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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.)



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.

Dealing with a Narcissist: The Basics

Whether you interact with a narcissistic friend, coworker, parent, or romantic partner, a few strategies can help you handle their self-centered behavior. I introduce some strategies here and then explain each idea in more detail later in the book.

Responding thoughtfully rather than merely reacting

The most important technique for surviving encounters with narcissists involves awareness of your own reactions. When you experience a trigger, such as being mistreated, take a breath, step back, and analyze what you are feeling. Are you experiencing rapid breathing, tightness in the chest, a sick feeling in your stomach, sadness, or anger? If so, then consider what about the situation triggered those feelings.

Becoming aware of your responses and the triggering event in an encounter with a narcissist is the first step in understanding how to thoughtfully respond rather than simply react. Part 2 gives you more information about dealing with narcissists in interpersonal interactions.

Setting boundaries

Setting boundaries with narcissists can be difficult. They have spent many years mastering the art of manipulation and are exquisitely good at making unsuspecting people fall for their control tactics. Here are some brief tips on standing up for yourself; I offer many more ideas throughout this book.

- » **Stop making excuses for their behavior.** Family members and partners of narcissists often try to excuse rude or hostile behavior by making excuses. Narcissists show their too-frequent anger outbursts whenever it pleases them. Too often they do not face appropriate consequences for their bad behavior.
- » **Don't expect them to change.** Narcissists rarely change; if they do, it's usually because of some big loss, but you have no control over that change. Threats, pleas, and cajoling don't work. You can't change a narcissist no matter how hard you try.
- » **Demand respect.** What do you usually do when someone disrespects you? Do you tolerate it? If so, you may have been in an abusive situation so long that it has become a habit. Step back and think about how others would respond. Perhaps it's time for you to stop tolerating disrespect.

» **Don't be afraid to say no.** Narcissists often make unreasonable demands on family, friends, and coworkers. Saying no sometimes leads to unwanted confrontations. However, if you don't say no, it will certainly result in an uptick of more unreasonable demands.

Recognizing gaslighting

Gaslighting is a form of emotional abuse that can make the victim start questioning their own sanity. Victims become increasingly confused, sometimes wondering whether they are losing their memory, their common sense, or their emotional stability. Narcissists often become experts at gaslighting. The abuse usually begins quite slowly, with small, insignificant suggestions that can lead to full-blown distortions of reality.

Here's an example of a somewhat common, mild form of gaslighting:

Leo (the narcissist) asks his partner, Owen, "Did you pick up the drycleaning?"

Owen replies, "No, you didn't ask me to. I didn't know it was ready."

"We had that conversation last night. You promised me that you'd get it on the way home," Leo responds.

"I don't remember either of us talking about that. Are you sure?" Owen queries.

"Are you okay? Were you taking drugs last night? You really don't remember? We definitely talked about you picking up the drycleaning. You seriously don't remember?" Leo counters.

"Okay, sorry, I don't usually forget things like that. You know I certainly wasn't on drugs! I'll go now and pick it up."

"It's too late. They're closed, and I needed a clean shirt for work tomorrow. I'll make do," Leo says icily and walks away.

Owen feels untethered and uneasy. He searches his brain, going over the sequence of what happened the night before, but can't remember his promise. *Owen doesn't recall the conversation because it didn't take place.* This simple maneuver by Leo is the beginning of additional subtle but more serious attacks.

Narcissistic gaslighters feel free to lie; they simply make things up. Then later, they change the story, deny the original lie, or somehow blame it on someone else. This can be particularly frustrating to those around them.

Small instances of gaslighting make vulnerable people question themselves. Over time, the narcissist becomes more powerful and the victim weaker. Throughout this book, you can find many more examples of gaslighting and how to respond to it by recognizing gaslighting and staying focused on trusting your own feelings.

Maintaining your self-esteem

If you are in a relationship with a narcissist, whether casual or intimate, your sense of self may feel unbalanced. Keep a focus on who you are as a person, and be compassionate with yourself. You are dealing with a stressful situation, but you are still the same valuable person you were before encountering the narcissist in your life.

One ploy of the narcissist involves isolating you from others and filling your mind with their selfish, narcissistic realities. Finding other sources of information is critical in these situations. Talking to others can keep you from falling into the trap of believing the narcissistic reality. Consider working with a mental health professional to help you problem solve and navigate this type of grueling relationship. See Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 for more information about dealing with narcissistic abuse.

Keeping things superficial and brief

Narcissists love to be at the center of attention. They enjoy an adoring audience and tend to give lectures rather than have conversations. Once you really get to know a narcissist, you may not want to attend the show. Yet, because they work with you or live with you, or are your ex, your parents, your next-door neighbor, or the local grocery store clerk, you may have to make an appearance.

Prepare in advance. Make your interactions as brief as possible. Make sure you have a commitment ready as an excuse to leave (see Part 2 for more detailed information). Furthermore, as much as possible, put your feelings in your pocket when you experience narcissistic abuse. Narcissists can smell discomfort or distress and will use those feelings to manipulate any situation.

Cutting off or compartmentalizing hurtful relationships

Sometimes, the only safe alternative for your own physical and mental health is to leave a relationship with a narcissist. If it's the local grocer, that's probably pretty easy to do, but if you live in a small town, it can be more difficult. It's even more challenging when it comes to friends, but sometimes a breakup is inevitable. With bosses or coworkers, you probably need to maintain a cordial relationship in order to keep up with your responsibilities (see the Chapter 7 for more ideas).

Cutting off relationships with business associates, neighbors, and friends is hard enough. However, walking away from interactions with family members is even harder. But people do it, perhaps more than you realize.

Research on family relations in the United States suggests that well over a third of the population has been estranged from one or more family members for significant periods of time. Estrangement between parents and adult children are quite common. For some strategies to deal with these tough decisions, see Chapter 6.

Leaving an intimate partner may be the most difficult for some; for others it's just a relief. However, cutting off relationships with a narcissistic intimate partner is usually the most conflictual, dangerous, and draining of all. See Chapters 5 and 9 for help in managing and implementing this trying decision.



TIP

Be willing to calmly walk away from a toxic relationship. When facing an unwinnable battle, sometimes the best thing to do is to leave the scene. This is not surrender. It's another way to set appropriate limits.

Getting Help: Considering Treatment Options

Some treatments, such as psychotherapy (discussed in Part 5), have been found to improve the day-to-day functioning of narcissists. However, narcissists rarely seek help unless they are under some external threat such as an impending divorce, a job loss, or legal trouble. When they do engage in treatment, they tend to leave treatment prematurely or sabotage efforts by therapists.

For the most part, narcissists are not very likely to seek and benefit from psychotherapy. But that leaves their partners, families, and concerned others wondering what to do to decrease their own misery.

During an emergency in an airplane, it's important to put the oxygen mask on yourself before giving help to the other people in your row, and the same principle applies to narcissistic relationships. If you find yourself miserable or even in danger dealing with a difficult person, first put on your own oxygen mask.

Get yourself to a better space. Consider counseling for yourself before tackling the job of attempting to help a narcissist or leave the relationship. Therapy can be a tool that gives you the power and perspective to make wise decisions.



TIP

Interacting with a narcissist can be initially wonderful and more often, ultimately horrible. Long-term costs to your self-esteem can be significant. It's important to save yourself.