

Narcissistic Personality Disorder - Who is a Malignant Narcissist?

By Sam Vaknin, Ph.D.

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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

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.

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

American Psychiatric Association. (1994). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, fourth edition (DSM IV). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.

Sam Vaknin. (1999, 2001). Malignant Self Love - Narcissism Revisited, second, revised printing Prague and Skopje: Narcissus Publication. ("Malignant Self Love - Narcissism Revisited" <http://www.geocities.com/vaksam/faq1.html>)

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: <http://samvak.tripod.com>

Frequently asked questions regarding narcissism: <http://samvak.tripod.com/faq1.html>

Narcissistic Personality Disorder on Suite101:
<http://www.suite101.com/welcome.cfm/npd>

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.

Related eBooks:

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