

Understanding the Mind of a Narcissist

Narcissists are not who they appear to be. They're both easy and hard to love.

Despite having a seemingly strong [personality](#), narcissists lack a core self.

Their [self-image](#) and thinking and behavior are other-oriented in order to stabilize and validate their [self-esteem](#) and fragile, fragmented self.

The gods sentenced Narcissus to a life without human love. He fell in love with his own reflection in pool of water and died hungering for its response. Like Narcissus, narcissists only "love" themselves as reflected in the eyes of others.

It's a common misconception that they love themselves. They may actually dislike themselves immensely. Their inflated self-flattery, [perfectionism](#), and arrogance are merely covers for the self-loathing they don't admit — usually even to themselves. Instead, it's projected outward in their disdain for and criticism of others. They're too afraid to look at themselves, because they believe the truth would be devastating. Emotionally, they may be dead inside, and hungering to be filled and validated by others. Sadly, they're unable to appreciate the love they do get and they alienate those who give it.

The Diagnosis

When we think of narcissists, we usually picture someone with an inflated ego — someone bossy and arrogant, who has to be right. To be diagnosed with [Narcissistic Personality Disorder](#) (NPD), the person must exhibit grandiosity (if only in fantasy) and lack of [empathy](#), as exhibited by at least five of the following traits:

1. Has a grandiose sense of self-importance and exaggerates achievements and talents.
2. [Dreams](#) of unlimited power, success, brilliance, [beauty](#), or ideal love.
3. Believes he or she is special and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people or institutions.
4. Requires excessive admiration.
5. Unreasonably expects special, favorable treatment or compliance with his or her wishes.

6. Exploits and takes advantage of others to achieve personal ends.
7. Lacks empathy for the feelings and needs of others.
8. Envy others or believes they're [envious](#) of him or her.
9. Has arrogant behaviors or attitudes.

In addition to the grandiose "Exhibitionist Narcissist" described above, James Masterson identified "Closet Narcissists" — those with a deflated, inadequate self-perception, a sense of [depression](#) and inner emptiness. (They are also referred to as "Introverted Narcissists.") They may appear [shy](#), humble, or [anxious](#), because their emotional investment is in the idealized other, which is indirectly gratifying (Masterson, 2004). "Malignant Narcissists" are the most pernicious and hostile type, enacting anti-social behavior. They can be cruel and vindictive when they feel threatened or don't get what they want.

Early Beginnings

It's hard to empathize with narcissists, but they didn't choose to be that way. Their natural development was arrested, often due to faulty, early [parenting](#). Some believe the cause lies in extreme closeness with an indulgent mother; others attribute it to parental harshness or criticalness. Although more research is required, twin studies revealed a 64-percent correlation of narcissistic behaviors, suggesting a genetic component (Livesley, Jang, Jackson, & Vernon, 1993).

Psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut observed that his narcissistic clients suffered from profound alienation, emptiness, powerlessness, and lack of meaning. Beneath a narcissistic façade, they lacked the sufficient internal structures to maintain cohesiveness, stability, and a positive self-image to provide a stable identity. Narcissists are uncertain of the boundaries between themselves and others and vacillate between dissociated states of self-inflation and inferiority. The self, divided by shame, is made up of the superior-acting, grandiose self and the inferior, devalued self. When the devalued self is in the inferior position, shame manifests by idealizing others. When the individual is in the superior position, defending against shame, the grandiose self aligns with the inner critic and devalues others through projection. Both this devaluation and

idealization are commensurate with the severity of shame and the associated depression (Lancer, 2014).

Although most people fluctuate in these positions, exhibitionistic and closet narcissists are more or less static in their respective superior and inferior positions, irrespective of reality, making them pathological. Arrogance and contempt, envy, withdrawal, denial and repression ([unconscious](#)), [aggression](#) and rage, projection (blaming or accusing others of their own flaws or actions), self-pity (especially closet narcissists), and avoidance (e.g., addictive behaviors) are common defenses to shame (Lancer, 2014). Narcissists also defend against shame and fragmentation by feeling special through idealizing or identifying with special or important people.

A Relationship with a Narcissist

At home, narcissists are totally different than their public persona. They may privately denigrate the person they were just entertaining. After an initial romance, they expect appreciation of their specialness and specific responses through demands and criticism in order to manage their internal [environment](#) and protect against their high sensitivity to [humiliation](#) and shame. [Relationships](#) revolve around them, and they experience their mates as extensions of themselves.

Many narcissists are [perfectionists](#). Nothing that others do is right or appreciated. Their partners are expected to meet their endless needs — for admiration, service, love, or purchases — and are dismissed when they don't. That their spouse is ill or in pain is inconsequential. Narcissists don't like to hear "no" and often expect others to know their needs without having to ask. They manipulate to get their way and punish or make partners feel [guilty](#) for turning them down.

Trying to please the narcissist is thankless, like trying to fill a bottomless pit. They manage to find fault with your efforts or give back-handed compliments, so that you always feel one down. If they're momentarily pleased, they're soon disparaging or asking for more from you. They make their partners experience

what it was like having had a cold, invasive, or unavailable narcissistic parent. Anne Rice's vampire Lestat had just such an emotionally empty mother, who devotedly bonded with him to survive. The deprivation of real nurturing and a lack of boundaries make narcissists dependent on others to feed their insatiable need for validation.

Partners often doubt the narcissist's sincerity and question whether it's really manipulation, pretense, or a manufactured "as-if" personality. They feel tense and drained from unpredictable tantrums, attacks, false accusations, criticism, and unjustified indignation about small or imaginary slights. These partners also lack boundaries and absorb whatever is said about them as truth. In vain attempts to win approval and stay connected, they sacrifice their needs and walk on eggshells, fearful of displeasing the narcissist. They daily risk blame and [punishment](#), love being withheld, or a rupture in the relationship. They worry what their spouses will think or do, and become as preoccupied with the narcissist as they are with themselves.

Partners have to fit into the narcissists' cold world and get used to living with emotional abandonment. Soon, they begin to doubt themselves and lose [confidence](#) and self-worth. Communicating their disappointment gets twisted and is met with defensive blame or further put-downs. The narcissist can dish it out, but not take it. Nevertheless, many partners stay, because periodically the [charm](#), excitement, and loving gestures that first enchanted them return, especially when the narcissist feels threatened that a breakup is imminent. When two narcissists get together, they fight over whose needs come first, blame and push each other away, yet are miserable needing each other.

Often in these relationships, narcissists are the distancers when more than [sex](#) is anticipated. Getting emotionally close means giving up power and control. The thought of being dependent is abhorrent. It not only limits their options and makes them feel weak, but also exposes them to rejection and feelings of shame, which they keep from consciousness at all costs (Lancer, 2014). Their anxious partners pursue them, unconsciously replaying emotional abandonment from their past. Underneath they both feel unlovable.

If you love a narcissist, the exercises and strategies in [Dealing with a Narcissist](#) can be helpful and give you clarity about whether you want to stay in the relationship. Email me if you'd like to join my mailing list and receive a "Checklist of Narcissistic Behaviors."

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Darlene brings a wide range of professional and life experience to her work as a relationship and codependency expert, having treated individuals and couples for 30 years and coaching internationally. Darlene wrote [Codependency for Dummies](#) and [Conquering Shame and Codependency: 8 Steps to Freeing the True You](#), and seven ebooks.

For more, see [my peer-reviewed article](#).

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