

Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

Narcissistic Personality Disorder

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Ages Served

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"I Am the Greatest..."

Probably everyone has known someone at one time or another who seemed to give the impression that they thought they were "the greatest," or that no one else's needs mattered except for their own. Perhaps one way of simply defining an individual with **narcissistic personality disorder** is when someone seems to have the idea that somehow they are more important or more unique than others and that their needs and desires are more valid and important than everyone around them. It has been estimated that narcissistic personality disorder occurs in 2-16% of individuals in a psychiatric population and perhaps less than 1% in the general population. To be around these individuals is often difficult, to say the least. Frequently they seem to imply an unrealistic sense of importance, attractiveness, and talent to both themselves, their children, or almost anything related to them. In part, this may also account for why individuals growing up with such parents are at greater risk for developing the disorder. It has also been reported that the incidence of this disorder seems to be increasing. Perhaps this is related to a somewhat prophetic article I remember reading in the late 1970s or early 1980s, which referred to our living at that time in what the author termed "the age of narcissism."

Diagnosis

According to diagnostic criteria in the DSM IV-TR, narcissistic personality disorder is characterized by a "pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts." It also requires that at least five or more of the following characteristics be present: 1) a grandiose sense of self-importance, such as exaggerating achievements and talents or expecting to be recognized as superior but without the achievements; 2) is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, an ideal love relationship; 3) believes that he or she is special and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high status individuals or institutions; 4) generally requires excessive admiration and attention from others; 5) has a sense of entitlement and unreasonable expectations of getting favorable attention or consideration from others, or expecting others to automatically comply with their wishes and expectations; 6) is exploitative of interpersonal relationships in taking advantage of others to meet their own needs and goals; 7) lacks sympathy and generally is unwilling to identify with the feelings or needs of others, particularly if it is not consistent with their own; 8) is often envious of others and believes that others are envious of him or her; and 9) shows arrogant or haughty behaviors or attitudes.

In daily interactions, the narcissistic individual tends to have a very grandiose sense of his own importance and frequently expects to receive special treatment or attention from others. They tend to be very sensitive to real or implied criticism and frequently become angry in response to it or at times will appear as though they do not care at all. This may occur even when the criticism or correction is coming from those of greater authority or expertise. Perhaps one of the greatest hallmarks of the narcissistic personality disorder is their tendency to show extreme anger or rage when they feel slighted, criticized, or not responded to with the deference which they expect. They tend to want, and expect, things to go their way whether it is in relationships or even just in situations that may occur over which no one truly has control, e.g. being stuck in a traffic jam, objects breaking down and not working when they want them to, or

even if the weather does not cooperate with their plans. Their relationships frequently tend to be fragile and difficult, particularly because they do not feel that the usual rules apply to them whether it is related to social convention, mutual respect of others, or even being willing to submit to authority over them. They have difficulty showing empathy, and may only at times pretend to be empathic in order to manipulate others. Manipulation is frequently one of their main interpersonal tools for getting their way. However, because underlying this grandiosity is an extremely fragile sense of self-esteem, they frequently may struggle with depression or anxiety, particularly when their manipulations no longer tend to be effective.

It is not unusual for other personality disorders to accompany the narcissistic personality disorder. Frequently, borderline personality disorder or features (see previous newsletter) or histrionic and antisocial personality disorders (to be covered in future newsletters) may accompany this disorder. Although the individual may be prone to depression when the world is not conforming to his expectations, he frequently tends to experience less anxiety than those with borderline personality, is less likely to attempt suicide, and generally their lives tend to be less chaotic and filled with fewer crises. Individuals with antisocial personality disorder tend to have more impulsive behaviors and frequently more run-ins with the law, and those with histrionic features may tend to be a bit more manipulative and exhibitionistic, which can make them difficult to distinguish from the narcissistic individual.

Treatment and Prognosis

Narcissistic personality disorder tends to be difficult to treat and generally requires long-term treatment. These individuals frequently struggle as they get older and perceive themselves as less physically attractive and unable to do some of the things physically that they could do when they were younger. Some would argue that they may be more vulnerable to "midlife crises" than are some of the other personality groups. What is particularly interesting about this disorder is that frequently its roots go back to what is often called "a narcissistic wound" in their early development. Frequently these individuals have been abused or often highly criticized while growing up, at times taunted or bullied by peers, and have developed this sense of grandiosity as a way of defending against feelings of fear, anxiety, insecurity, and lack of confidence. At other times, when the grandiosity has been fostered by the environment, such as parents, the individual will go along with the extreme expectations, but underlying it is almost always the fear of failing.

Because individuals with narcissistic personality disorder must turn away from the only defense they have found for the underlying insecurities, and because treatment requires facing these fears and past experiences, therapy can be long and difficult and requires a significant amount of motivation by the patient. Psychoanalytic approaches in therapy have perhaps been the most researched forms of treatment in this disorder, although group therapy has also been found to be helpful for many. No specific medications have been found particularly useful for the narcissistic personality disorder itself, although certainly antidepressants and other medications may be useful specifically when depression, anxiety, or significant mood swings are present.

For those involved in a relationship with a narcissistic individual, it can be very difficult. It is important to set reasonable boundaries with these individuals regarding their expectations and demands and to recognize that they will not like it when this is done. One must be somewhat cautious and respect the level of anger that these individuals can experience, because they can become abusive when they do not get their way. Safety should always be a primary concern. But the only chance for change that the individual with a narcissistic personality disorder has is when his or her standard ways of dealing with situations through manipulation or intimidation no longer work, and he is then forced to look within himself to learn ways of better dealing with life.



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