) and young adulthood (infertility) but did not force him into therapy until midlife, when the issues of time limitation and future personal death intensified his pain ("When you reach age fifty you must die", “despicableness” and so on). Thus, it is possible to construct a chronological and developmental line of X’s loneliness that is illustrative of the theoretical formulations presented in Section One.

X’s childhood relationship with his parents was avoidant and empty. He did not feel a real or reassuring closeness to them. This lead to the intrapsychic struggle between the need for the real presence of the object and the regulation of the distance from the object which was described earlier in the paper following the presentation of some of Freud’s thinking on the subject. X reexperienced this conflict in his relationships with his wife, lover and Internet women as he tried to manage his feelings of loneliness which were heightened by his midlife engagement of the aging and time limitation. Throughout his life, up to and including midlife, X attempted to build an inner world capable of compensating for his loneliness and the sense of emptiness which stemmed from his parent’s emotional distance.

From this psychopathological vertex we can postulate the meaning of X’s “game”. Although his behavior with the women he engages seems to imply the desire for love and intimacy, once he creates the illusion of closeness in his victim he “kills” the relationship and the game is over. We can infer that X repeatedly experienced similar feelings of rejection by his parents as a child. Thus the “game” he played in adulthood is a chronic traumatic repetition of an infantile trauma in an attempt to turn the passively experienced trauma of childhood into midlife mastery.

When midlife concerns about growing old became a preoccupation and compromised X’s ability to manage his anxiety and feelings of loneliness, he moved his life in a new direction by leaving his wife and seeking solace in the “game” and the company of numerous women. When his efforts in this new direction failed he was finally able to seek help.
X’s conflict and need for relief from his intrapsychic pain can be conceptualized as follows: He could continue in his never-ending search for new women or he could, with the help of therapy, develop the capacity to deal with and integrate split-off aspects of his self and develop mature, intimate relationships for the first time.

From a psychopathological perspective, utilizing Kernberg’s (1984) criteria (identity diffusion syndrome, primitive defensive mechanisms and preserved reality testing) it is our conclusion that X is suffering from a borderline personality disorder. Identity diffusion is evident in his use of various “personalities” in his relationships with the multiple victims of his “game”. The primitive defensive mechanism of projective identification is apparent in his relationship with his multiple partners who serve as repositories for his projected narcissistic vulnerabilities which are then controlled by active manipulation and eventual termination of the relationships. Finally there is no doubt that X maintained his reality testing.

Denial is another primitive defensive mechanism employed by X. By stating that everyone reaching his age of fifty should die as a result of “natural laws” he avoids coming to terms with the midlife struggle with time limitation and the psychic pain related to the growing realization of a personal end. If this natural “human” law could be accepted no working through would be necessary. No psychic process would be needed, that is: no contemplation, no understanding, no feelings, in sum, no pain. Denial is often utilized as a defense against extreme pain, and X employs denial for that very purpose. Extreme pain resulting from irreolvable intrapsychic conflict precipitates the use of extreme defenses.

As is the case with many borderline patients, abandonment anxieties are at the core of X’s psychopathology. During childhood he protected himself from loneliness and fears of abandonment through his Gang of the South. In midlife he built a new Gang of Women for the same purpose. When involved with his girlfriends and lovers X protected himself against abandonment by the “game” he was playing and his inability to commit authentically. But when the external object left the “game” through her proposal of an authentic and natural bond, and X employs denial for that very purpose. Extreme pain resulting from irreolvable intrapsychic conflict precipitates the use of extreme defenses.

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X also used reaction formation to manage his fears of loneliness by boasting of his enjoyment of being alone and self-sufficient. However, in actuality he was constantly trying to maintain a level of distance from the object that allowed him to control the relationship and minimize the underlying, pervasive fear of being abandoned. If the abandonment anxiety become to severe he left the relationship before he could be left. By so doing X protected himself against past traumas of abandonment by his primal objects while at the same time maintaining his intrapsychic relationship with them through these current relationships.

Although X struggled with intimacy and loneliness since early childhood he didn’t feel the need to leave his marriage until he felt that he was near his “end”. When X reached his feared age of “despicableness” he lost control, separated from his wife and attempted, unsuccessfully, to build a new relationship with another woman.

X sought treatment after the relationship with his lover failed to bring comfort and happiness. X’s fear of old age was exaggerated and extreme because, as interpreted by the analyst, he projected into the present the aloneness and loneliness he suffered during infancy and childhood. The intensity of his discomfort and need to act was clear evidence that his defensive mechanisms against loneliness and abandonment were beginning to fail.

X also feared old age because of the pain associated with his infertility. The fact that he did not have children and was thus unable to symbolically live on through them after death undoubtedly added to his frantic need to change the status quo. By dating women over fifty X was able to avoid his feelings about infertility since the possibility of impregnating women in this age group was not a realistic concern. Although the analyst approached the subject indirectly by inquiring why X did not date younger, fertile women, the exploration of this issue in relationship to the underline concerns about infertility is incomplete. Other themes related to the infertility which warrant further exploration are X’s feelings of being “deeply ashamed of being small and short” and his intense dislike of his lover’s son.

It is important to note that when his relationship with his lover didn’t resolve his pain X began a determined effort to conquer other women. Maybe that would diminish his anxiety and restore his shattered sense of self-esteem and well-being.

At this point in the analysis it is unclear to what degree X failed to establish the good inner object and whether or not he will be able to develop the normative capacity to be alone in the presence of the object.

Following Freud in On Transience [1916 (1915)], we posed (Colarusso and Montero 2007) three major pathways for working-through the midlife confrontation with the developmental task of contemplating an end to personal existence: 1) The depressive path-the individual feels that everything, including their very existence, will be lost and as a result become depressed. 2) The manic path-the individual denies the inevitability of a personal end and frantically attempts to run from the present and begin anew in order to control the passage of time. 3) The elaborative path-the individual is gradually able
to acknowledge and accept the transient nature of all living things.

The depressive and maniac paths often lead to true midlife crises while the elaborative path usually ends with a contemplative midlife transition. The presence or absence of varying degrees of psychopathology as one approaches midlife are the determining factor in which path is chosen. X is using both depressive and maniac mechanisms in his unsuccessful attempt to integrate and accept the transient nature of his existence. Hopefully further analytic work will lead him toward a more elaborative process of acceptance.

This clinical material demonstrates how psychopathology and phase specific development tasks and conflicts are always intertwined and continually affect each other. The need to rework early experiences with loneliness within the framework of the midlife developmental task of integrating the awareness of time limitation and eventual personal death is a normative process in midlife. When successfully accomplished, the integration is indicative of the formation of an adult psychic organizer (Colarusso and Montero, 2007). The establishment of the adult psychic organizer is indicated by the comfortable, integrated acceptance of transience in all its forms.

The process of acceptance involves confronting “the most touching point of the narcissistic system, ego’s immortality challenged by reality” (Freud 1914c). To this is added the conflict between the ego ideal (mortality and transience) and the ideal ego (immortality and eternity). The predominance of pre-oedipal (abandon) and oedipal (castration) anxieties are important elements in determining whether or not the adult psychic organizer is established. Obviously, the presence of the organizer is not yet evident in X.

The healthy midlife individual recognizes and accepts the impermanence of personal existence and the presence of hate and evil in human nature (Jaques 1965). Further, he or she tolerates the uncertainty of living and the flow of generations and begins to conduct a life review by honestly appraising past and present experience. Wisdom is based on the bittersweet recognition that all individuals are always both alone and simultaneously fused with all other humans through experiences with family, friends and culture.

We think that X is far from acquiring such understanding. As his analysis progresses, it is our hope that he will develop the capacity for genuine intimacy, and as Winnicott expressed it, the ability to feel comfortably alone in the presence of the object.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no financial conflicts of interest.

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