

## **Podcast #39 - UNDERSTANDING 'TRUMP FATIGUE'**

I want to talk today about what has come to be known as “Trump Fatigue.” Now, I suspect that this is something that especially afflicts political liberals or moderates and, therefore, if you are conservative and like our President, then perhaps you can listen to this analysis as a way of understanding “the other side.” But first, a confession: I’m one of those liberals and so my analysis comes as much from my self-scrutiny as it does my psychotherapy practice. So, again, I’m not an unbiased observer and if that’s what you’re looking for, or if you’re tired of liberals criticizing Trump, you better turn off this podcast right now.

First, some definitions: “Trump Fatigue is the experience that one has of bludgeoned every day by one more grandiose or bitter Presidential tweet, one more personal attack on a politician or foreign leaders, or one more distortion of reality.

What are the psychodynamic reasons that Trump’s antics cause such fatigue? The first reason is that we are helpless to stop him. Trump commands the airwaves, social media, and even the coverage of his liberal media critics. He’s everywhere,

every day, talking trash about people, insufferably bragging, and lying to our faces. The House might stop his Wall, but we can't stop his pontificating.

Helplessness, we know, is psychologically toxic and we respond as we always do to any kind of helplessness--with outrage, depression, or both—But outrage and depression each saps us of energy.

Outrage is especially problematic. Anger is often the way our minds respond to helplessness, isn't it? Think about it this way: anger seeks to enforce our claim to agency; it is our protest against passivity; anger reflects our attempt to get up after being knocked down. Our minds try to use aggression to resist Trump's assaults.

Anger is also our way of opposing gaslighting. Trump's lies, his constant need to create and maintain an alternative universe in which he's the greatest President that ever lived, are attacks on our reality testing. When someone is trying to drive us crazy—gaslighting us—there are only two possible responses: We fight our way through it or we succumb and comply with it. Again: either response takes energy.

Holding on to and forcefully asserting our own experience of reality against gaslighting requires a lot of psychic force,

energy, and momentum. But the opposite reaction---surrendering and complying with Trump's world view, a world view that we know, deep down, is crazy or evil, utilizes even more energy. Betraying our own instincts, our own selves, takes a toll that's far greater than the effort expended in outrage.

Now, obviously, this outrage over Trump's obvious psychopathology is especially common among liberals. But each time we feel it or observe others feeling it, it's as if we're seeing and feeling it for the first time. Outrage almost always contains an element of shock. Think of it as sort of a "*scandalized indignation.*" This outrage is a curious phenomenon because there isn't a single grandiose utterance, not a single humiliating tweet, not a single bald face lie that isn't completely understandable given Trump's psychology, namely his malignant narcissistic character disorder—which has not only been professionally diagnosed but has been hiding in plain sight for decades.

Trump is constantly defending himself against anxiety and shame. You don't need to be Sigmund Freud to understand this. It's common sense. Think of the last time you were in the presence of some bloviating self-centered braggart—usually, of

course, a man. Was there any doubt that he was desperately trying to hide or compensate for feelings of insecurity, insignificance, and/or weakness? Trump is just such a man. He wears these conflicts on his sleeve.

What in the hell is shocking or surprisingly horrifying about this?

So, it was striking to me how, on the day that Trump called himself the “Chosen One” and called the President of Denmark “nasty,” that Chris Matthews and his guests on MSNBC were shouting over each other, competing to show who was more outraged at how reckless and crazy the President of the United States really was. As if Trump’s mutterings that day were anything more than a natural and predictable expression of his need to defend himself against feelings of being small and of being shamed in public.

Donald Trump is a narcissism, paranoia, and sadism machine. Every day we see symptoms of these pathologies. We should accept this fact and our inability to change it. At his worst, Trump is like a crazy and abusive parent, forcing us to protect ourselves with some combination of outraged aggression or helpless protest. We seem to have to continually review and defend objective reality. Because these attempts to

maintain our own sanity take a lot of energy, in the end we just feel tired and depressed.

Obviously, the “we” who get the most tired and depressed refers primarily to political moderates and liberals. I’m sure that the same character traits that pummel “us” might energize many people in Trump’s base. But for liberals, surviving the Trump era means finding ways to compartmentalize—accepting that we’re powerless over the inevitable stream of his crazy provocations while simultaneously trying to live our political lives aligned with our values.

The elephant in the room of any discussion of Trump’s psychopathology is that he obviously has tremendous power and is using it to destroy the environment, undermine our democracy with a quasi-fascist and racist political sensibility, dismantle the welfare state, and engineer a massive shift of wealth toward his fellow economic elites.

Part of aligning our political lives with our values means not only working to defeat Trump in 2020, but to shift power in Congress toward a progressive Democrat agenda. It might involve becoming active locally--arenas in which democratic values can still thrive. It might involve demonstrating in the

streets against the fossil fuel industry and their political enablers. It ultimately has to involve organizing for power.

As Rachel Maddow frequently says, *we have to pay attention to what he does and not so much to what he says*. And here's the bottom line—we cannot block out the poisonous messages generated by Trump's malignant narcissism, but we can, instead, focus on what we can do to resist his actions. In the end, it's the serenity prayer—we have to have enough serenity to accept the things we can't change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.