

The Depressive Narcissist

By Sam Vaknin

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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While the distinction between reactive (exogenous) and endogenous depression is obsolete, it is still useful in the context of narcissism.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.

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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