

The Cyber Narcissist

By Sam Vaknin

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To the narcissist, the Internet is an alluring and irresistible combination of playground and hunting grounds, the gathering place of numerous potential Sources of Narcissistic Supply, a world where false identities are the norm and mind games the bon ton. And it is beyond the reach of the law, the pale of social norms, the strictures of civilized conduct.

The somatic finds cyber-sex and cyber-relationships aplenty. The cerebral claims false accomplishments, fake skills, erudition and talents. Both, if minimally communicative, end up at the instantly gratifying epicenter of a cult of fans, followers, stalkers, erotomaniacs, denigrators, and plain nuts. The constant attention and attendant quasi-celebrity feed and sustain their grandiose fantasies and inflated self-image.

The Internet is an extension of the real-life Narcissistic Pathological Space but without its risks, injuries, and disappointments. In the virtual universe of the Web, the narcissist vanishes and reappears with ease, often adopting a myriad aliases and nicknames. He (or she) can thus fend off criticism, abuse, disagreement, and disapproval effectively and in real time – and, simultaneously, preserve the precarious balance of his infantile personality. Narcissists are, therefore, prone to Internet addiction.

The positive characteristics of the Net are largely lost on the narcissist. He is not keen on expanding his horizons, fostering true relationships, or getting in real contact with other people. The narcissist is forever the provincial because he filters everything through the narrow lens of his addiction. He measures others – and idealizes or devalues them – according to one criterion only: how useful they might be as Sources of Narcissistic Supply.

The Internet is an egalitarian medium where people are judged by the consistency and quality of their contributions rather than by the content or bombast of their claims. But the narcissist is driven to distracting discomfiture by a lack of clear and commonly accepted hierarchy (with himself at the pinnacle). He fervently and aggressively tries to impose the "natural order" – either by monopolizing the interaction or, if that fails, by becoming a major disruptive influence.

But the Internet may also be the closest many narcissists get to psychodynamic therapy. Because it is still largely text-based, the Web is populated by disembodied entities. By interacting with these intermittent, unpredictable, ultimately unknowable, ephemeral, and

ethereal voices – the narcissist is compelled to project unto them his own experiences, fears, hopes, and prejudices.

Transference (and counter-transference) are quite common on the Net and the narcissist's defence mechanisms – notably projection and projective identification – are frequently aroused. The therapeutic process is set in motion by the – unbridled, uncensored, and brutally honest - reactions to the narcissist's repertory of antics, pretensions, delusions, and fantasies.

The narcissist – ever the intimidating bully – is not accustomed to such resistance. Initially, it may heighten and sharpen his paranoia and lead him to compensate by extending and deepening his grandiosity. Some narcissists withdraw altogether, reverting to the schizoid posture. Others become openly antisocial and seek to subvert, sabotage, and destroy the online sources of their frustration. A few retreat and confine themselves to the company of adoring sycophants and unquestioning groupies.

But a long exposure to the culture of the Net – irreverent, skeptical, and populist – usually exerts a beneficial effect even on the staunchest and most rigid narcissist. Far less convinced of his own superiority and infallibility, the online narcissist mellows and begins – hesitantly – to listen to others and to collaborate with them.

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Grandiosity Bubbles

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As one Source of Narcissistic Supply dwindles, the narcissist finds himself trapped in a frantic (though, at times, unconscious) effort to secure alternatives. As one Pathological Narcissistic Space (the narcissist's stomping grounds) is rendered "uninhabitable" (too many people "see through" the narcissist's manipulation and machinations) – the narcissist wanders off to find another.

These hysterical endeavors sometimes lead to boom-bust cycles which involve, in the first stage, the formation of a Grandiosity Bubble.

A Grandiosity Bubble is an imagined, self-aggrandizing, narrative involving the narcissist and elements from his real life – people around him, places he frequents, or conversations he is having. The narcissist weaves a story incorporating these facts, inflating them in the process and endowing them with bogus internal meaning and consistency. In other words: he confabulates – but, this time, his confabulation is loosely based on reality.

In the process, the narcissist re-invents himself and his life to fit the new-fangled tale. He re-casts himself in newly adopted roles. He suddenly fancies himself an actor, a guru, a political activist, an entrepreneur, or an irresistible hunk. He modifies his behavior to conform to these new functions. He gradually morphs into the fabricated character and "becomes" the fictitious protagonist he has created.

All the mechanisms of pathological narcissism are at work during the bubble phase. The narcissist idealizes the situation, the other "actors", and the environment. He tries to control and manipulate his milieu into buttressing his false notions and perceptions. Faced with an inevitable Grandiosity Gap, he becomes disillusioned and bitter and devalues and discards the people, places, and circumstances involved in the bubble.

Still, Grandiosity Bubbles are not part of the normal narcissistic mini-cycle (see the resources in the section titled "Also Read" below). They are rare events, much like trying on a new outfit for size and comfort. They fizzle out rapidly and the narcissist reverts to his regular pattern: idealizing new Sources of Supply, devaluing and discarding them, pursuing the next victims to be drained.

Actually, the deflation of a grandiosity bubble is met with relief by the narcissist. It does not involve a narcissistic injury. The narcissist views the bubble as merely an experiment at being someone else for a while. It is a safety valve, allowing the narcissist to effectively cope with negative emotions and frustration. Thus cleansed, the narcissist can go back to doing what he does best – projecting a False Self and garnering attention from others.

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