

"A triumph of collective narcissism": How Trump unleashed forbidden desires

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(AP/Ross D. Franklin)

Therapist Elizabeth Mika: Trump embodies hidden yearnings "that people do not necessarily want to admit"

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Donald Trump embodies almost everything wrong with America: He is a greedy, craven, untruthful bigot and bully, the living product of a celebrity-driven popular culture prefaced on distraction and crudeness. Trump's political movement and presidency seem to resemble a slow-motion car accident, but instead of running away from this destruction and chaos Trump's voters and Republicans en masse largely seem to welcome the mayhem.

Much of this dynamic can be explained by Trump's skill as a storyteller who is keenly aware how to speak to the hopes and fears of the human deplorables who comprise his camp. He is a political cult leader. But Trump's public also possesses a high level of agency. His followers have made a choice to stand by their Great Leader -- even when that loyalty is personally harmful to them as well as the country they supposedly love. Why? Because Donald Trump and his supporters are intertwined in a state of collective narcissism.

Is it possible to free Donald Trump's voters from this codependency? What role does collective narcissism play in Donald Trump's authoritarian movement? How does collective narcissism encourage the kinds of political violence that have emerged during Trump's campaign and presidency? What is the relationship between social pathology, collective narcissism and the cult of personality that Trump inspires?

In an effort to answer these questions, I recently spoke with Chicago-area counselor and therapist Elizabeth Mika, a contributor to the New York Times best-selling book "The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump."

This conversation has been edited for clarity and length. A longer version of this conversation can also be heard on [my podcast](#).



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How would you explain the rise of Donald Trump? How was he able to become president?

It is a triumph of collective narcissism in America. It is also an inevitable historical, political and psychological turn. We've seen this before in history. People are feeling extremely unhappy, unable to prosper or see hope for themselves and their children. There is, however, a certain segment of the population that is excluded from this: the elites. They are victim to their own blindness and we saw this in the 2016 election when supporters of Hillary Clinton were so convinced she would win. There was no question in their minds that would be the case, so they missed what was really happening.

So we have a troubled society. One aspect of this societal disorder is the lack of value. We lose the distinction between right and wrong. We become more and more psychopathic -- the main feature of which is the lack of conscience.

Can you provide some clear concrete examples?

The growing inequality between the "haves" and the "have-nots." We have a society where many people cannot afford health care. Higher education is beyond the reach of most people. Social bonds are fraying. The Trump administration is not going to make this any better. On the contrary, it will become worse.

There is a great deal of denial about Trump and what he reflects about American society. He has given people permission to act on the worst aspects of human nature. But to criticize Trump is to be self-reflective and criticize oneself, and most people -- especially his supporters -- are not willing to do that.

Most of us can identify with psychopathic functioning in some respect. We can identify with narcissistic pathology in some respect as well. Having someone like Trump, who combines both, is quite remarkable and having this person become a world leader is even more worrisome. He lies all the time. This is part of this so-called charm. Some people call it charisma, but it's not really charisma. Having no conscience, Trump does not experience guilt or shame or remorse, so he can say whatever pleases him at the moment to get people to do whatever he wants or needs of them.

People fell for this because they want what he has to offer. Ultimately, Trump embodies values that people do not necessarily want to admit to.

What is the appeal of Donald Trump for his supporters? We can go down the list of this man's attributes and most of them are negative. Yet his followers adore him.

For many people, all those negative characteristics are the allure. Trump gives them permission to act on the worst aspects of their nature. So essentially Trump normalizes pathological behavior.

Are Donald Trump and his movement the symptom or are they the disease in the American body politic?

He's actually both. Trump is a symptom of a disease that has been brewing for decades, if not centuries, as a matter of fact. When you go back to the foundation of the country, it was based on genocide of Native Americans and on slavery, cardinal sins that have never been atoned for. So part of the narcissistic pathology has to do with the disavowal of guilt. Narcissists are incapable of experiencing guilt.

A nation that is founded on a narcissistic principle will disavow responsibility and guilt. With the individual narcissist, we see this progression often. But when applied to society, it also holds truth as well.

In a healthy society, somebody like Trump would not become famous. He would certainly not come to the position of ultimate power. The fact that Trump is in the White House is a sign of how troubled we obviously are.

What separates a healthy ideation or idolization of a public figure from a negative one?

There are things that are objectively wrong, for example. Lack of compassion for example. Aggression and violence. We should be able to recognize them in people whom we consider our leaders. An uncritical approach to a leader is always unhealthy.

There is also the phenomenon known as "narcissistic collusion." We see this in leaders who have narcissistic personalities where the grandiosity fulfills a need in their followers, who tend to be narcissistic themselves. So you have this match between the leader and the follower, and there is a strong bond that is not susceptible to reality. This is one of the dynamics of a cult: The cultist is so devoted to the leader that the latter can direct the follower to self-destruct and they would oblige.

What is the relationship between collective narcissism and authoritarianism?

It's a very tight relationship. In general, antidemocratic movements are driven by collective narcissism. Hierarchy, especially, is important, because the narcissist essentially sees themselves as better than others.

Isn't it true that collective narcissism is also closely related to the type of social dominance behavior displayed by Trump and his followers?

Yes, social dominance goes along with social submission. There is willful collusion between the leader and his followers. So, again, it's predicated on those deep needs. There is an uncritical allegiance to Trump from certain segments of American population -- especially young white males. This is, by the way, what happened in Germany during the early 1930s with another leader.

Collective narcissism is also closely linked to ethnic and racial violence, because the "in-group" becomes empowered against the "out-group." The increase in right-wing violence during Trump's campaign and through his presidency is not a coincidence.

This is the essence of narcissistic pathology. The grandiose version of their selves is, of course, unrealistic, but they are very invested in maintaining it. With group and collective narcissism, the devalued aspects of the self are projected onto others. This is the basis of what's called "the narcissism of small differences."

When we project all those devalued parts on others, we essentially create enemies out of people who may have been our neighbors, for example. This was what happened in Rwanda. This was what happened in the former Yugoslavia. This is what is happening in America. The narcissistic projection of the devalued aspects of the self among Trump's supporters and other members of the right wing leads to aggression. And aggression then becomes completely normalized and justified, because those "others" have to be destroyed.

Trump is now more than a noun, he's a verb. You can go on YouTube and elsewhere and watch videos of white Trump supporters attacking nonwhites, Muslims and others while yelling "Trump!" or "Build the Wall!" or "Make America Great Again!"

This is one of the greatest dangers of having leaders with this character problem. They normalize what is profoundly abnormal and not acceptable. Thus all kinds of violence is permissible because Trump makes them permissible. We see this on a mass scale, but we also see this in families and other relationships.

There is a real darkness in human hearts, which we are not necessarily eager to acknowledge. But when we have somebody with similar characteristics elected to the position of ultimate power, it tells us that the potential for violence is already very high in the society. That gave Trump permission to come to power so he could unleash this type of aggression.

In terms of what Trump is doing to the collective mental health of the American people, what are some of the things you and your colleagues are seeing with your patients?

There's definitely an increase in stress. Some therapists and other mental health professionals are calling this "Trumpian stress disorder."

How can we break Trump's power over his followers? How do you heal people who are stuck in a cycle of collective narcissism?

It may be possible for individual cases, but certainly not possible for all. We have to this day people who worship Hitler or Stalin. Of course, personal tragedy or severe disappointment may bring this realization in some people's minds. But in others, the denial is so strong that you cannot break the bond. The more people start to act out of aggression or behave in ways that violate morality and their own conscience, the more they are invested in rationalizing their allegiance to the leader. Then the followers will say, "I was just following orders," or "I did what others did," or "I didn't know what was going on," and so the rationalizations and denials go on.

Given how dire the situation is in America at this moment, do you see reasons for hope?

There is a process of positive disintegration that's going on in our society thanks to Trump. He has brought to light all kinds of unsavory things going on in American society. Of course, he's using these unsavory things to deepen the discord in our disorder. But we need to keep in mind that leaders like that always fall. The reign is limited, although the damage they may cause is often deep. So the flip-side to Trump is the awakening of our moral nature and our understanding of what's right and wrong. Many people who had never previously thought about politics are now working to create positive change.

Chauncey DeVega

Chauncey DeVega is a politics staff writer for Salon. His essays can also be found at Chaunceydevega.com. He also hosts a weekly podcast, [The Chauncey DeVega Show](#). Chauncey can be followed on [and](#) .

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