

## The therapist's experience of projective processes

### Vignette

The patient, Mrs P, came to me following an initial couples' session, which she had attended with Mr P, her narcissistic husband, following the discovery of his recent affair, which revealed that it was, in fact, the latest in a sequence throughout their twelve-year marriage. He also had engaged in hedonistic behaviour on a regular basis, including the use of drugs, alcohol and prostitution. In the session he said he expected that they would be able to work towards healing the rift between them by "drawing a line under what had happened", and to start afresh. When asked what she felt, Mrs P looked heavenward and shook her head, silently appealing to me, but unable to express any wish of her own. I was unwilling to work with them as a couple on this basis, and he began therapy with an addictions counsellor while I agreed to see Mrs P for individual work.

In the first few months of therapy, Mrs P expressed her feelings of grief, and she began to tell me about the shame that she felt. She spent much of the session crying, and almost all of each session speaking about her husband, with whom she hoped to rebuild a trusting relationship. She phantasised and tormented herself with images of his infidelity, having found receipts from sex shops and lingerie sales, and she felt full of resentment towards him. She also described his unwillingness to speak with her about what had happened, or about his addiction treatment, and she became infuriated as the sessions continued, saying that although she was seeing me on a regular basis, nothing seemed to be changing in her life.

I found myself becoming frustrated in my wish to help her, and I felt inclined to fill the space left by her in the sessions, and to respond to her desperate attempts to pull me into telling her how she should behave with him. As each session finished I felt exhausted and as if I had barely given the patient enough ("enough what?" I wondered) to last until she got out of the door. I was drained and filled with feelings of inadequacy. I found myself frequently going over the time boundaries by more than a minute or two, and she became accusatory and resentful towards me. I began to wonder whether she too was a narcissist, because her behaviour felt full of entitlement and her wishes were expressed as needs. At this stage my more cursory understanding of narcissism actually misled me temporarily, and I wonder whether I might not have continued to follow this line

of thought for some time, had I not met her husband and observed first-hand how she became silent in response to his narcissism.