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Narcissistic Personality Disorder – An Introduction

By Sam Vaknin

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NARCISSISM (n. sing.)

A pattern of traits and behaviours which signify infatuation and obsession with one's self to the exclusion of all others and the egotistic and ruthless pursuit of one's gratification, dominance and ambition.

Narcissism is named after the ancient Greek myth of Narcissus who was a handsome Greek youth who rejected the desperate advances of the nymph Echo.

In punishment of his cruelty, he was doomed to fall in love with his own reflection in a pool of water.

Unable to consummate his love, he pined away and changed into the flower that bears his name to this very day.

WHAT IS NPD (Narcissistic Personality Disorder)?

The Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) has been recognized as a separate mental health disorder in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual (DSM) in 1980. Its diagnostic criteria and their interpretation have undergone a major revision in the DSM III-R (1987) and were substantially revamped in the DSM IV in 1994. The European ICD-10 basically contains identical language.

An all-pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behaviour), need for admiration or adulation and lack of empathy, usually beginning by early adulthood and present in various contexts. Five (or more) of the following criteria must be met:

(1) Feels grandiose and self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents to the point of lying, demands to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements)

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- (2) Is obsessed with fantasies of unlimited success, fame, fearsome power or omnipotence, unequalled brilliance (the cerebral narcissist), bodily beauty or sexual performance (the somatic narcissist), or ideal, everlasting, all-conquering love or passion
- (3) Firmly convinced that he or she is unique and, being special, can only be understood by, should only be treated by, or associate with, other special or unique, or high-status people (or institutions)
- (4) Requires excessive admiration, adulation, attention and affirmation – or, failing that, wishes to be feared and to be notorious (narcissistic supply).
- (5) Feels entitled. Expects unreasonable or special and favourable priority treatment. Demands automatic and full compliance with his or her expectations
- (6) Is "interpersonally exploitative", i.e., uses others to achieve his or her own ends
- (7) Devoid of empathy. Is unable or unwilling to identify with or acknowledge the feelings and needs of others
- (8) Constantly envious of others or believes that they feel the same about him or her
- (9) Arrogant, haughty behaviours or attitudes coupled with rage when frustrated, contradicted, or confronted.

The language in the criteria above is based on or summarized from:

American Psychiatric Association. (2000). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, fourth edition (DSM IV-TR). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.

Sam Vaknin. (1999, 2001, 2003). Malignant Self Love – Narcissism Revisited, fifth revised printing. Prague and Skopje: Narcissus Publication.

("Malignant Self Love – Narcissism Revisited"
<http://www.geocities.com/vaksam/faq1.html>)

I. PATHOLOGICAL NARCISSISM OVERVIEW

Whether narcissism and its pathology are the results of genetic programming (see Anthony Benis and others) or of dysfunctional families and faulty upbringing or of anomic societies and disruptive socialization processes – is still an unresolved debate. The scarcity of scientific research, the fuzziness of the diagnostic criteria and the differential diagnoses make it unlikely that this will be settled soon one way or the other.

It is the psychoanalytic belief that we are all Narcissists at an early stage of our lives. As infants and toddlers we all feel that we are the center of the Universe, the most important, omnipotent and omniscient beings.

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At that phase of our development, our parents are perceived by us to be mythical figures, immortal and awesomely powerful, there solely to cater to our needs, to protect and nourish us.

Both Self and others are viewed immaturely, as idealizations. This, in the psychodynamic models, is called the phase of "primary" narcissism.

Inevitably, the inexorable processes and conflicts of life erode these perceptions and reduce the ideal into the the real.

Adaptation is a process of disillusionment. If this process is abrupt, inconsistent, unpredictable, capricious, arbitrary and intense – the injuries sustained by the infant's tender, budding, self-esteem, are severe and, often, irreversible. Moreover, the empathic support of our caretakers (the Primary Objects, the parents) is crucial. In its absence, our sense of self-worth and self-esteem in adulthood tends to fluctuate, to alternate between over-valuation (idealization) and devaluation of both Self and others. Narcissistic adults are widely thought to be the result of bitter disappointment, of radical disillusionment in the significant others in their infancy. Healthy adults accept their self-limitations (the

boundaries and limitations of their selves). They accept disappointments, setbacks, failures, criticism and disillusionment with grace and tolerance. Their self-esteem is constant and positive, not substantially affected by outside events, no matter how severe.

Sam Vaknin is the author of *Malignant Self Love – Narcissism Revisited* and *After the Rain – How the West Lost the East*. He is a columnist for *Central Europe Review*, *United Press International (UPI)* and *eBookWeb* and the editor of mental health and Central East Europe categories in *The Open Directory*, *Suite101* and *searcheurope.com*. Visit Sam's Web site at <http://samvak.tripod.com>

Narcissistic Personality Disorder – Who is a Malignant Narcissist?

By Sam Vaknin, Ph.D.

QUESTION Number 1 – Who is a Narcissist?

Dear Dr. Vaknin,

I read the excerpts you placed on your web site with great interest.

I wanted to ask:

Isn't your definition of malignant narcissism too wide? Having read it, I think that it fits my neighbours, friends, and family to a "t". Everyone seems to be a narcissist to me now!

HELP!

ANSWER

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Yours is an understandable reaction. All of us have narcissistic TRAITS. Some of us even develop a narcissistic PERSONALITY. Moreover, narcissism is a SPECTRUM of behaviours – from the healthy to the utterly pathological (known as the Narcissistic Personality Disorder, or NPD).

But the "malignant" narcissist consistently manifests at least 5 of these 9 criteria.

The DSM IV uses this language:

"An all-pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behaviour), need for admiration or adulation and lack of empathy, usually beginning by early adulthood and present in various contexts."

So, what matters is that these characteristics, often found in healthy people, appear: Jointly and not separately or intermittently They are all-pervasive (invade, penetrate, and mould every aspect, nook, and cranny of the personality) That grandiose fantasies are abundantly discernible That grandiose (often ridiculous) behaviours are present That there is an over-riding need for admiration and adulation ("narcissistic supply") That the person lacks empathy (regards other people as two dimensional cartoon figures and abstractions, unable to "stand in their shoes") That all these phenomena began, at the latest, in early adolescence That the narcissistic behaviours pervade all the social and emotional interactions of the narcissist.

Here are the 9 criteria. Having 5 of these 9 "qualifies" you as a narcissist... Feels grandiose and self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents to the point of lying, demands to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements) Is obsessed with fantasies of unlimited success, fame, fearsome power or omnipotence, unequalled brilliance (the cerebral narcissist), bodily beauty or sexual performance (the somatic narcissist), or ideal, everlasting, all-conquering love or passion Firmly convinced that he or she is unique and, being special, can only be understood by,

should only be treated by, or associate with, other special or unique, or high-status people (or institutions) Requires excessive admiration, adulation, attention and affirmation – or, failing that, wishes to be feared and to be notorious (narcissistic supply). Feels entitled. Expects unreasonable or special and favourable priority treatment. Demands automatic and full compliance with his or her expectations Is "interpersonally exploitative", i.e., uses others to achieve his or her own ends Devoid of empathy. Is unable or unwilling to identify with or acknowledge the feelings and needs of others Constantly envious of others or believes that they feel the same about him or her Arrogant, haughty behaviours or attitudes coupled with rage when frustrated, contradicted, or confronted.

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Sam Vaknin is the author of "Malignant Self Love – Narcissism Revisited" and the editor of mental health categories in The Open Directory, Suite101, and searcheurope.com.

His web site:

Frequently asked questions regarding narcissism:

Narcissistic Personality Disorder on Suite101:

Narcissistic Personality Disorder – Who is a Malignant Narcissist?

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Misdiagnosing Narcissism – Asperger's Disorder

The Depressive Narcissist

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