

LEARNING MADE EASY



Narcissism

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



Understand the root
causes of narcissism

Identify a narcissist in a personal
or professional relationship

Create healthy boundaries
and regain your identity

Laura L. Smith, PhD
Clinical psychologist



Narcissism

by Laura L. Smith, PhD

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dummies[®]
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Narcissism For Dummies®

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Introduction

Ask anyone what kind of person a narcissist is, and they can quickly come up with an answer. Loud, brash, self-centered, obnoxious, superficial, entitled, and conceited are just a few descriptors that come to mind. And most people, myself included, can recall at least one or two narcissists who have played significant roles in their lives.

Narcissists generally make a lasting impression on those they come into contact with. Although they tend to be initially charming, once they catch someone in their web, the resulting emotional costs add up quickly. Partners, friends, coworkers, and family members suffer at the hands of narcissists who cheat, lie, manipulate, and sometimes become aggressive or even violent.

If everyone can pretty easily describe a narcissist and most people have met a few, why write a whole book about narcissism? The reason is that there is much more to the narcissist than the entitled exterior. For example, narcissists can be both overconfident and have very thin skins at the same time. Some of them can be surprisingly vulnerable to any kind of negative feedback. When backed into a corner, narcissists lash out, sometimes quite viciously and with surprising cruelty.

Also, narcissists can become firmly entrenched in your life, causing all sorts of hardship. If you are the child of narcissistic parents, you may have lasting emotional damage. If you get into a romantic relationship with a narcissist, your personality might change as you become embroiled in their manipulations. And if you work with a narcissist, you may be confused by their shifting allegiances and outright distortions of reality. Therefore, if you care about or have been touched by narcissistic manipulation or abuse, this book gives you ways to handle your present reality as well as changes you may need to make to establish healthy boundaries and maintain your sanity and safety.

About This Book

You may be aware that the word narcissist comes from the myth of a strikingly beautiful man who glances at a pond and falls in love with his own reflection. He is so enthralled that he cannot leave and eventually withers away and dies. This is

a book that dives deeply into the pond of narcissism and gives you a close look at what lies beneath the shimmering surface.

Whether you are in a relationship with someone you suspect has narcissism or you are just curious about the topic, you'll find all you need to know about narcissism in the following pages, including down-to-earth, practical suggestions on how to protect yourself or deal with narcissistic maltreatment.

You'll notice a few other important things as you read this book:

- » For simplicity, I use the term *narcissist* to describe both people who exhibit narcissistic traits as well as those relatively fewer people officially diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), which reflects an extremely high level of narcissistic characteristics.
- » I try to keep the language simple and direct; when I do offer new vocabulary, I italicize and define it.
- » Sidebars are set off by a gray background. The material contained in sidebars may or may not interest you. Feel free to skim them or even skip them altogether. On the other hand, you might find them as interesting as I do (I admit to being a bit of a geek).
- » If you're reading a digital version of this book on a device connected to the internet, note that you can click the web address to visit that website, like this: www.dummies.com

Foolish Assumptions

If you've picked up this book, I'm guessing you have more than a passing interest in narcissism. Most likely, you fear you may be falling victim to someone you suspect is a narcissist, and you're looking for insight and ways to cope with this person. Or maybe you suspect you have some narcissistic traits yourself. Or possibly you're a mental health practitioner who just wants to know more about narcissism.

Whatever your reason, you've come to the right place. This book gives you a clear picture of the ins and outs of narcissism. It describes how insidiously narcissism disrupts the lives of those who are involved, whether families, friends, lovers, coworkers, or acquaintances.

Icons Used in This Book

Throughout this book, you may notice symbols in the margins. These icons designate a special type of material:



TIP

This icon provides bits of insight that may have practical relevance. Be sure to read and think about them.



REMEMBER

From time to time, you run into some material that is particularly noteworthy. You might decide to note it in your phone or put it up on your bulletin board to remind you of its importance.



WARNING

Narcissists can present special challenges or dangers. The warning icon reminds you to watch out and take care.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

You may or may not be interested in these in-depth tidbits of information. Read them if you want, or feel free to skip them. Some of these icons refer to specific research findings.

Beyond the Book

In addition to the abundance of information regarding narcissism that I provide in this book, you can access more material online. Go to www.dummies.com and type “Narcissism For Dummies Cheat Sheet” in the search box. The cheat sheet gives you some quick tips and take-aways that can help you identify and handle a narcissist in your life.

Where to Go from Here

You don't have to read this book from cover to cover to get useful information. You can pick and choose what you want to find out more about. In fact, if you'd like to start at Part 6 and read those chapters first, that's perfectly okay.

If you're unsure where to begin, use the table of contents at the front of the book or the detailed index at the rear to find the topics that most interest you. If all else fails, start with Chapter 1, which provides an overview of narcissism and directs you to later chapters that provide more details.

Or feel free to browse. Wherever you land, happy reading!

1

Reflecting on Narcissism

IN THIS PART . . .

Take a look at narcissism in its various forms.

Check out quick suggestions for dealing with narcissists.

Recognize what happens when groups become overly narcissistic.

Find out how narcissism develops in childhood.

- » Finding out about narcissists
- » Seeing the results of being with a narcissist
- » Discovering ways to handle yourself with a narcissist
- » Getting the support you need

Chapter **1**

Narcissism: The Big Picture

As I contemplated writing this book, I thought about the narcissistic people who have crossed my path over the years. I am a clinical psychologist and have treated a variety of people with narcissistic traits and some who've been diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder, or NPD. (People with NPD have an extremely high level of narcissistic characteristics. Chapter 2 clarifies the distinction between narcissistic traits and NPD.)

I've also worked with partners and family members who were dealing with the trauma left by a narcissist in their lives. That trauma often caused lasting effects that impacted their functioning in many areas including work, family relations, and friendships. The destruction that a single toxic relationship delivers can be astonishing.

I also pondered the relationships that I have had with narcissists. I recalled the narcissist that I thought I fell in love with many years ago. Then there was a former narcissistic relative who wreaked havoc not only on his partner but on the extended family as well. I remember working with narcissists, some of whom were colleagues or supervisors. I had a good friend with narcissistic tendencies and neighbors who certainly could put on a narcissistic hat from time to time. In addition, there are the superficial contacts that everyone has had with narcissists,

those entitled people who cut in front of the line with no regard for those patiently awaiting their turn, or the pushy salesperson who insists they alone have the perfect answer to their customers' needs. And who could forget the obnoxious politician or the grandiose celebrity who thinks surely everyone else recognizes their specialness and superiority.

The bottom line is that most people have had multiple interactions with narcissists. Because you're reading this book, you likely suspect someone in your life is a narcissist and would like to know more about what makes narcissists tick.

You've come to the right place. This book answers your questions about narcissism, from "What causes a person to become a narcissist?" to "Can narcissists change?" as well as "If I decide to end a relationship with a narcissist, how do I do it?" But first this chapter introduces narcissism and takes a general look at how these personality traits manifest in narcissistic individuals, groups, and cultures. It tallies some of the costs of narcissism for individuals, families, and society, and it provides some guidelines for dealing with narcissists. A brief introduction to treatment options is offered as well. Throughout this overview chapter you find references to later chapters in this book where these ideas are elaborated.

What's So Grand About Narcissism?

Narcissists usually feel pretty grand about themselves. After all, they are special, superior, unique, and highly successful. Or so they think. So, for many, in their minds, there's really nothing wrong with feeling grand about yourself. They tend to be self-centered and carefully construct realities in their minds that support their overly positive view of themselves.

In addition, narcissists are likely to be demanding, domineering, and entitled. If they don't get their way, they get angry. They seek power and control and can be extremely manipulative. Some narcissists are highly successful at work and able to maintain superficial relationships with others who provide them the validation they crave.

Spotting a narcissist

It's not always easy to spot a narcissist. That's because they often come across as socially skillful, charming, and friendly. If a narcissist wants to establish a relationship with you, watch out. They may offer excessive flattery, put you up on a pedestal, and shower you with gifts. Narcissists can also seem to be good listeners and appear extremely interested in hearing all about you. However, once a narcissist succeeds in captivating you, those interactions change.

Soon the narcissist seems like they are on stage, attempting to impress everyone with their uniqueness, importance, and greatness. Over time, they become tedious in their constant attempts to show the world how special they are. They no longer show interest in your life, only their own. They become less warm and agreeable and show their hostility and arrogance. If they experience failure or threats to their overly positive, inflated self-esteem, they blame others or react with anger or even rage. (See Chapter 2 for more information about the characteristics and different types of narcissists.)



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Narcissists may not always be invisible. Raters (usually college students) were asked to look at the social media pages of various people. They were able to detect narcissism by looking at pictures posted (flattering and often seductive), messages (self-congratulating and flashy), and even email addresses (self-enhancing) of narcissists compared to non-narcissists.

Considering telltale narcissistic traits

Figuring out whether someone is a narcissist should be done by a licensed mental health practitioner. However, most folks with narcissistic traits have no intention of going to see a professional. The following questionnaire does not substitute for a professional opinion; however, it can help you identify and understand some of the typical traits of narcissists.

You can take the test for yourself, or think about the possible narcissistic person you are concerned about and answer as if you were that person.

Answer true or false for each of the following questions. Be honest. Don't worry; you don't have to show this to anyone.

1. I view myself as a superior human being.
2. Lots of people envy me.
3. I am an unusually successful person.
4. I am a born leader.
5. I like to show off my good looks.
6. I avoid spending time with those who are socially unacceptable to me.
7. I don't like associating with losers.
8. I enjoy having the best of everything.
9. I like people who tell me how great I am.
10. When I am the center of attention, I enjoy it.

11. I can manipulate just about anyone to do what I want.
12. People really enjoy hearing me talk.
13. I love what I see in the mirror.
14. I shouldn't have to wait like ordinary people.
15. I prefer associating with other high-status people.
16. I am capable and great at making decisions.
17. If someone is in my way, I'll push them aside.
18. I have achieved much more success than most people.
19. If there is trouble, I tend to blame others.
20. Someone should write a book about me.

The more answers that you endorsed as true, the more likely you have narcissistic traits. If you were taking this quiz as if you were someone else in your life, well, you may be dealing with a narcissist. Again, only a mental health professional can officially diagnose a narcissistic personality disorder.

Understanding how certain cultures foster narcissism

Cultures around the world differ in values. Although there are variations within a culture, generally Western cultures, such as the United States, are more individualistic. In other words, Western cultures emphasize success of the individual, freedom, and independence. Eastern cultures are more collective, valuing the success of the family or group over personal achievement.

How do individualistic cultures foster narcissism? What makes so many people in this culture more entitled and self-centered? I don't want to overgeneralize. The majority of people in the United States are not narcissistic. However, the trait of narcissism is likely higher here than in many other cultures because values in this culture reflect a narcissistic bent. Here are a few examples of cultural values that support narcissism:

- » Believing that high-status careers are more important than less flashy but meaningful work
- » Accumulating possessions for the sake of appearing better than others
- » Obsessing about looking good and staying young
- » Demanding immediate gratification

Consider this example of putting all of these cultural values on display. Imagine a commercial showing a 70-year-old actress (high status), lounging around her swimming pool (possessions), praising a skin care product that erases her wrinkles (obsessing about looking good and young), virtually overnight with one application (immediate gratification). It's pretty easy to imagine a commercial with such content. In fact, you've probably seen more than one or two.

Narcissistic cultures foster narcissism among individuals. What about the people who don't have the personal or financial resources to pursue high-status careers; obtain lots of flashy possessions; or purchase cosmetics, expensive clothing, or plastic surgery to stay looking young for as long as possible? Some in this group desperately want to achieve values that look suspiciously like narcissism. If unable to do so, they live lives of desperation or lash out in anger. Perhaps some of the strife people throughout western societies are experiencing is due to unsatisfied narcissistic dreams.

On the other hand, many people simply don't care about fame, fortune, or looking as good as clothes, makeup, cosmetics, or surgery can accomplish. For those folks, other values, such as being a good person, having a supportive social system, participating in a spiritual community, or being able to make a decent living makes their life quite satisfying.

Counting the Costs of Narcissism

When I've worked on books about anxiety, depression, or obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), I've easily accessed data about the societal costs and consequences of such mental health problems. I looked for information from the World Health Organization, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and various other trusted sources. In my searches, I found plenty of charts and graphs displaying estimates of lost productivity; the portion of the population suffering from anxiety, depression, or OCD; and whether the rates of those disorders were increasing, decreasing, or staying the same.

The same is not true for narcissism. There simply isn't much information about the cost of narcissism in terms of lost wages, psychotherapy costs, or specifics on rates or rate changes over time.

There are reasons this data is so sparse and inconsistent. First, many people with narcissistic traits are never seen by a therapist or counted by a researcher. That's because they believe that they're special, superior, mentally healthy, and in no need of help. They're certainly unlikely to volunteer their valuable time for a research study. If they suffer, it's almost always viewed as someone else's fault.

A second reason that data is lacking has to do with the fact that the definition of problematic narcissism is inconsistent and unclear. In addition, narcissists often have overlapping mental disorders such as depression or histrionic personality disorder that make a precise diagnosis difficult (see Chapter 13). Therefore, an accurate count of narcissism and its societal costs is difficult or even impossible for scientists to tabulate. (See Chapter 2 for more information about definitions of narcissism.)



TIP

Despite the lack of hard data in charts and graphs, after reading a good portion of this book, you're very likely to be aware of who narcissists are when you encounter them and the costs to you or others. Narcissism, in its many variations, is quite common and costly in the United States and around the world.

Broken relationships

For those caught in a narcissistic web of abuse, the effects can be long-lasting. Partners of narcissists often lose a sense of who they are. They lose the confidence to handle daily life and struggle to make decisions. They suffer from bouts of anxiety and depression. They frequently feel similar to those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), needing to be hypervigilant for possible danger and attempting to suppress memories of their abusive relationship.

Partners coming out of a situation of abuse struggle to set appropriate boundaries. They feel powerless to say no when necessary and allow others to use or abuse them again. Their self-esteem litters the floor with emotional debris. They have a desperate need to be liked and commonly go overboard in a frantic attempt to please others. (See Chapter 5 for more information about relationships with narcissists.)

Fractured families

A narcissist doesn't just affect their partner, they spread misery to other family members like a rapidly spreading cancer. One common tool of the narcissist is isolation. The narcissist attempts to control their partner by keeping them from meaningfully interacting with family members. This is especially true for family members who have the potential to give the partner of the narcissist helpful feedback about the abuse they are being subjected to. In addition, other family members usually recognize the lies, excuses, and other manipulations the narcissist uses to keep their partner in line.

Often partners of narcissists find themselves making excuses for the narcissist to other family members for rudeness, acting entitled, or deception. For example, the partner may declare that their partner is sick or too tired from work to participate in family gatherings. Relationships among family members and the victim of the narcissistic abuse can descend into a tangle of conflict and chaos.

Finally, children with one or more narcissistic parents rarely emerge unscathed. Their world is one of emotional uncertainty and turmoil. One day they may be the golden child, unable to do wrong. The following day, they are scapegoated and blamed for all the family's problems. However, if they are lucky to have a strong role model or parent who protects them and provides unconditional love, they may grow up to be surprisingly resilient and well-adjusted. (See Chapter 6 for more information.)

Conflict at work and in the neighborhood

Whether you work with one or more narcissistic colleagues or have the misfortune of being under the supervision of a narcissistic boss, the fallout can range from annoyances to career ending ruin. For example, narcissistic colleagues may claim credit for your ideas and accomplishments. A jealous, narcissistic boss, threatened by your talent, could sabotage your chances for advancement.

The same dynamic occurs across other settings such as neighborhoods and civic organizations. Conflict can erupt between narcissists and their victims. Arguments about vegetation growing over fence lines, parking spaces, or even the color of paint on a home provide ample fuel for narcissists to complain about. See Chapter 7 for more information about examples of encounters with narcissists around town and how to negotiate better outcomes.

Social unrest in group settings

When a group of people — whether a sports team, sorority, religion, fraternity, nation, race, or political party, or students of a particular college or high school — feels superior, special, entitled, and exceptional, it may or may not suffer from narcissism. It's perfectly natural to feel pride about being a member of a certain group. Many people feel positively about groups they're a part of.

However, when that pride is combined with the belief that the group is not sufficiently recognized as superior by other groups, then collective narcissism all too often raises its dragon-like head. Collective narcissism involves thinking that the superior qualities of one's group are not appreciated by others and other groups may be out to thwart their power. Social unrest occurs when people who are dissatisfied with something disrupt the regular social order to the detriment of others. It may be violent or nonviolent.

Collective narcissism has been linked to

» Racism

» Sexism

» Homophobia

» Prejudice

- » Fascism
- » Aggression
- » Violence
- » Nationalism

- » Religious fanaticism
- » Conspiracy theories
- » Terrorism
- » War

Those involved in a group that experiences collective narcissism are extremely threatened by perceived threats by another group. For example, white supremacists may believe that certain immigrant groups are out to get their jobs. People with these beliefs may respond to their imagined threats with revenge, including bullying, or attempts to intimidate the other group members. (See Chapter 3 for more information about collective narcissism.)

NARCISSISTIC PRESIDENTS AND WAR: 1897–2009

John P. Harden, while a doctoral student in political science at Ohio State University, studied 19 presidents, narcissistic traits, and days at war during each of their presidencies. The study, published in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, looked at the relationships between narcissism and length of war.

Experts and presidential historians reviewed historical biographies of the presidents. They then rated narcissistic traits of the presidents using a personality inventory. Just for your own information, during this time, Lyndon Johnson scored the highest on narcissism. Next in line was Teddy Roosevelt, and then Richard Nixon (note the most recent president rated was George W. Bush).

Using a database called the “Correlates of War,” which measured combat between two countries in which at least 1,000 people died within a year, the research looked at how long wars lasted under high-scoring narcissistic presidents compared to low-scoring narcissistic presidents.

High-scoring narcissistic presidents tended to extend wars until they could declare at least some form of victory. Perhaps the humiliation of a loss is intolerable for narcissistic presidents. This study is obviously limited by the small sample size and other factors that could confound or complicate the results. However, the author concluded that narcissistic presidents, in their “desire to protect their inflated self-image,” dragged out wars longer than necessary.