

Understanding Narcissism

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Jim is a 43-year-old regional sales manager. When people first meet him, they find him charming, pleasant, and endearing. But as they get to know Jim better, they see another side.

During planning meetings at church and work, Jim often dominates the conversation. He tells everyone his opinion, whether they want to hear it or not. He doesn't like being challenged or outvoted, and he is hypersensitive to criticism. Jim acts like he is someone special whom others should admire and to whom they should defer. He also has a short fuse when things don't go his way or when people keep him waiting. At restaurants, for example, Jim expects to get the table he wants when he wants it. If he has to wait, he becomes curt and angry.

Since Jim is so focused on himself, he has difficulty being sensitive to others and has few close friends. Even when he does helpful things, he seems to be motivated more from his desire to look good or be a leader than by a real concern for the people he is helping.

At home, Jim's wife and children find him difficult. He expects them to see things his way and appreciate everything he does. Jim has a hard time relating to anyone in an intimate way, as a peer, or for any sustained period of time. In short, Jim has a narcissistic personality.

Narcissism Defined

Historically, the term narcissism comes from the Greek myth of Narcissus. In one of the more common versions of this myth, Narcissus is a physically attractive young man who, upon seeing his own reflection in a pond, is so taken with himself that he withers away while staring at his reflection in the water.

Everyone has at least a little narcissism. At the relatively healthy end of the continuum are people who believe in themselves and their abilities, but don't demand special privileges or consider themselves above the social rules or norms. They can visualize themselves as one of the best or most accomplished in their field or profession and they may be competitive, but they don't envy or begrudge others their success. They may occasionally be shrewd in dealing with others, but they don't exploit people or take unfair advantage of others to achieve their own ends. Most importantly, they possess a good awareness of their own thoughts, feelings, and needs, and respect others and are concerned about them.

At the other end of the continuum, a person with pathological narcissism portrays at least five of the following characteristics¹:

- Needs constant attention and admiration
- Approaches others with a sense of entitlement
- Is interpersonally exploitative and takes advantage of others to achieve his or her

own ends

- Lacks empathy and is unwilling or unable to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others
- Envy others or believes that others are envious of him or her
- Displays an arrogant and haughty behavior or attitude
- Is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love
- Believes that he or she is “special” and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people

Craig, for example, was going through a conflicted divorce. He ran through lawyer after lawyer, trying to get the joint custody arrangement of the children exactly as he wanted it. He was certain that he deserved the custody in his way. He raged at his ex-wife when she stood up for any alternative. He showed absolutely no concern for her and very little for the children except for the control he could gain by having joint custody. Once he got it, he repeatedly left the children with babysitters while he did his own thing. His goal was winning, not the welfare of his children.

Craig was fired from two jobs in spite of the fact that he was highly productive. He was let go because he tried to tell his supervisors how to run the companies. But as far as Craig was concerned, his supervisors had the problems. To him, they lost a great employee. He didn't consider for a moment that he might be the problem.

Soon after his divorce, Craig informed his dad that he was moving in with his new girlfriend. When his dad asked why he didn't wait until they married, Craig was incensed. “You're not supporting me!” he shouted, as if his father was duty-bound to feel the same way he did about his decisions. Craig was oblivious of his father's right to have a mind of his own, and when his father expressed his own beliefs, Craig felt betrayed. Craig didn't have any boundary or differentiation between his thoughts and feelings and his dad's. He thought his father should think and feel exactly as he did. To Craig, like many narcissists, “being loyal” meant agreeing with him at every point.

In between those with a healthy degree of self-interest and those with pathological narcissism is a group of people who don't fully fit the diagnostic criteria of pathological narcissism but do have a lot of leanings in that direction. They tend to be self-centered and not deeply concerned about others. They may have only three or four of the criteria listed above. This group may include physicians, lawyers, and athletes who are overly controlling, proud of their accomplishments, “cocky,” or possibly use labels and license plates like “Top Doc,” “Super Lawyer,” or “Top Jock.”

Some successful politicians, religious leaders, and businessmen and women are rather narcissistic. They have great vision and drive to succeed, but they like things their way and eat up the admiration of their followers. They exploit others to fulfill the needs of their business, church, or society as they understand the needs; they lack deep caring for others and true humility. They may be admired from a distance or seem successful in terms of growth and numbers, but not in terms of close relationships with others. When it comes time to give up the leadership reins, they struggle to let go since that means giving up prestige and control.

When narcissistic people are placed in positions of leadership in a church or Christian organization, both their strengths and weaknesses impact those who work with them. On the positive side are narcissists' vision and capacity to stir people to set new goals and accomplish great things. Narcissists are often able to

mobilize a congregation or group of people – especially if it isn't necessary to work closely with them or if others trust them implicitly because of their leadership position.

On the negative side, narcissists need to be the focus of attention, have difficulty receiving advice and input from others, and may view members of their congregation or missionary team as people who should unquestionably follow their vision.

If someone disagrees with the narcissist's vision – whether it is to build a larger church sanctuary or start a new outreach – the narcissist (and his or her loyal followers) may label the dissenters as uncooperative, lacking vision, unspiritual, or out of God's will. In their arrogance, narcissists naively assume that anyone who disagrees with them is opposing God rather than simply expressing a well-considered opinion. Needless to say, this is extremely discouraging to members of a team or congregation who feel ignored, minimized, or pushed aside as the narcissist pursues his or her agenda.

Some narcissistic leaders try to subtly (or sometimes not so subtly) take credit for everything positive that is happening in a church or business team. They can't stand seeing anyone else receive credit or be in the limelight – unless, of course, they put them there and can share in the reflected admiration.

Many business ventures, churches, and mission teams have been fractured or have lost fine members because of a narcissistic leader's need to have everyone under his or her control. When someone else is too successful, it threatens the narcissist's need for admiration and control, and he or she may push aside or minimize them or their contributions in various ways.

It is estimated that less than one percent of Individuals would be clinically diagnosed as having a narcissistic personality disorder. But when it comes to exhibiting some unhealthy narcissistic personality traits, the number is much larger. Of those diagnosed with the narcissistic personality disorder, 50 - 75% are male.² Ironically, the self-centered relational style of most narcissists is apparent to almost everyone who knows them, but not to themselves. It usually takes a series of conflicts or failures at work or home before the narcissist considers the possibility of seeking help.

Craig, for example, was absolutely certain that his ex-wife, his father, and every friend who dared to have a different opinion about his lifestyle or the welfare of his children was the problem. He "knew" he was right and everyone else was at fault. What he needed was a new wife, new parents, new friends, and a new job – not a different attitude!

Jim, the regional sales manager who had troubles at church and home, finally sought out a counselor after repeated relational problems. He asked his counselor the questions that plague many people with narcissistic personalities:

- “Why doesn't my wife appreciate everything I do for her?”
- “Why can't I make lasting friendships?”
- “Why can't others accept and appreciate me for who I am?”
- “Why do I feel isolated and lonely – even in groups?”

The answers to these questions come as we understand why narcissists think and feel the way they do.

The Dynamics of Narcissism

The underlying skeleton holding the narcissist's personality together is a fragile self-esteem that fears abandonment. The narcissist attempts to ward off painful fears of aloneness or shame by developing an idealized view of self and concludes that everyone should admire him or her. When others don't share this self-perception, he or she turns on them in anger or devalues them in order to protect this idealized view.

Some individuals with narcissistic personality disorders have a difficult time adjusting to the limitations inherent in aging. Since narcissistic personality traits are a bit more acceptable in the marketplace when a person is young and on the way up in his or her field, narcissists can sometimes manage reasonably well, except in intimate relationships. But with aging, the problems become more obvious.

Causes of Narcissism

What might cause someone to become so self-centered?

From earliest childhood each of us struggles to develop a realistic set of attitudes and feelings toward others and self. Each person is born with a wonderful potential to become a unique individual who can love and be loved and make a contribution to the world. Each has the potential to become the real self and healthy person that God created him or her to be.

To grow into this kind of person, each person needs certain childhood experiences. Awareness of our own unique abilities and needs, for example, only develops as our parents and others close to us recognize our God-given gifts and needs.

Good parents sense their children's emotional, spiritual, and physical needs and respond helpfully. They recognize their children's unique ways of being and value those distinctions. They allow their children to grow up and develop their own identities rather than trying to force them into their mold and meet their needs.

How well we develop our God-given selves determines to a large degree whether we will become emotionally healthy individuals or suffer from narcissism or other adjustment disorders. Those growing up as potential narcissists fail to develop their God-given selves. They shift their energies into becoming the type of person they must be in order to feel good about themselves, and a person whom everyone will admire. Instead of becoming the persons God created them to be with strengths and weaknesses like the rest of us, they can only feel good about themselves when their false, grandiose self is being affirmed.

But in seeking constant admiration, the narcissist must look to everyone else to prop up this unrealistic self-image. In the process, he or she obliterates the boundaries between self and others. Narcissists expect others to live for them and to affirm their unrealistic selves rather than live as the distinct persons God called them to be. They use others to ward off their deep fears of abandonment, shame, or depression rather than loving others for who they are.

Narcissistic traits can develop from several different types of early life experiences, but they all have one thing in common: experiences that undermine the child's acceptance of a true, God-given self. Parents who pamper their children by always giving them their way, who neglect their children, or who are so needy or intrusive that they repeatedly force their children to meet their needs have the potential of raising children who become narcissists. Permissiveness and pampering tend to program children to develop undeserved feelings of entitlement or superiority. These children don't learn humility and respect for others because their parents do not set limits and model mutual respect.

Consider three-year-old Caleb, for example. While shopping with his mother, Becky, Caleb sees a candy he desires. Totally unaware of adult concerns like finances, ownership, or health, Caleb only knows that he wants the candy and he believes that he should have it. If Becky says no, Caleb may initially feel anger or even throw a tantrum. But in time he will get over it and learn that he cannot always have his way. He will also learn to calm himself down and feel okay when things don't go the way he wants. But if Becky consistently gives in, Caleb will come to believe that he is entitled to anything he wishes.

To become emotionally mature, children need parents who enjoy them and are emotionally caring, but also parents who know how to say no. We all must learn that we can't always have our own way and that we need to regard others. Psychologists call this the ability to "self-soothe." Children who become narcissistic adults never learned to do this. They can't accept their limitations or the fact that their wishes will not always be met.

Children who grow up in wealthy or influential families in which parents are not sufficiently emotionally nourishing may develop a strong sense of entitlement and a lack of sensitivity to others that characterizes narcissistic personalities.

Marriage and family therapists have begun to realize that an entire family system can be narcissistic, not simply one individual within the family. In a narcissistic family, relationships revolve around getting the parents' desires and needs met rather than also meeting the needs of the children. Reasons may include job stress, alcoholism, drug abuse, mental illness, lack of spiritual maturity, physical disability, lack of parenting skills, or self-centered immaturity. Trying to earn their parents' approval or to keep their parents happy, children in these families lose touch with their own needs. They are so busy adjusting to parental needs or taking emotional care of their parents that the biblical pattern of parents meeting children's needs is reversed. The children are psychologically taking care of the parents. This leaves the children craving to be cared for. But because they aren't, they start seeking admiration or success to fill their emotional void.

Here are some of the more common characteristics of these narcissistic families:

- Indirect communication between parents and children. For example, instead of saying, "Steve, would you please empty the dishwasher?" a parent might say, "It would be nice if someone would empty the dishwasher."
- Family relational patterns resemble triangles. One or both of the parents speak through the children to use them as a defense to closeness.
- Unclear physical and emotional boundaries between the parents and the children. For example, an unspoken family motto might be, "What is mine is mine, and what is yours is mine, too."
- Children are not entitled to have, express, or experience feelings that are unacceptable to the parents. For example, a child is told, "You don't *hate* your brother. You *love* your brother."
- Mind reading, that is, one or both parents assume that everyone else in the family *should* know what he or she is thinking or feeling, without having to clearly communicate those thoughts and feelings.

Notice that there need not be abuse or neglect for a family system to be narcissistic. Indeed, some narcissistic families look fine outwardly. Nobody takes drugs or is an alcoholic, and nobody has a serious mental illness. Yet, with further probing it becomes clear that the needs of the parent (or parents) are the

focus of the family, and the children are in some way expected to serve those needs.

Other potentially narcissistic adults suffer parental neglect or indifference. As a result, they develop a compensatory false self that desires greatness and constant affirmation as a way of shoring up their sagging sense of self-worth. This may also be an attempt to ward off the shame or fear of abandonment that comes from a lack of parental attunement, sensitivity, and love.

Regardless of the specific childhood experiences that give rise to narcissism, the end result is a set of unspoken or unconscious beliefs, such as:

- “I am special and I deserve special treatment, privileges, and status.”
- “I am superior to others and they should acknowledge this fact.”
- “The rules apply to everyone except me; I am above the rules.”
- “The only people who can truly understand me are those who share a similar status or privilege.”
- “When I am criticized or don’t get my way, I feel ashamed, defective, and afraid that I will never measure up.”

Understanding these dynamics helps answer two questions many Christians have about narcissistic individuals: *Aren’t they just proud and selfish?* and *Aren’t they just being sinful?* The answer to both questions is yes and no. Narcissists are proud and they are sinful, as we all are. But they aren’t just proud and sinful.

Simple pride and selfishness is something most of us struggle with. We can all seek our own advantage and well-being without regard for others. Although this isn’t emotionally or spiritually healthy, if we honestly face ourselves, seek forgiveness, and grow through our relationship with Christ and others, we can move beyond our pride and selfishness.

Pathological narcissism is different. It is a personality style that is deeply rooted in the structure of the entire personality from the first few years of life. Simply confessing one’s sins and committing to change cannot overcome it. Growing out of narcissism is a long, slow process that may take years.

Living or Working with a Narcissist

If you live or work with a narcissist, you know this relationship presents a distinct set of challenges. The narcissist’s extreme self-focus, violation of your boundaries, and controlling style can cause incredible frustration and despair.

Some decide the best way to deal with the narcissist is to pacify, to sacrifice a part of one’s own self so that the narcissist can live out his or her fantasy life of superiority without conflicts. This is especially true for the family of a narcissist. It takes so much energy to avoid relational conflicts that family members simply give up trying to have a life or opinions of their own. Unfortunately, spouses who attempt to make peace this way can’t be honest about their own thoughts, feelings, and desires because that would upset their mate. A good indication that this is happening is to ask spouses or family members whether they feel relieved or become a different person when the narcissist is not around.

There are better ways of coping than giving up one's self. Here are some guidelines for surviving and thriving:

- Remember that it is inevitable you will periodically trigger the narcissist's feelings of inadequacy and anger. Realize that it is usually less about you and your behavior or words and more about the narcissist. Even though narcissists like to be above their failures, they are sinful and imperfect like the rest of us (Rom. 3:23, Jer. 17:9). If anything, they are even more prone to be unaware of their own imperfections. Even a true statement kindly spoken can wound the narcissist's fragile self-esteem.
- Try not to absorb the guilt or blame narcissists attempt to place on you. Remember, their need to blame you comes from their own deep feelings of inadequacy and inability to observe and respect your needs. According to the Bible, although we all have responsibility to others, we must each ultimately take responsibility for our own burdens (Gal. 6:4).
- If you start feeling diminished or angry, realize that the narcissist's behavior is probably triggering those emotions. Narcissists like to use others as a kind of emotional wastebasket where they can dump their feelings. If you believe them, you will end up feeling as bad as they do. This doesn't mean you can ignore your contribution to the problem. If you are angry, critical, or overly sensitive, you need to work on your issues too. But don't take responsibility for a narcissist's deep-seated problems. They were there before he or she met you!
- Put some emotional distance between you and the narcissist while you sort all this out. Take time to reflect on what is going on between you and your spouse or co-worker, for example. Fighting back just escalates the narcissist's anger, and accepting the accusations reinforces his or her unhealthy style while leaving you feeling depressed, angry, or "crazy."
- The alternative is to take time to center yourself so that you calmly see what the narcissist is attempting to do without falling into his or her trap. Remember that, in many ways, the narcissist is acting and feeling like a two or three-year-old on the inside. But don't say that! Use your understanding to be patient while still keeping yourself centered. Don't use it as a weapon to fight back.
- Minimize direct confrontation with the narcissist's unhealthy behavior. Most narcissists are simply unable to receive criticism, even if it is spoken gently and respectfully, and intended to be constructive. True narcissists are too busy frantically trying to manage their own unconscious fears of being worthless or abandoned to get into your emotional shoes and take an objective look at themselves.
- If you are working under a narcissistic supervisor and want to keep your job, show your appreciation as much as possible. If you decide you must confront your boss, do so very gently or do so with one or two others present. You may opt to express your concerns to your boss's superior. Since a narcissistic boss will probably become threatened and angry, be prepared. If the boss could take criticism humbly, he or she wouldn't be a narcissist!
- Maintain good personal boundaries. In response to your boundary setting, the narcissist may attempt to rewrite history or convince you that what you thought happened or what you saw happen, did not really happen, and thus there is no need

for you to set a boundary in the first place. Do not back down. Do check in with others to confirm your reading of the situation (Prov. 21:11).

- Recognize that you will not be able to change a narcissist. Professional help from an experienced therapist is nearly always necessary if a narcissist is to make substantial changes.
- Develop other friendships. Because narcissists can trigger all sorts of feelings of frustration, don't expect to have all of your needs met in a relationship with a narcissist. Develop friendships with those you enjoy who can help you keep perspective when things get tough. Get involved in your church or a social or recreational group, or find other ways of developing a few good friends (I Thess. 5:11).
- Realize that although the narcissist may agree to change the dynamics of your relationship, maybe to "get you off his (or her) back," the change will usually be temporary. A narcissist will usually revert back to what he or she considers "normal." In the end, the only healthy way to live with a narcissist is to become more of your own person and to create a space between you and the narcissist from which you both can live.
- Develop a deep and meaningful relationship with the Lord. We all need great human friends, but centering your life on God and studying scripture, especially about your uniqueness and identity in Christ, can provide you with wonderful resources and give you meaningful outlets to use your gifts in helping others (Eph. 1:3-10).
- If your spouse is a narcissist, consider getting a job if you don't already have one. You need a place and some space to have a life beyond the narcissist's shadow.
- If you have trouble with any of these guidelines, you may need more personalized assistance from a competent professional counselor.

Psychotherapy

There is good news and bad news about the effectiveness of counseling for narcissistic personalities. First, the bad news. Getting the narcissist to agree to see a therapist is usually difficult. Motivating that person to continue the counseling process to the end is even harder. This is partly due to the narcissist's vulnerable self-esteem, which makes him or her inordinately sensitive to any hint of criticism from anyone, including a counselor. Moreover, narcissists have a long-standing pattern of concealing their imperfections and keeping their defects hidden. Therapy threatens to uncover those hidden imperfections.

Narcissistic personalities typically seek treatment only when their sense of specialness or invincibility is threatened by a major life crisis such as a mid-life crisis, illness, job loss, impending divorce, or depression. Now for the good news. If the narcissist is willing to examine and confront his or her dysfunctional patterns, counseling can be quite effective. Individual psychotherapy is generally the most effective treatment. A trained psychotherapist can gradually explore the narcissist's underlying fears of abandonment, inferiority, and shame in a safe environment.

If a narcissist comes to know Christ as personal Savior, or has a renewed spiritual commitment as a Christian, he or she may take significant strides toward facing the hurts beneath his or her self-centered lifestyle. A personal relationship with God can begin to impact the egocentric, prideful person in two ways.

First, the act of accepting Christ as one's personal Savior is an act of humility. Each of us must acknowledge our needs and failures in order to seek God's forgiveness and healing. Second, knowing that God understands, loves, and accepts us with all of our faults has the potential to lessen our need to seek constant affirmation from others.

You should know, however, that change will typically take a long period of time. The relational patterns of the narcissistic personality were learned over many years and are not easily dismantled and replaced, even for the Christian. The dismantling process can be painful for narcissists, as well as disquieting to those around them. It will also take a very good therapist who has significant experience counseling narcissistic individuals because they need a somewhat different type of therapy than most people.

Therapists with extensive experience working with narcissistic individuals have learned that it usually doesn't help to confront their pride or arrogance directly. Since narcissists' problems are rooted in early, painful childhood experiences that made them particularly sensitive to any hint of criticism or correction, the therapist will need to spend a great deal of time empathizing with feelings of feeling wounded, misunderstood, or unappreciated. Only as the counselor helps a narcissist become aware of his or her underlying wounds and needs can there be growth. A skilled Christian therapist will help the narcissist realize that God and also the therapist understand his feelings of shame or inferiority, and how disappointed and angry he feels when others don't understand or appreciate him. If the narcissist perseveres with a counselor like this, she can gradually give up her defensive pride, growing to accept herself and others as God intended. Over time, this therapy process can bring about radical life change.

Marital counseling can sometimes be a helpful adjunct to individual counseling. One aspect of successful marital therapy is for the narcissist's spouse to address dependency issues. Very often, spouses have low self-esteem. They married a narcissist because they sensed they needed someone strong and confident, compensating for their poor feelings about themselves.

A marital crisis may arise, however, when the wife of a narcissist, for example, begins to realize that her husband thinks she is supposed to be his extension and that he has taken advantage of her quiet, self-effacing nature. When she learns to express her own needs, establish better boundaries, and challenge her narcissistic husband's long-term patterns of relating, then issues of power and control, independence and dependence, and closeness and distance will likely surface and need to be addressed. Marital therapy can help both spouses address their contributions to unhealthy relational styles.

Family and Group Therapy

Family and group therapy are generally not the best forms of therapy for narcissistic individuals because they so easily feel wounded and misunderstood. In group counseling, narcissists' self-focus and defensiveness can trigger anger and direct confrontations with group members. Narcissistic rage makes it very difficult for them to look at themselves. Because of dynamics like these, family and group counseling is generally neither recommended nor successful until the narcissist has made good progress in individual counseling.

It is also generally not helpful or recommended to refer a pathological narcissist to a small support group or care group that is not led by a trained therapist. In these types of unsupervised groups, the narcissist is likely to monopolize and manipulate the group until everyone quits or the group members force the narcissist out for being arrogant, self-focused, or uncaring.

Medication

Medication alone is not recommended for a person with a narcissistic personality disorder. In conjunction with psychotherapy, however, medication can be helpful if the narcissist is struggling with intense anxiety or depression. Premature use of medication, however, can mask the depression underlying a narcissist's maladaptive character style and eliminate the primary motivation for seeking therapy. Narcissists need to become aware of their internal pain in order to face it and resolve it rather than continue trying to avoid it.

For Further Reading

Among the best books for laypersons who want to understand narcissism is *Why Is It Always About You? Saving Yourself From the Narcissists in Your Life*.³ Although this book is not written from a distinctly Christian perspective, it offers a thoughtful, helpful understanding of the problem of narcissism, its causes, and very practical suggestions for living with a narcissist.

One of the most helpful books on narcissism for professional psychotherapists is *The Narcissistic and Borderline Disorders: An Integrated Developmental Approach*.⁴

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