

BEWARE OF A NARCISSIST IN YOUR MIDST

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

When I watch the media, I am reminded that our culture has an obsession with egotists, or narcissistic people. From a distance, we can easily become awestruck by their illusion of perfection and secretly wish we were just like them. Interestingly, they are shamelessly admiring of themselves, as well. But all narcissists aren't on the silver screen or in the executive boardroom of places like Enron. They are, oftentimes, our neighbor, parent, spouse, or friend. This article will describe the narcissist you might know on an up close and personal basis and help you gain some perspective on why the relationship is so difficult to manage.

The term, Narcissism, is derived from the story of a young man, Narcissus, in Greek mythology. Narcissus saw his reflection in a pool of water and fell in love with his own image. Just this tidbit is enough to be a forewarning if you think you're in love with a narcissist. They are only in love with themselves and you are simply useful for promoting them. They are incapable of loving others due to their personality defects.

One author, Hotchkiss, in her book, [The Seven Deadly Sins of Narcissism](#), describes the narcissists' defects as including shamelessness, magical thinking, arrogance, envy, entitlement, exploitation and bad interpersonal boundaries. This is a good beginning to recognize some key aspects of the narcissist's personality. However, we'll explore other major characteristics later.

Most of us logically realize that there is no perfect person. Most of us accept this---except for people who suffer from a Narcissistic Personality Disorder or NPD. For someone with this disorder, they are perfection personified! Therapists describe people who suffer from a Narcissistic Personality Disorder as displaying a pattern of self-centered or egotistical behavior that shows up in both thinking and behavior in a wide variety of situations and activities. Just as a rose is a rose, a narcissist is a narcissist no matter where they are or what they're doing.

People with NPD won't alter their behavior when other people complain about the way they act; when their behavior causes a lot of emotional distress to others; or even when it causes problems at work and their job is threatened. They have a way of viewing such problems as always the other person's fault. Hence, viewing themselves as blameless, they see no need to change their own behavior, nor are they disturbed by their own behavior. Most narcissists are intelligent enough to manipulate the data to fit their blameless perspective and convince others of their distorted viewpoint.

Because narcissists believe their needs are more important than anyone else's, they expect others to accommodate to them. It doesn't compute to them that they might not always come first! They have a constant need for adoration and affirmation from others.

People who have to contend with a narcissist, report that lying is the most common complaint they have about him/her. The narcissist will content that they are loved and respected by others, despite a history of exploitive interpersonal relationships. They simply lack the ability to provide accurate self-reports, because all information is distorted to fit the glorified image they have of themselves. Also, because the narcissist is lacking in ability to empathize with others, they are able to maintain wildly inaccurate misinterpretations of other people's speech and actions. This inability to empathize also results in the NPD being characterized by others as fairly aloof and incapable of true intimacy. Oftentimes, people who marry a narcissist have a fear of emotional intimacy themselves. Hence, this type of marriage will not pressure them to conquer their fear of intimacy given their partner's disinterest in developing such emotional closeness.

If you're paying close attention, you can recognize the individual with NPD by two key characteristics: a show of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior) and a constant need for admiration and attention. However, don't confuse the narcissist with a psychopath. Psychopaths display grandiosity and pathological narcissism, too, but, unlike the NPD, the psychopath is willing to use physical violence to get what s/he wants. Narcissists rarely commit crimes. I didn't say, never, but violence is not generally a characteristic of the narcissist.

Lets examine the major problems associated with NPD. As you read these, ask yourself if these relate to people you know or have know in the past. If you are a narcissist yourself, you won't consider these items as a problem and will dismiss this article as uninformed.

1. Grandiosity is the hallmark of narcissism. Do you know someone who consistently talks about his or her daily life at home or work as if there were nobody else in the picture? This person will talk as if s/he were the hero, seeking admiration or sympathy from you and become fairly enraged if you don't provide their due! They oftentimes blame their co-workers or partners for being uncooperative or stupid and denigrate other people's contributions. In reality, were you to observe the real situation they've described, you would see that they were exaggerating their role and minimizing the role of others. Overall, they exaggerate their own talents and achievements and expect you to acknowledge their superiority.
2. Narcissists are obsessed with internal fantasies of their own successes, power, brilliance, beauty, etc. They literally live in an unrealistic world and feel defensive and angry if others attempt to intrude on their viewpoint.
3. Narcissists believe they are "special" and can only be understood by, or should affiliate with, other high-status, special people or institutions. People who are not included in this special category are viewed by the narcissist as worthless.
4. Narcissists demand excessive admiration from others in the form of constant compliments, praise, deference, accolades, etc.
5. Individuals with NPD have a sense of entitlement (i.e. "I'm first; should have favored treatment wherever I go; get the best seat at the restaurant; people should cater to what I need and want; etc.) and oftentimes fly into a rage when these expectations are unmet.

6. The narcissist selfishly takes advantage of others to achieve his/her own ends and does not consider the cost of such behavior on other people.

7. People with NPD are totally lacking in the capacity to accurately recognize or empathize with other people's feelings or needs. We've all been with someone who always seems to tune out when we might want to discuss some of our own problems, observations or thoughts and feelings. Indeed, many narcissists experience the world from a rather numb state, rarely recognizing their own muted feelings and therefore, unable to accurately interpret or read other people's emotions.

8. The narcissist oftentimes believes others are envious of him/her, as well as s/he feeling envious of others.

9. Narcissists display arrogant, haughty, patronizing or contemptuous behaviors and attitudes. If you've ever been around someone who treats you like "less than dirt," you know what I mean. The narcissist has no room in the mirror for another beautiful, talented, brilliant person, since they're it!

If you'd like to read more about Narcissistic Personality Disorder, I would recommend several books: Why is it always about you: Saving yourself from the narcissists in your life, by Sandy Hotchkiss, The Wizard of Oz and other Narcissists: Coping with the One-way Relationship in Work, Love, and Family by Eleanor Payson, and Emotional Blackmail: When the people in your life use fear, obligation and guilt to manipulate you, by psychologist, Susan Forward.

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