

Exploring Narcissism

Understanding what it is and from where it originates, and exploring its different forms and how we can respond to being in its presence

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What is narcissism?

As a word, 'Narcissus' first originated in 8CE as a male character, in Ovid's book *Metamorphoses*, who fell in love with his own reflections. Whilst the term began to feature in the psychological-field in the late 1800s, it entered broader social consciousness following the publication of 'The Culture of Narcissism' by Christopher Lasch in 1979.

"It can be defined as a self-centred personality style with an excessive preoccupation with oneself and one's own needs often at the expense of others."

APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2021

Whilst only 1-5% of the UK population are estimated to have the Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), there is a continuum (Horney, 1939). It can range from a healthy through to the unhealthier expression of destructive, and ultimately pathological (NPD) levels of narcissism.

Some psychologists agree that a healthy (aka adaptive) level of narcissism can be helpful. It can help us to understand our own value, recognise the attributes

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that make us special and unique, but not to the detriment of others (www.psychcentral.com),

In contrast, the unhelpful (maladaptive) form of narcissism is where the traits don't serve the individual, and can negatively impact how they relate to themselves and others.

How do narcissistic tendencies develop?

Having researched how narcissism originates, there seems to be some variation in what psychologists and other members of the medical profession currently believe.

Is it inherited? Some medical professionals believe that there is some genetic conditioning (National Library of Medicine, 2023), whilst others believe that genes play no part (Biggers, 2022).

However, there is greater consensus that early years' upbringing plays a bigger part. Interestingly, there are differing scenarios that can cultivate NPD. For example, unempathetic and inconsistent early childhood interactions can cultivate a NPD defence, also excessive praise and elevation can engender a NPD mindset.

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"Negative developmental experiences including being rejected, leading to a fragile ego, as well as excessive praise, may lead to NPD."

Adapted from National Library of Medicine, 2023

What are the narcissistic characteristics?

Across the literature, there is some agreement to the nine, core narcissistic characteristics:

1. Exaggerated feelings of superiority and self-importance
2. Regular fantasies about personal power, intelligence, success or attractiveness
3. A firm belief in personal 'specialness'
4. A strong need for attention, praise and admiration
5. Entitled behaviours such as a desire for special treatment
6. A habit of using manipulation tactics
7. Low empathy or disinterest in the emotional needs of others
8. A tendency to envy others or assume others envy them
9. Arrogance and scorn for others

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Members of the medical profession can draw upon the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders when making a formal assessment,

A formal diagnosis of NPD is only affirmed when five or more of the nine narcissistic characteristics are present in different contexts. Other diagnostic considerations are the first occurrences and how this affects daily life and relationships (www.psychcentral.com).

What are the different types of narcissism?

Given these core narcissistic characteristics, there are five types of how narcissism shows up behaviourally:

Overt (grandiose) – aka 'thick-skinned'. Outwardly confident with high self-importance. Often draws attention to their accomplishments. Requests special treatment. Reacts with angry outbursts if ignored

Covert (vulnerable) – aka 'thin-skinned'. Seems quiet and humble. Unclear sense of self, resents others success. Excessive need for approval and support. Seeks admiration indirectly through self-deprecation

Antagonistic – a subtype of overt. Focus on rivalry and competition. Can take advantage of others and be argumentative

Communal – a subtype of overt and the opposite of antagonistic. Values fairness, sees themselves as altruistic. Be morally outraged. Shows high levels of social power and self-importance

Malignant – also a subtype of overt, it is the most severe form.

Characteristics include vindictiveness, enjoying creating pain for others, aggression, paranoia

How can we respond to narcissism?

Being in the presence of a narcissist can be challenging. Many warning signs are reported by mental health professionals including: dominating conversations (monologues), gaslighting (psychological manipulation that generates self-doubt), trivialising your opinions and needs, projecting shortcomings on to you, isolating you from support systems. (www.healthline.com)

Given the disorder's nature, many narcissists are unaware of their own internal landscape and their need to generate a continual source of 'supply' (of attention) to feed their glow. Therefore typically, narcissists don't seek help or change, as they think that problems reside outside of themselves. The onus is for others to learn response strategies:

Educate yourself

Knowing more about narcissism, will help sense-making and crafting a response

Be the observer

When you are in the presence of a narcissist a way of reducing their impact is to take an observer perspective. Imagine that you are watching a documentary (Morrigan, 2021)

Be a grey rock

Acting as a grey rock, being bland and boring in response. By refusing to pick up the rope and enter the drama, the narcissist will eventually lose interest

Set clear boundaries

Setting and asserting clear boundaries, for example in terms of topics of conversations, behaviours, nature of comments, levels of contact, etc.

Practice self-care

Cultivating practices to maintain a healthy self-esteem is crucial, including drawing upon a supportive network, mindfulness practices, wellbeing habits

Cut ties

This may take courage and time to plan out and to instigate. Gaining the support of a specialised medical can be a helpful resource at this time

Top tip



If you'd like to find a specialised mental health professional, the Health & Care Professions Council (HCPC) have a register of professionals (www.hcpc-uk.org/register)

Recommended authors include: Danu Morrigan, Stephanie Sarkis, Kelly McDaniel



About the writer

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Cathy Brown is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist, consultant and writer. She runs Evolve Consulting Services Limited which works with individuals, teams and businesses to manage transition and change.

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