

Daughterhood The Podcast

Episode #77

Caregiving For a Narcissistic Parent with Dr. Julia Mayer

• 48:04

SPEAKERS

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Rosanne Corcoran 00:13

Hello and welcome to Daughterhood, the Podcast. I'm your host. Rosanne Corcoran, Daughterhood circle leader and former primary caregiver to my mom, who lived with vascular dementia for 12 years. Through that journey, I experienced every phase of caregiving firsthand, the heartbreak, the joy and the aftermath. That journey showed me how vital support and connection truly are, and that's why this podcast exists. No matter where you are in your caregiving journey, I'm so glad you found us, because caregiving is far too much to do alone. So welcome to Daughterhood, the Podcast part of the Daughterhood community, where we empower caregivers to navigate both the practical and emotional sides of caregiving together. Here, your efforts aren't just good enough, they're heroic, and here you're never alone. Join me in Daughterhood. Before we dive in. I just want to share a quick note. This podcast is part of the whole care network. The conversations you'll hear are here to inform and inspire, but they're not a substitute for professional advice. The views you'll hear are those of the host and guests, and may not always reflect those of the Whole Care Network. If you have medical questions, please talk with your doctor and for legal advice, check in with your attorney. I'm so glad you're here. Julia L Mayer is a clinical psychologist in private practice in media Pennsylvania with over three decades of experience supporting women in caregiving roles, those navigating troubled marriages and individuals with histories of sexual trauma. She is the author of the novel A Fleeting State of Mind, and

co-author of the AARP Meditations for Caregivers, AARP Love and Meaning after 50 and most recently, the must read AARP Caregiver Answer Book. A former president of the board of the psychology network, Julia has co hosted the podcast Shrinks on Third since 2016 focusing on psychology and social justice. She also brings lived experience as a caregiver for her father and mother-in-law with vascular dementia and her stepfather-in-law with Alzheimer's disease. In this episode, we talk about caring for a narcissistic parent, the different types of narcissism, compassionate ways to cope, tending to your own well being and so much more. I hope you enjoy our conversation.

Rosanne Corcoran 02:29

Let's start with the basics. Can you paint a picture for us? What are some of the common traits of a narcissist?

Dr Julia Mayer 02:36

Sure, what I like to think of is a baby in a crib, crying, needing care and not getting it. Now in the adult body, someone who doesn't have the capacity to actually get much of their needs met, not their emotional needs, so they replace the emotional needs with do this for me. That's not good enough that you know you didn't do enough for me. You should do more for me. I'm your mother. I took care of you. Whatever it is, there's guilt, there's manipulation, there's controlling, there's criticism, but it all comes out of need, and it's a need for a thing that they can't get so again, the other thing I start with in every situation is compassion. Yeah, so I look at someone who we might label as a narcissist, as someone who they have emotional needs that they cannot meet because they never met them. They don't even know what they look like, and they certainly can't meet their adult child's emotional needs because they can't get their own met.

Rosanne Corcoran 03:45

Oh, wow. Okay, well, what do we do with that? Yeah, that's how are we dealing with that while we're trying to provide care for them?

Dr Julia Mayer 03:55

Yeah.

Rosanne Corcoran 03:55

And nothing's ever enough.

Dr Julia Mayer 03:57

Nothing's ever enough because a baby who isn't being fed and is screaming and not getting care, can never get that fulfillment. The reason I start there is because I want people to try to have compassion for this person, even though they are the bane of their existence. And I get that a narcissistic parent makes you feel bad all the time, makes you feel guilty you can't do enough. You know, you make them some elaborate meal because you want to impress them, and they're like, this is cold or like, there's they can't stop themselves from being negative and critical. And you know, there are obviously different kinds of narcissists. Sure, the one we're probably going to talk about the most is the one who is critical and demand and insistent that they deserve special treatment and no treatment is good enough for them. It just isn't special enough no matter how much they demand. It that kind of typical difficult, narcissistic care receiver. It. The other kind is also really difficult, and it's more like I suffer more than anybody else, and you can't possibly understand my suffering, and you can't make it go away. And I am defined by my suffering, and my victimhood is badge that I wear kind of narcissism. It's like, I'm special because I suffer more than everybody, right? That one makes people feel very guilty. Because, like, if you want to try to stop your mom from feeling so so much pain, there's nothing you can do, and then you just feel guilty that you've, you know, let her down.

Rosanne Corcoran 05:37

Well, because it's never enough. So how do you, how do you deal with that? I'm never I can't. There's nothing I can do here. I can't fix her suffering. I can't, I can't get her to be like, that was great, or Thank you, or something like that, or I'm sorry,

Dr Julia Mayer 05:55

I'm sorry.

Rosanne Corcoran 05:56

Yes, yes.

Dr Julia Mayer 05:57

Those are not things narcissists tend to say, and like, just want to say what a narcissist is is on a continuum. So we all have some narcissism, right, right? You know, like, if you look in the mirror, you don't want to hate yourself. You want to think, Okay, I look nice today, or whatever. We have certain ways in which we think we're special, and we all should have that, because everybody is special, but it's, it's sort of a hugely magnified, almost cartoon version of that that you see in someone that you would go out of your

way to label a narcissist. I got you, it would be, you know, that their self importance is so overblown, so big, they take up all the oxygen in the room. You know, everything about them is so important, and they don't tend to have empathy, so they don't really understand what you're feeling. So you bend over backward to try to make them feel better and try to make them feel good, and then you don't get it reciprocated, right? So it's a definitely one of the more difficult kinds of caregiving that we would do is for a narcissist, because you put a lot of effort in, like any good adult you know, who wants to take care of their ailing parent, and what you get back is rejection, criticism, condemnation, frustration. And I think there are a lot of people who are in that caregiver position who feel easily burnt out, overwhelmed, angry, yeah, on the daily, yeah, it's tough, I mean, and this is someone who is trying to do the right thing. You know, probably had spent much of their own childhood trying to please this unpleasable person. So here they are, that person is diminished enough to need care, um, but still self centered and unemphatic and demanding, right? Yeah, makes me think of my mother in law, who she and her husband went bankrupt. He had Alzheimer's, and she couldn't handle their situation, and they ran out of money, and we had to move them up from Florida. So we bought this apartment about a mile from us in this lovely building that has a van that can drive people around, and beautiful lobby and rooms for people to play cards in a swimming pool outside. It is really nice. And they moved in and two things she said to her nieces, as she was describing the place to them, that it looked like a tenement.

Rosanne Corcoran 08:24

Oh, my goodness.

Dr Julia Mayer 08:25

And yeah, that hurt. We bought it. Yeah, we moved her here.

Rosanne Corcoran 08:32

Wow.

Dr Julia Mayer 08:33

The other thing she said, early on, I can picture it. We were sitting in the apartment with her, and she said, You know, I'm a princess, and I expect certain level of care, really. What does that even mean?

Rosanne Corcoran 08:46

Yeah, right.

Dr Julia Mayer 08:48

And it meant that she never washes her own hair. So we she would go weekly to the hairdresser. This is a bankrupt person, weekly to the hairdresser, to the nail salon. She was still shopping for clothing at Talbots, even though it's like she couldn't really be in reality about how bad her situation was.

Rosanne Corcoran 09:07

And what do you do with that? Julie, yeah, what did you do?

Dr Julia Mayer 09:13

We felt angry and frustrated. But what I do, and what Barry and I try to do, we are psychologists. We try is, is to have compassion for her, because the secret is, if you have compassion for the really difficult person, it's like you're putting a boundary in place. So I would think about my mother in law, the life she had built for herself. She'd worked really hard. She was always in charge of things. She ran a business by herself, and she was a pretty, you know, major person. It had collapsed and and she lost everything, including her admiring friends who she apparently, in Florida, took out to lunch every week, and she went bankrupt. So she um. Yeah, she was suffering, and I she had a long history of other kinds of suffering too, and some trauma. And so, you know, we just had to kind of try to laugh about the princess comment. It was a little harder to laugh about the tenement comment, yeah, I would think so. But I also did my best to not take it to heart. Her childhood was in a tenement. And so, you know, if you think about the kinds of criticisms and comments that someone who's kind of narcissistic makes, it makes more sense. If you think, if you take this sort of wide angle perspective, you step back, you think, what is going on with this person? And I could see that she was really unhappy. You know, I could have put her anywhere, and she would have been unhappy because she wasn't where she put herself. And she didn't like us controlling. She wanted control. And, of course, she was criticism critical, because she was always critical. So then I could just sort of step back and observe how she was coping. I don't mean to be like too clinical about it, but I actually think it's a skill for anybody that back and you sort of look at the other person and you sort of evaluate where they are, why they're behaving like this, rather than absorbing it like a sponge, because that does nobody any good. The problem is, if you grew up with a mom like that, you grew up absorbing it like a sponge. It's know how to do. It's automatic. So then you get to this stage where you're taking care of her because she's in need, and you

start out by absorbing it like a sponge, because that's what you've always done, just like you've always felt guilty, just like you've always over functioned for her, parented her as much as you could to you know, not very good outcome. So it's very hard not to fall back into those same patterns when you're caregiving. So you do a whole bunch of things to avoid it, like, like, well, this is my favorite phrase at the moment. It's also give it to you radical acceptance. Yeah, that's what you do. You say this is who she is. This is how she is. She's always been this way, but I don't have to be the same way I was as a kid. It didn't really work for me. I need to come up with some better ways of coping with her that I couldn't as a kid. I did the best coping I could as a kid, which means I I wanted an attachment with this difficult person who can't really attach. So I overcompensated. I over functioned. I did things as a child that you don't expect children to do, like cook a birthday breakfast, you know, at age seven for the parent, all kinds of things like that. But that's what you do when you have a pretty narcissistic parent, because it is a life and death issue to be attached. If you're not attached, then you really are in trouble. So if you have a narcissistic parent, you spend your childhood figuring out how to attach to that, and then you get really good at it, because all the ways that you attach to a narcissistic person are not really good things over functioning guilt, you know, getting criticized and doing nothing about that. You know, accepting the criticism, becoming the criticism, feeling, you know, not good enough less than that's not all very good coping for an adult, but it was amazing coping that a kid came up with in order to be with that mom.

Rosanne Corcoran 13:21

It makes perfect sense. And the problem that happens over and over is that the minute your mother opens her mouth, you're seven years old again.

Dr Julia Mayer 13:32

Yes, right.

Rosanne Corcoran 13:36

But you're a fully grown woman,

Dr Julia Mayer 13:38

You forget.

Rosanne Corcoran 13:39

Yeah, you totally forget that. So it's almost like, you know, Julie, it's one of those things too, where it's like, it's one more thing on the caregiver's back, oh yeah, because you have to look at it, and you have to take it all in. And it's almost like, well, you have to be the bigger person. And it's like, I don't want to be the bigger person. I just want to be a person,

Dr Julia Mayer 14:02

And you have needs too, and right, not not getting that

Rosanne Corcoran 14:06

Right, right. So how does in, in that situation, what are the strategies that go with that? Is it? I'm going to take a walk, I'm not going to answer the phone. I'm not going to I'm just not everything that she says. I'm just going to say, yep, Yes, mother, like, what? What do you do?

Dr Julia Mayer 14:23

That is a bunch of strategies that you could try, for sure. But under the strategies is the philosophy. And the philosophy is, I'm not that child anymore. I'm never going to please this woman. I have to stop trying so hard. I don't need to feel guilty about the fact that she can't be happy. It is not my job to make her happy as her caregiver. It's my job to make sure she's safe. If I can, as much as I can, but it is not my job to make her happy. I can't, as a matter of fact, nobody can. She's just going to be that way, and maybe. It's worse now that she's older and more frail. Okay, so your approach is, I'm going to take care of this person as well as I can and hopefully give them a safe, peaceful life as much as I can. I'm not superhuman, but I'm going to catch myself if I start feeling guilty, if I notice that I'm over functioning, if I feel bad because she didn't like what I cooked, or because she doesn't like my hair today, whenever I've gained weight and she's pointing it out, or, you know, yeah, all those things, I'm not going to feel bad about those things, because they're not about me. I mean, they sound like they are. They're aimed at me. They're about her misery. So every time she does something like that, and I find myself falling down that well, till I'm seven years old again, I say to myself, radical acceptance, this is not about me. This is a poor, miserable older woman who is suffering, who has always suffered, and has never felt the kind of loving connection that she's longed for, even though she's tried very hard, but she's always tried in the wrong way. She's controlled people, she's manipulated, she's guilted them into doing things. But she can't just be loving, and so she can't really even take it in. So the thing that's really tricky, I think, for the daughters of a narcissist is accepting that that person who, I think another

feature of growing up with a narcissistic parent is that we kind of idealize them because they require us to do that. So we do automatically. We don't even realize we're doing it, but we kind of put them in a special place, on a pedestal, and we we won't criticize them as much as they might criticize us, and we don't want to be like that, and we don't do it back right? So I don't mean it to as a criticism of them. It's just an awareness level that we need to have. We're looking at this narcissistic parent, and we're saying they're actually not fine. They're not something I want to be. They don't actually admire the way they treat people. I don't actually look up to that and the things I value, like a close emotional connection that's safe without all that criticism, they can't do that. So it's really the clearer view that you get of that person you know. You keep working on it and try to make it as clear as possible how you see them in reality, now, in the here and now, not as a child, but in the here and now. That helps you put some boundaries in place. Because if you can see them as kind of a pitiable person who isn't ever going to be happy, isn't ever really going to feel that close to anybody, and it's actually easier to take care of them and when they're critical and miserable and yelling or whatever they do, you know you really work hard to have that boundary where you know you're thinking, it's because they're so miserable, they're just trying to get out on me, and it's the only way they know how to connect. How sad. And then you say to yourself, thankfully, somehow I can connect in much better ways.

Rosanne Corcoran 18:16

Are there any ways to communicate to make it easier to try to get them to cooperate with you, of course.

Dr Julia Mayer 18:23

So I'll give you an example in our family, okay, my mother in law was messing up her pill box. And Barry, you know, my husband, went in there and said, You're messing up your pillbox. I'm taking over. She did not like that, and you can imagine why she's controlling and has pride. And she was insulted, and the insult ran really deep, because she's hypersensitive. So she said, No, no, I'm you're not. I'm not doing anything wrong. You're not taking it over. So we waited a little bit, and then I went in, and I'm not her daughter, thankfully. So it was easier for me. I said to her, I think you could help me with something. I am worrying, maybe unnecessarily, but I'm worrying about your pills, and if you're taking them right, and I want you to be okay, and it would really help me if you would let me do the pill box, because that way I'll know that they're set up right, and that way I don't have to worry so much about how you're doing. So what I did there was I was flattering, and I asked her to help me, so she was important, and I looked like I

was having anxiety, so she was superior, and she could help me solve my problem. She could take care of me a little bit, which is a good thing. And I think also, because I'm not her daughter, it was a little bit easier for her to say yes to me.

Rosanne Corcoran 19:46

Right, right. So how do we balance the I'm going to stand up for myself and the I'm going to make it appear that I need the help, that this is about me and not her. How do we deal with those conflicting feelings.

Dr Julia Mayer 20:01

Yeah, it's tricky. Stand up for myself. Stand up for myself is what you would need to do as a young person, but as an adult child of a person who is needy. Now you don't actually really need to stand up for yourself in quite the same way. You know, I'm trying to think of an example. If my mother in law, you know, told me she hated the meal I made, I could say I worked really hard on it, I tried to make it something you like, and she said, Well, it wasn't good, right? So the point, I don't really know whether you need to stand up for yourself. If you stand up for yourself, you're still trying to get that person to change to value you, and that's just not really likely to happen on the regular. It could happen on rare occasions when, like, people say, are narcissistic people empathic, and no, they're not. But anyone who's grown up with a narcissistic parent knows that every now and then you get some empathy and you're like, Wow, this is so great, but the only reason you do is because they're feeling the same thing you are at moment, because they really don't have empathy so they can connect with you empathically only if you're both feeling the same thing, okay, you're both angry at the guy who ran the stop sign. Okay, then we're connected. Okay, so it's not an actual empathic moment, even though it feels like one. And you know, if you're again, the child of a narcissist, you're looking for that, you know that's you're really eager to find some empathy, right? So as the adult caregiver, no, you don't really have to defend yourself. Okay, what's the point? It's a trap. It kind of is, yeah, exactly. So it's more like, you just kind of say, Okay, well, we don't have to agree, you know, I see it differently. I really like this meal, next book. What I like? Right, right, right. Okay, it helps a sense of humor too. Always does across the board, exactly. So if I can laugh at my mother in law saying she's a princess and imagine her in a little, you know, tiara, then okay, that's good.

Rosanne Corcoran 22:13

That'll work. What are the differences between someone being selfish or controlling and them being truly a narcissist?

Dr Julia Mayer 22:21

Yeah, and a lot of these things are just a matter of degree, okay, but it is an interesting question, because as people age, especially if they become infirm in some way, they become more self centered, that can make them seem more selfish and less empathic, and they can start to look more narcissistic, and maybe they're but usually a person who's not a narcissist isn't going to become one when they're ill. It's just that when people are ill, they're they're in more need, so the needy aspects of them come out so they can look more selfish or more demanding, okay, but the narcissist is is pretty consistently like that, where someone who's just having a rough time and is like, I need care. It's usually not permanent. It's kind of temporary, and they appreciate the care. So this is an important point. Okay, a narcissist is not that likely to appreciate everything you're doing. They don't even notice. They just can't get their needs met. And you you're trying so hard, and they're feeling frustrated because it doesn't really meet their needs. They're not people who say, Thank you, Wow, you really worked hard for me. You know, if someone tells them to, this is what happened with my mother in law, to thank us, and she's like, Thank you for your efforts. But it made me feel like she had no clue what they were, right? I appreciated the attempt. So I think there's just, you know, a limit to what you can expect. There's no apologies, no thank yous someone who's just being selfish might actually appreciate it if you help them.

Rosanne Corcoran 23:58

Okay. Well, that makes sense, because, you know, it's hard. It's like, you know, well, they're a narcissist, or, you know, I'm being gaslit, or there's, there's lots of labels, and everybody wants a label to make it easier. And then it's like, Well, yeah. And I feel like there's a lot of times where we want to plug something in so that we can understand it. But I think when it comes to like, labels are a big deal, right?

Dr Julia Mayer 24:23

Yeah, I don't really like labels. I'm a psychologist, and one of the things we have to do is diagnose everybody, right, at least for insurance purposes. But I don't actually love that. I don't like people to be identified by something like narcissist even narcissists. I don't love it. I would only do it if it's interfering with either their or other people's, you know, life. So narcissists don't generally feel discomfort about being narcissists, okay, but the people around them. Feel discomfort. And one way, you know, someone's like at the level of label or personality disorder or whatever, is because the people around them have a hard time. Give me a for example, um, you know, a narcissist in a in a meeting

is something, you know, self promoting and self you know, aggrandizing, and everyone around them is kind of like rolling their eyes. That's an a little tiny example of, okay, maybe that person is a narcissist. I would need more information, but you see behaviors that actually push people away. And then, you know, if you think of it like, what do all humans want? They want connection, they want to be loved. You know, they want to be accepted, but the narcissist is doing the making other people run the other way. And so a lot of times you think, well, personality disorder gets the opposite of what they're longing for. Okay? So the narcissist doesn't get love. They get ridicule, which is the thing they're most uncomfortable with, right? Yeah, so I would only label somebody if there was some need to. And the word narcissist gets thrown around quite a lot, and I think it's overused, like we all have a certain level of narcissism. It's important to have some. It's aware of whether we're shooting ourselves in the foot or getting getting by.

Rosanne Corcoran 26:18

Okay? And it's not, you know, it's needed that understanding of where their person is, where their care partner is, on this, you know, on the range of where are they in their treatment of them.

Dr Julia Mayer 26:31

Yeah, I'll call it a continuum.

Rosanne Corcoran 26:34

There you go. Continuum much better.

Dr Julia Mayer 26:36

So you could have a somewhat narcissistic care receiver and they're somewhat empathic, and sometimes they say, thank you. And that's much easier than the extreme narcissist who is just so self focused that they can barely think of another person. And that's the one that makes me think of the baby in the crib screaming, yeah. How do people become narcissists in the first place baby in the crib, screaming, okay, it probably somewhat neglected. There could be abuse, like, you know, there's genetic loading, of course, there's cultural factors in everything. Some cultures you know, promote that in some people. And then, you know, I guess the way I would think about it, as a psychologist is this person had trouble connecting, attaching to their caregiver as a baby. So there's attachment issue, and that attachment issue is they can't get their needs met, whether it was that they were neglected or mistreated, or the care provider

in some way, had trauma, or was had postpartum depression, or, I don't know, any, any number of things, but their needs weren't met. And then they kind of get stuck there, needing, needing, needing, and never feeling by because the connection part is what's important, and that's kind of what they're not they don't have enough of.

Rosanne Corcoran 28:01

Gotcha. Well for caregivers trying to provide that care, how can they help themselves? It when they feel that, like they're trapped, because that's that treadmill. Julie, you know, can't make them happy, trying to make them happy, all of that. How do they how do they help themselves in those situations?

Dr Julia Mayer 28:19

So caregiving, of for anybody is stressful thing and frustrating and agitating. And so when you're caring for a difficult person, it's even harder. And you know, the research shows that if the person doesn't appreciate the caregiver, it's so much harder on the Yeah, so that's the situation. So you have to do self care. You have to say, well, if my mom or my care receiver can't show me the love, I have to do that for myself. I'm an adult. I have to, you know, have some good people to talk to. I could talk to a therapist, I could talk to good friends. I could go to a support group. In addition to that, you know, I could go put myself out in nature. I could learn how to meditate. I can calm myself down, by the way, even just breathing exercises, if you get good at it, when the care receiver says something that makes you want to like blow your top, you can get yourself calm again if you have practiced doing some breathing. So it really helps. The goal is to not keep getting triggered. And so you go into the situation anticipating that you will she's going to say something to me today. I know it ready, and when she does, you know, okay, I can give myself a quarter or whatever, like, I predicted that correctly, and you also get a little bit of distance from it if you're predicting it, and then in terms of responding to it, the amazing thing is, it doesn't matter what you do. You can get angry, you can cry, you can storm out, you can laugh. You can be blank, like, Thank you for your comment. It, whatever. It makes no difference, because she'll never change. So again, radical acceptance, you go in there knowing she'll never change. And you know there's grief in that, because people with narcissistic parents have a lot of hope. They don't even know it necessarily, but they go in hoping today she'll love me in the way I need today, she'll, she'll see me, you know, validate me. So radical acceptance means giving up on that hope. And that's it's sad, yeah. And I think people have to grieve, even with their family member, whatever their care receiver, right there in front of them, there's a kind of grief that they have to feel that this is not necessarily going to ever get

better, but I do have a story to tell you about how one person coped with it. Let me tell you that please. Yeah, I had this client for many years. Actually, she was a nurse, wonderful person, really dedicated to her unbelievably narcissistic. And I happily label her, that mother who as an example of how narcissistic she was, every Christmas she would make a list of the things that my client would have to buy her for Christmas, a Christmas list that she the client would have to run around and get everything. It was long list she would not give her daughter anything. So Christmas was about her receiving gifts full stop. And my client was on board. She had done it her whole life.

Rosanne Corcoran 31:29

Really?

Dr Julia Mayer 31:30

Here she was in her 50s, running around getting gifts for her mom, knowing that she would get nothing, and if she didn't get exactly what her mom wanted. Her mom would be critical, annoyed, you know, disappointed, etc. And if she did get everything exactly right, that was what was expected. There's no compliment, right? And I know, having worked with this woman, that it was really tough to get her to see how imbalanced that it's. Yeah, it's just not, but that's the normal she knew. Wow. So fast forward a little bit. Her mom has a stroke. She has type two diabetes. She needs care. This mom also always looked down on her daughter. Always looked down on the nursing degree, anything she could look down on she looked down. But my client said, I want to take care of her. It's a good thing to do. I know how to do it, and I want to do it. We had to have a lot of conversations about, how do you do that without, you know, basically destroying yourself, right? So we had lots of conversations, like the one we're having right now. You really need to not try to change your mom. You need to deal with her the way she is. And what happened was she had about a two year caregiving stint until her mom passed away, and her mom kept getting worse. She had kidney disease, etc. During those two years, her mom, I think, felt cared for, maybe because she was so diminished. She really couldn't care for herself. She let her daughter care for her, and that shifted their relationship. And of course, my client didn't react to other criticisms. Didn't play into, you know, an argument about, you know, who's in charge, what's the right thing, and how wrong she is. Like, she just didn't take the bait as much as possible. Look, sometimes you take the bait, even I do. You know it's what you do, but you try not to. She really tried not to, and as time went by, their relationship actually did get better. I don't think her mom stopped being a narcissist, but what happened was my client changed. She started to recognize her own strength. She recognized she didn't

need her mom to validate her. She didn't need her mom to admire what she had achieved in life, which was a lot. She didn't need all that she needed to do what was right for her, which was take care of her mom as best she could, no matter what her mom did. And interestingly, when she stopped taking the bait, and it took a while, but her mom stopped baiting her, it stopped. The whole pattern disappeared, mostly, like 100% but it mostly disappeared. And because it did, my client felt like she could be closer to her mom, you know, who wasn't snapping at her anymore, and they actually had the best relationship they'd ever had in their lives together. So when her mom passed away, she said to me, I wouldn't do a single thing differently. I actually felt closer to her than I had ever felt in my life, and she actually started to appreciate my medical knowledge and rely on my medical knowledge, and that made me feel good. So she found ways to connect with her mom, because she didn't take the bait. As hard as that is.

Rosanne Corcoran 34:58

It's just so interesting Julie. Because having the fortitude and the ability to just be like, Nope, I'm not going to do it, as angry as I feel, as hurt as I feel, I'm not going to do it.

Dr Julia Mayer 35:13

Right. So the secret ingredient is compassion.

Rosanne Corcoran 35:16

Okay.

Dr Julia Mayer 35:17

It's that compassion for this person who is like a baby screaming get their needs met and can't really connect in a loving, caring way, like they long for, like everybody longs for, right? So if you go in with that compassion, you don't actually have to feel so angry, and you also don't have to feel so hurt, because it's not even about you, it's about them, right? Just a hard thing to really integrate. I mean, I can talk about it, because this is what I do for a living, but I know it's really hard, really, to make this particular perspective change, and you have to work on it a lot. So you know it's hard enough to be a caregiver and remember all the doctor's appointments and the meds and the shopping and the pharmacy and, you know, whatever else, meals and but on top of that, and it really is a kind of self care. You want to have compassion for the fact that this person is the way they are, that they're so unable to just be loving, it makes it easier to be loving toward them, actually, because if you have that image of a

screaming baby in a crib right in the back of your head, it's not real. I don't mean this literally. It's sort of a metaphor, but if you have that in your mind, then you can see that this is just someone who, you know, they can't really have what maybe you have, which is, you know, connected loving relationships. So then you can have compassion for them, and then when they do their normal thing, kind of shrug and say, well, there it is again.

Rosanne Corcoran 36:50

Is it a positive to go back and be like when I was a kid, she didn't do this and this and this and this and therefore, like, is it a positive to do that, or is it like just let that be and try to be here where you are now?

Dr Julia Mayer 37:06

Yes and yes. Definitely want to be here now and remember that you're an adult and that you have strengths and resilience, and you don't have to be a seven year old. However, it does help to remember it's going to come up anyway, so don't fight it. You're going to have memories where she was disappointing, where you needed her and she let you down, where you needed her to understand something about you, and she wouldn't, and all those things are there. And then you say to yourself, but you know what? I'm not her. I'm not her. I am fortunate to not be her. I feel bad for her, I feel compassion for her, but I am a functioning person. I am a caregiver. So I'm stressed out, exhausted, etc, but I am a caring person who actually knows how to care better than she does. And my identity is I care. I care about people. It's meaningful to me to care, no matter what she's like. So I've chosen this mission to take care of her, and this was what my client was saying. You know, I'm on this mission. I want to do this right? It doesn't matter if she can't reciprocate. Never could. It's also a really tough thing, because you also have feelings you're human and still longing for that reciprocation, but going to be there. So, you know, you just remind yourself, I don't need it from her, because something I got through my whole life without it from her, so I can't possibly need it now.

Rosanne Corcoran 38:39

And the the script in your head when you get back to your car or when you go in another room, is what?

Dr Julia Mayer 38:46

I feel bad for her. She's stuck, she's and I can go on having a life, which I have to do. I need to contact my friends. I need to have a support network. I need to do things to refuel. You would have to do that as a caregiver, no matter what kind of person you're taking care of, but a really challenging person, okay? You need more of that. You need to say, I'm a caring person, so I need to aim some of that at myself too. You can't all be toward her, right? Have to take care of me. I have to show my self love. And if she can't appreciate it, I can. I can say, You know what, I'm a good person. I'm doing a good thing. I'm doing a really hard good thing, especially hard because of who she is. And I can feel proud of myself. It doesn't make me a narcissist, it's just proud of myself well.

Rosanne Corcoran 39:33

And that's my next question, because being the child of a narcissist, when you try to take care of yourself, are you viewing it as you're being selfish and being a narcissist, or are you viewing it like, I have to do this for myself, like, where's that line?

Dr Julia Mayer 39:48

Yeah, that's a good question, because I think a lot of children of narcissists feel like they don't deserve care. All their care should be aimed at this person,

Rosanne Corcoran 39:58

And if they flip it around and do it. For themselves, then they're being that person.

Dr Julia Mayer 40:02

They're going to feel guilty, feel, yeah, selfish, right? Sometimes they've been accused of being selfish growing up, yes. So it's hard for them. I get this, it's really tough to decide. You know, Am I entitled? Am I entitled? Am I entitled to real care and love and acceptance and validation. So I always say this to people, imagine you're talking to your best friend or your sister or whatever, and they say that, Am I entitled to care and love and validation? Would you say no, no, as a matter of fact, if you knew they were caregiving somebody challenging, would you say, yeah, you need extra care.

Absolutely. You're doing a really hard thing, and you need validation for that. Yeah, that is what you would say, and that is what you should say to yourself, because if other people deserve it, of course you do too.

Rosanne Corcoran 40:56

I love that. Do you think forgiveness can happen in any of this? Is there a path to forgiveness? Is it important to forgive?

Dr Julia Mayer 41:04

Yeah, this is a tough topic. I think I have a prejudice against forgiveness only because I don't think that the person is sorry necessarily not sorry. What are you forgiving? So I don't think I would use that word. I would say again, acceptance. This is who they are. If you had hooked them up to a lie detector test when they were a parent of young children, including you, and said, Are you? Are you doing your best job as a mom? And they said, yes, no. Bells and whistles would go off. We did their best. Everybody does their best. And it's not the mom's, in this case, fault that she's narcissistic. It's not like she said, Well, kind of personality disorder would I would like to have? I think it would be a narcissist. It's unfortunate. It's a tragedy. It sometimes comes of tragedy. It's not their fault, even though, the behaviors that as a, you know, child of narcissist that you had to deal with, yeah, they hurt, they were painful, they were disappointing, you know, they were you had guilt, you had shame, you had all sorts of things. It's not about forgiving it. It's about accepting that that person did their best and it was not good enough, and it's not really their fault that it's not good enough as matter of fact, the whole issue of fault is kind of irrelevant. So it's not about forgiveness and it's not about fault. It's about compassion and acceptance. It really is. They're tough. They're tough when you're not used to thinking of them this way, but I'm telling you, if you feel compassion for that person and you can accept that they lived the best life they could, because everybody does that, but it just they had damage. You know, they're damaged people, and so they couldn't get their needs met. Actually, they couldn't appreciate their children. They couldn't say, I'm sorry when they did something wrong to their children. It's a blessing to be able to say, I'm sorry to your children. If you can't do that, think about how limited, like the fragility of that person, sorry I messed up. It's so easy to do is impossible for someone like that. So I think, like I said before, you kind of really want to do a dive into Who are they, this person who was my mom, and who is now kind of diminished, and I'm taking care of her. You know, what is it like to be like that, to not say, I'm sorry, to not, you know, show empathy only. It's, it's fragile, it's, it's not a good way to be. So, yeah, I don't really think you it's about forgiveness. It's about clearly seeing them for who they are, and accepting that that's, that's how it went, and it, it's, it's sad, and you have to grieve it.

Rosanne Corcoran 44:01

To accept that you have to grieve that,

Dr Julia Mayer 44:04

Yeah.

Rosanne Corcoran 44:05

Because nobody wants to, we don't want to grieve when we have to grieve, let alone in the process of this,

Dr Julia Mayer 44:12

It's very hard to grieve while you're caregiving, and do it anyway. We have to. You can't. So you may as well recognize what's happening, because if you don't recognize it, and this would be in any situation, and you're a caregiver, you're going to burn out. You have to give yourself room to be filled with grief. You are caring for someone who's very likely to die at some point. You're watching them get diminished. It's scary to think about end of life stuff. It's scary to think about the helplessness that they feel even the narcissistic parent who is especially controlling so their helplessness is really bad. They feel it intensely, and they react to it by being even more controlling and more critical. Yes, it's hard emotionally to be a caregiver in most situations, but certainly when the person's really difficult, and it all requires grief. And what do I mean by you have to grieve while you're doing it. It means you need to make time to have your feelings. You need to share them with people. If you don't do that, you end up really irritable. You end up overwhelmed by holding all those feelings, and your sleep will be even worse. You will feel anxiety like you can't believe these are all burnout signs. Rather than go there, start by recognizing that this process, from start to finish, is filled with grief, and so recognize it when it's there. Necessarily share it with the care receiver, because she's not going to be empathic, right? Other people?

Rosanne Corcoran 45:41

Yes, outside of that, yeah. What's your takeaway? Best advice to someone who's caring for a narcissistic parent?

Dr Julia Mayer 45:50

Lean on other people. Get your people. Talk to them. Share these crazy stories, you know, like the Christmas list story or whatever, and help. Get help from them to keep that perspective on the care receiver. You know, you can talk about them with someone that you trust and care about. It really helps the process. And then when you go in, you know it's like you have this protected, protective boundary around you where you're less vulnerable to the arrows coming at you because you've talked to someone who gets it, and if you don't have someone in your life, you can talk to like that. Join a

support group. Support groups are filled with people with narcissistic parents. Go find them fine. I mean, you know, it's easier to do that than ever before. Talk to a therapist if it feels like you really need to process this stuff, you know, in a deeper way, because of childhood trauma, absolutely, because that stuff comes up, take care of yourself. It's the most important thing.

Rosanne Corcoran 46:48

A big thank you to Julie Mayer for being my guest today. For more information about Julie her books, or to contact her, visit her website, caregiveranswerbook.com, I hope you enjoyed today's episode and found something helpful, whether it was information, inspiration, or even just a little company. You'll find the full transcript and links to resources mentioned today at Daughterhood.org in the podcast section. While you're there, explore more of what daughterhood offers. We're more than a podcast. We're a nonprofit community providing free services and support for caregivers, including nationwide virtual support groups. We call circles on our website, you can register for a circle, sign up for our newsletter and read our founders blog. Don't forget to subscribe and review us on Apple podcasts or wherever you listen. Your reviews help other caregivers discover the support they need. Follow us on Facebook and Instagram at daughterhood to stay connected, and if you know someone else who may benefit from Daughterhood, share it with them. Also a very special thank you to Susan Rowe for our theme music, Mama's Eyes. This is Rosanne Corcoran. I'm so grateful you spent your time with me, and I look forward to being with you again next time here in Daughterhood.