

# Exploring Narcissistic Traits: A Comprehensive Analysis

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**Abstract:** *Narcissism is a distinct personality trait which makes a person feel entitled to regard highly of oneself. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) a narcissist possesses the characteristics of an exaggerated sense of self-importance and uniqueness, an unreasonable sense of entitlement, a desire for admiration, exploitative tendencies toward others, lack of empathy, and arrogance. Narcissists have a strong inclination to project themselves as superior before others. Obsessed with their personal image and a high value on their own looks, they lack empathy towards others and have an abnormal positive self-evaluation. They are primarily preoccupied for the grandeur of their self and fantasise their power and success. The excess sense of their imagined power often results in an exploitative approach towards others. They barely care about the existence of others and try to pacify them whenever they feel like. They think of themselves as comprehensive being. The aim of the present study is an attempt to understand and discuss the characteristics of Narcissism.*

**Key Words:** *Narcissism, personality disorder, lack of empathy, power and self – importance.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION :

The term 'narcissism' devised from the Roman poet Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the first century story of Narcissus and Echo. In Ovid's myth, there was a striking young man named Narcissus. Echo, a nymph, was cursed to only echo the hum of others falls in love with Narcissus. While Echo could not express her love to Narcissus, he was uninvolved with anyone and even rejects Echo forcing her to die with the desire to love. The Greek Gods punished Narcissus by cursing him that he will fall in love with his own image. He saw his replication in a water fountain and fell in love with the image and admired his image forever. As the object of his love does not love him back, he died and turned into a flower near the lakes. Ever since, the person who shows extreme love with one's image is named to be narcissist. Reading Ovid's and Pausanias' version the moral they intend to state is that anyone who loves oneself will die a lonely death.

The term 'Narcissus – like' was first used by an English psychologist Havelock Ellis in 1898. He used the term to describe a psychological disorder where in the subject has a condition considering oneself as a sexual object. Paul Nacker used the term 'Narcissism' for the first time in 1899 to describe the person who derives sexual pleasure from one's own body rather than from others. In 1911, it was Otto Rank who connected narcissism to self-admiration and pride. Ernest Jones was the first who constructed narcissism as a character trait which he called 'God – complex' and explained as people who are aloof, over confident, self-admiring, inaccessible, self-important, exhibitionistic and auto-erotic with fantasies of omnipotence and omniscience. He also observed that these people had a high need for uniqueness.

## 2. Sigmund Freud on Narcissism :

Sigmund Freud in his essay, *On Narcissism: An Introduction* associates narcissism to the libido that directs towards the ego. He has stated that the libido which has been withdrawn from the outer world had been directed to the ego and results in the rise to an attitude which may be called as narcissism. (Freud 75)

Freud further categorises the stages of narcissism as primary narcissism and secondary narcissism. Primary narcissism has been described as the stage of development of ego which is formed at birth. A child practices its ego on the image created by his or her parents. Parents form an affirmative image of their children by appreciating them (Freud 87). This self-love and formation of ego makes possibility for primary narcissism. This stage also suggests the development of energy that regulates one's instincts for survival. The 'ego' takes the shape of 'ego-ideal' in the later stages of development of self. When the 'ego-ideal' takes a majestic form then it starts eliminating object libido. This creates the ground for the development of secondary narcissism. People experience a decline in their sense of self-worth when they move from primary narcissism to object love. A healthy relationship involves mutual libidinal investment by both parties and neither suffers a loss as a result.

Secondary narcissism is the undesirable state of narcissism, in order to love and satisfy oneself, people relapse to it as a managing mechanism when their love objects are unable to reciprocate their affection. Freud has substantiated the role of ego-ideal in the withdrawal of instincts from others to self. He has focused on the development of the stages of Narcissism which correlates with the development of the personality and behavioural patterns of an individual. This description is remarkably close to the contemporary formation of Narcissistic Personality Disorder.

### 3. Narcissism – as a disorder :

Fundamentally, narcissism can be a caustic disorder where the narcissists venture many of their insecurities and faults to others. Then, when their source runs out, the destruction may get directed at the self. The prime feature of the narcissistic personality is the magnificent sense of self-importance. But ironically under their magnificent image, the narcissist grieves from a constantly fragile low self-esteem. The narcissist's behaviour is designed to reaffirm his or her sense of adequacy. Subsequently, as the narcissist is incompetent of affirming his or her own sense of adequacy, the narcissist seeks to be admired by others. However, the narcissist's extreme fragile sense of self-worth does not allow her or him to risk any criticism. Therefore, meaningful emotional interactions with others are avoided. Regardless of how people react, the narcissist typically succeeds in maintaining the appearance of grandiosity by seeking other people's adoration and keeping them at a distance. Therefore, the narcissist's grandiosity will grow when people compliment him or her, but when the narcissist is criticized, the grandiosity usually remains unchanged because the narcissist degrades the criticizing person.

The four narcissist character traits illustrate the pattern referred above:

- A narcissistic person has a fundamental sense of inferiority which underlies a preoccupation with fantasies of outstanding achievement
- A narcissist individual is unable to trust or rely on others so they generate rumours, seek a large number of shallow relationships in an effort to gain favour.
- A narcissist person has a shifting morality and ready to shift values to gain favour.
- A narcissist is unable to sustain relationships demonstrating an impaired capability for a committed relationship.

As Narcissism is a personality trait, it is further classified into five types: overt narcissism (grandiose), covert narcissism (vulnerable), communal narcissism, antagonistic narcissism, and malignant narcissism.

**Overt narcissism** is extroverted, egoistic and extremely competitive. Their narcissistic behaviour is observable. A person with this personality thinks that they have more emotional intelligence than others. Some of the common signs with overt narcissism includes:

- A strong desire for admiration and compliments
- Seeking attention
- An overstated sense of self-esteem
- Incapable to empathize with others
- Personal dominance
- Overrates their intelligence, abilities and capabilities
- Unresponsive to the needs of others
- Loud and arrogant
- High headed
- Extremely self-involved

**Covert narcissism** is the opposite of overt narcissism. Their behaviour is less observable and subtle. These types of narcissists do not behave outwardly or loudly. However, they are exceedingly focused on themselves with the expectation for applause from others. Their need for admiration may appear as talking down about themselves in order to gain assurance from others. The common signs of covert narcissism include:

- Introvert
- Unable to accept criticism
- Feel and express they are not worthy
- Blames and shames others for their mistakes
- Delicate self-esteem
- Plays the victim
- Self-doubting and low self-reliance

**Communal narcissism** is a type of overt narcissism. The communal narcissists claim to have a steady moral code with a belief in impartiality but will not behave according to their beliefs. Their actions will not go parallel with what they believe, think or say. For instance, their concern for others will not be genuine. The common signs of communal narcissism include:

- Extreme sensitivity to injustice
- Expression of humane values
- Identifies themselves as philanthropic, saintly and generous
- Expression of anger in response to biased circumstances

**Antagonistic narcissism** can be considered as the subtype of overt narcissism. Overt narcissists are outward, social and tend to make friends effortlessly. However, someone with the antagonist narcissism may struggle to sustain social ties with others because the personality trait is linked to a negative impact on peer relationships. The characteristics include:

- Tendency to disagree and debate
- Extreme focus on conflict
- Extremely competitive
- Lack of mercy of others
- Trust issues
- Takes advantage of others

**Malignant narcissism** is considered to have a mixture of narcissism and anti-social personality disorder which is a serious condition and not much research was done. An exploratory study declares that this type of narcissism has features such as psychopathic, suspicious and sadistic interactions. Similar to overt narcissism, malignant narcissism continuously desire for praise and attention, however, the behaviour to fulfil their needs are extreme. Some of the common characteristics include:

- Display suspicion especially fear of others making fun of them
- Aggression
- Sadist- enjoys seeing the pain of others
- Cruel and hurtful
- No tolerance for criticism
- Lack in handling criticism

The narcissist view of others is what he or she wants others to be and not view others as they are. It is like others are supposed to exist only in connection to their narcissist's needs.

#### 4. Objectifying the other :

The term 'objects relations' takes on a distinct connotation with the narcissist. For narcissists, others are objects and do not really realize or hear and sense the genuine presence of others. The narcissist maintains the childhood illusion of being merged to the object. It is important to state that at a psychological level, he or she experiences complications in distinguishing the self from others. The inability to distinguish personal boundaries determines the severity of the disorder. (Johnson 1987)

## 5. Defence mechanism of Narcissist

Regarding the defence mechanism of narcissist, the narcissist defences in order to avoid the experience of the feeling of narcissistic injury. The most common defence mechanism is grandiose defence. This defence is utilized by the narcissist when someone wounds their grandiosity by saying something that affects the view of himself or herself. The function of the defence is to restore the narcissist's exaggerated perception about herself or himself. Devaluation or humiliation is another common defence used by the narcissist. When disappointed, the narcissist responds by devaluing the offending people. Devaluation or humiliation restores the wounded ego by providing the narcissist a feeling of power and superiority over the offender.

The other two defence mechanisms which the narcissist uses are self-sufficiency defence and manic defence. To keep the narcissist emotionally secluded from others, self-sufficiency defence is used. By keeping himself or herself emotionally secluded, the narcissist's grandiosity is continued to exist unchallenged. The manic defence is utilized when feelings of unimportance begin to surface. In order to avoid these feelings, the narcissist will drive to occupy himself or herself with activities so that he or she has no time left for the feelings. (Manfield, 1992)

## 6. Behaviour of a Narcissist :

The most common consistent behaviour of a narcissist is manipulation. Love and kindness of are taken for granted and twisted into mistreatment in the hands of a manipulative individual. To manipulate others, Narcissist use direct and covert strategies. The intention of the narcissist is to be a governor and hurt. In order to retain the individual's attachment and closeness, narcissists use both direct and unintended manipulations. The reason of the exaggeration is to maintain attention. When the narcissist senses the love and attention of the individual is fading, they start their strategies of manipulation. It is unacceptable for the narcissists to know the fact that partner is unwilling to stay with them or reject them. The narcissists have an inner belief that people around them are jealous. They have an undeserved ego. The narcissists go to any level to regain control of a person if they think they are losing attention and affirmations from the person through manipulations. Narcissists do try micromanipulations when there is no room for their direct manipulations. Micromanipulations seem to have an understanding and empathy towards their partner and their self-perceived victim status. However, it is highly an intentional way to redirect the story and regain control over the other individual's thoughts and feelings.

Psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich in his book *Character Analysis* (1933) notes that if narcissists were ego-threatened, they would become violent: "react with cold disdain, marked ill-humour, or downright aggression (aggressive)" (p.218). Reich identifies narcissism with "identification between the ego as a whole and the phallus" (p. 219). He ventures that this condition is more common in men than in women.

The cause of Narcissism personality disorder is typically as a result of genetic, and environmental factors. The causes are linked to

- Parent-child relationship with either too much admiration or too much criticism which do not match the real child's experiences and achievements.
- Learning abusive and manipulative behaviour from family or people around them.
- Inconsistency in upbringing.
- Genetic characteristics from parents.
- Physical, sexual or verbal trauma from childhood.

Annie Reich (1960) labelled narcissists as "hyperbolic, unrealistic – i.e., infantile – inner yardsticks" (p. 217). According to the psychoanalyst Reich, narcissism is initiated by continual early childhood traumas that occur before the ego's defence mechanisms are established and lead the child to withdraw inward to a safer self-protective fantasy world: "It is not so. I am not helpless, bleeding, destroyed. On the contrary, I am bigger and better than anyone else. I am the greatest, the most grandiose" (p. 220).

### Summing up

Narcissists are obsessed with their personal image and place a high value on their own looks. They lack empathy towards others and have a developed positive self-evaluation. They are primarily preoccupied for the grandeur of their self and mostly live in their fantasies of their power and success. The excess sense of their power often results in an exploitative approach towards others. They barely care about the existence of others and try to pacify them whenever they feel like. They think of themselves as comprehensive being. Thus the present study is an attempt to understand and discussion of the characteristics of Narcissism.

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