

Taming the Beast: Pathological Narcissism and the Quality of Life

By Sam Vaknin

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Question:

You seem to be very sceptical that someone with a Narcissistic Personality Disorder can be treated successfully.

Answer:

The Narcissistic Personality Disorder has been recognised as a distinct mental health diagnosis a little more than two decades ago. There are few who can honestly claim expertise or even in-depth understanding of this complex condition.

No one knows whether therapy works. What is known is that therapists find narcissists repulsive, overbearing and unnerving. It is also known that narcissists try to co-opt, idolize, or humiliate the therapist.

But what if the narcissist really wants to improve? Even if complete healing is out of the question - behaviour modification is not.

To a narcissist, I would recommend a functional approach, along the following lines:

Know and accept thyself. This is who you are. You have good traits and bad traits and you are a narcissist. These are facts. Narcissism is an adaptive mechanism. It is dysfunctional now, but, once, it saved you from a lot more dysfunction or even non-function. Make a list: what does it mean to be a narcissist in your specific case? What are your typical behaviour patterns? Which types of conduct do you find to be counterproductive, irritating, self-defeating or self-destructive? Which are productive, constructive and should be enhanced despite their pathological origin?

Decide to suppress the first type of behaviours and to promote the second. Construct lists of self-punishments, negative feedback and negative reinforcements. Impose them upon yourself when you have behaved negatively. Make a list of prizes, little indulgences, positive feedbacks and positive reinforcements. Use them to reward yourself when you adopted a behaviour of the second kind.

Keep doing this with the express intent of conditioning yourself. Be objective, predictable

and just in the administration of both punishments and awards, positive and negative reinforcements and feedback. Learn to trust your "inner court". Constrain the sadistic, immature and ideal parts of your personality by applying a uniform codex, a set of immutable and invariably applied rules.

Once sufficiently conditioned, monitor yourself incessantly. Narcissism is sneaky and it possesses all your resources because it is you. Your disorder is intelligent because you are. Beware and never lose control. With time this onerous regime will become a second habit and supplant the narcissistic (pathological) superstructure.

You might have noticed that all the above can be amply summed by suggesting to you to become your own parent. This is what parents do and the process is called "education" or "socialisation". Re-parent yourself. Be your own parent. If therapy is helpful or needed, go ahead.

The heart of the beast is the inability of the narcissist to distinguish true from false, appearances from reality, posing from being, Narcissistic Supply from genuine relationships, and compulsive drives from true interests and avocations. Narcissism is about deceit. It blurs the distinction between authentic actions, true motives, real desires, and original emotions – and their malignant forms.

Narcissists are no longer capable of knowing themselves. Terrified by their internal apparitions, paralysed by their lack of authenticity, suppressed by the weight of their repressed emotions – they occupy a hall of mirrors. Edvard Munch-like, their elongated figures stare at them, on the verge of the scream, yet somehow, soundless.

The narcissist's childlike, curious, vibrant, and optimistic True Self is dead. His False Self is, well, false. How can anyone on a permanent diet of echoes and reflections ever acquaint himself with reality? How can the narcissist ever love – he, whose essence is to devour meaningful others?

The answer is: discipline, decisiveness, clear targets, conditioning, justice. The narcissist is the product of unjust, capricious and cruel treatment. He is the finished product off a production line of self-recrimination, guilt and fear. He needs to take the antidote to counter the narcissistic poison. Unfortunately, there is no drug which can ameliorate pathological narcissism.

Confronting one's parents about one's childhood is a good idea if the narcissist feels that he can take it and cope with new and painful truths. But the narcissist must be careful. He is playing with fire. Still, if he feels confident that he can withstand anything revealed to him in such a confrontation, it is a good and wise move in the right direction.

My advice to the narcissist would then be: dedicate a lot of time to rehearsing this critical encounter and define well what is it exactly that you want to achieve. Do not turn this reunion into a monodrama, group therapy, or trial. Get some answers and get at the truth. Don't try to prove anything, to vindicate, to take revenge, to win the argument, or to exculpate. Talk to them, heart to heart, as you would with yourself. Do not try to sound professional, mature, intelligent, knowledgeable and distanced. There is no "problem to solve" – just a condition to adjust yourself to.

More generally, try to take life and yourself much less seriously. Being immersed in

one's self and in one's mental health condition is never the recipe to full functionality, let alone happiness. The world is an absurd place. It is indeed a theatre to be enjoyed. It is full of colours and smells and sounds to be treasured and cherished. It is varied and it accommodates and tolerates everyone and everything, even narcissists.

You, the narcissist, should try to see the positive aspects of your disorder. In Chinese, the ideogram for "crisis" includes a part that stands for "opportunity". Why don't you transform the curse that is your life into a blessing? Why don't you tell the world your story, teach people in your condition and their victims how to avoid the pitfalls, how to cope with the damage? Why don't you do all this in a more institutionalised manner? For instance, you can start a discussion group or put up a Web site on the internet. You can establish a "narcissists anonymous" in some community shelter. You can open a correspondence network, a help centre for men in your condition, for women abused by narcissists ... the possibilities are endless. And it will instil in you a regained sense of self-worth, give you a purpose, endow you with self-confidence and reassurance. It is only by helping others that we help ourselves. This is, of course, a suggestion – not a prescription. But it demonstrates the ways in which you can derive power from adversity.

It is easy for the narcissist to think about Pathological Narcissism as the source of all that is evil and wrong in his life. Narcissism is a catchphrase, a conceptual scapegoat, an evil seed. It conveniently encapsulates the predicament of the narcissist. It introduces logic and causal relations into his baffled, tumultuous world. But this is a trap.

The human psyche is too complex and the brain too plastic to be captured by a single, all-encompassing label, however all-pervasive the disorder is. The road to self-help and self-betterment passes through numerous junctions and stations. Except for pathological narcissism, there are many other elements in the complex dynamics that is the soul of the narcissist. The narcissist should take responsibility for his life and not relegate it to some hitherto rather obscure psychodynamic concept. This is the first and most important step towards healing.

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>

The Depressive Narcissist

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Many scholars consider pathological narcissism to be a form of depressive illness. This is the position of the authoritative magazine "Psychology Today". The life of the typical narcissist is, indeed, punctuated with recurrent bouts of dysphoria (ubiquitous sadness and hopelessness), anhedonia (loss of the ability to feel pleasure), and clinical forms of depression (cyclothymic, dysthymic, or other). This picture is further obfuscated by the frequent presence of mood disorders, such as Bipolar I (co-morbidity).

While the distinction between reactive (exogenous) and endogenous depression is obsolete, it is still useful in the context of narcissism. Narcissists react with depression not only to life crises but to fluctuations in Narcissistic Supply.

The narcissist's personality is disorganised and precariously balanced. He regulates his sense of self-worth by consuming Narcissistic Supply from others. Any threat to the uninterrupted flow of said supply compromises his psychological integrity and his ability to function. It is perceived by the narcissist as life threatening.

I. Loss Induced Dysphoria

This is the narcissist's depressive reaction to the loss of one or more Sources of Narcissistic Supply – or to the disintegration of a Pathological Narcissistic Space (PN Space, his stalking or hunting grounds, the social unit whose members lavish him with attention).

II. Deficiency Induced Dysphoria

Deep and acute depression which follows the aforementioned losses of Supply Sources or a PN Space. Having mourned these losses, the narcissist now grieves their inevitable outcome – the absence or deficiency of Narcissistic Supply. Paradoxically, this dysphoria energises the narcissist and moves him to find new Sources of Supply to replenish his dilapidated stock (thus initiating a Narcissistic Cycle).

III. Self-Worth Dysregulation Dysphoria

The narcissist reacts with depression to criticism or disagreement, especially from a trusted and long-term Source of Narcissistic Supply. He fears the imminent loss of the source and the damage to his own, fragile, mental balance. The narcissist also resents his vulnerability and his extreme dependence on feedback from others. This type of depressive reaction is, therefore, a mutation of self-directed aggression.

IV. Grandiosity Gap Dysphoria

The narcissist's firmly, though counterfactually, perceives himself as omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, brilliant, accomplished, irresistible, immune, and invincible. Any data to the contrary is usually filtered, altered, or discarded altogether. Still, sometimes reality intrudes and creates a Grandiosity Gap. The narcissist is forced to face his mortality, limitations, ignorance, and relative inferiority. He sulks and sinks into an incapacitating but short-lived dysphoria.

V. Self-Punishing Dysphoria

Deep inside, the narcissist hates himself and doubts his own worth. He deplores his desperate addiction to Narcissistic Supply. He judges his actions and intentions harshly and sadistically. He may be unaware of these dynamics – but they are at the heart of the narcissistic disorder and the reason the narcissist had to resort to narcissism as a defence mechanism in the first place.

This inexhaustible well of ill will, self-chastisement, self-doubt, and self-directed aggression yields numerous self-defeating and self-destructive behaviours – from reckless driving and substance abuse to suicidal ideation and constant depression.

It is the narcissist's ability to confabulate that saves him from himself. His grandiose fantasies remove him from reality and prevent recurrent narcissistic injuries. Many narcissists end up delusional, schizoid, or paranoid. To avoid agonising and gnawing depression, they give up on life itself.

Sam Vaknin (<http://samvak.tripod.com>) is the author of Malignant Self Love - Narcissism Revisited and After the Rain - How the West Lost the East. He served as a columnist for Central Europe Review, PopMatters, and eBookWeb , and Bellaonline, and as a United Press International (UPI) Senior Business Correspondent. He is the the editor of mental health and Central East Europe categories in The Open Directory and Suite101.

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