NARCISSISM

What it is and how to recognize it

By Laura Dawn Lewis

Lucky people avoid ever knowing or being under the influence of a narcissistic personality. Most people discover this personality or behavioral disorder the hard way through the living hell it makes of one's life. Referred to as *Narcissistic Personality Disorder* (NPD) by most in the medical and social fields, the nature of this disorder is difficult to diagnose and to date, impossible to cure.

Narcissism refers to collection of personality/behavior disorders that if you discover it, just walk away. Narcissists cannot love like normal people, but they can sap all the love out of everyone around them and create a living nightmare for all within their reach. For myself, I first discovered the devastation narcissism imparts on the self-esteem of those unlucky enough to find themselves in a relationship with this type of personality. However, I use the term, "relationship" loosely.

One of the by-products of narcissism illustrates itself through the inability to cultivate intimacy on any level but the three most superficial, that of physical, (liking how one looks or moves), aesthetic (attraction to similar tastes) and recreational, (shared activities). The higher levels of intimacy, those which make relationships solid and fulfilling including Intellectual Intimacy, (values, beliefs), Spiritual Intimacy, (morals and dreams), Emotional Intimacy (empathy, cherishing, respect and shared goals), Sexual (Giving and Receiving of Love) and Unconditional Love are unobtainable for this type of personality.

MAY I INTRODUCE MR. NARCISSISM…

My first experience with narcissism came in the shape of a six foot three, gregarious and charming college senior I'll call Sean. Since we were both Marketing Majors and seniors, most of our classes were together; we saw a lot of each other. What I remember most about Sean is that special quality called charisma. A type 'A' personality, charisma oozed from every pour and like myself, he possessed ease with public speaking, persuasion and capturing an audience's attention, qualities I admire.

He was different than most of my other classmates. To begin with, he and I were the same age, in our twenties. Most of the other people were in their thirties and forties as this was night school and we all had real jobs. Soon Sean and I started dating, but I failed to notice the warning signs like the lack of gifts, never doing what I wanted or even asking what I wanted, using alcohol to get me in bed and then ignoring me once he got what he wanted. If something wasn't convenient for him, he couldn't be inconvenienced and he didn't care if it hurt. I should have figured it out when he stood me up for my birthday, but I didn't. I thought I was in love and he made a point of cutting me down

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whenever he could, usually propping himself up at the same time. Narcissists love people like me at the time. My self-esteem with men needed some help and people with low self-esteem will try even harder to please in order to gain their appreciation and validation; this boosts the narcissists ego while further humiliating the enabler, in this case, me. With a narcissist, this is a no-win situation. Narcissists care nothing about other people's needs and even less about assisting to elevate their self-esteem and self-worth. The worse you look, the better they feel. This validates their feelings of superiority.

Everything was about him. What he wanted, what he thought, what he liked, only the thoughts weren't his; they were borrowed from others. He simply regurgitated them as his own and insisting such within a habit of being grandiose and a cocky. If something went wrong, the fault lay elsewhere, never with him. That spring, knowing how much I loved camping, he invited me to go camping…neglecting to tell me he was bringing another girl as well. What followed constituted the longest night of my life as he showered this other girl with attention, continued to put me down and then proceeded to engage in several hours of noisy carnality just ten feet away from my tent. Hearing everything and unable to sleep, I cried that entire night. At daybreak I broke down my tent and left, completely humiliated, yet wiser for the lesson learned. For the next five years, I immersed myself in therapy, self-help and self-improvement motivated by the fact I never wanted to feel that way again. It worked and I never have.

Later, I discovered what Sean's behavior represented the beginning manifestations of narcissism and counted myself lucky I discovered this young. Fortunately since, I've avoided dating or spending time with such people by choice.

Narcissism becomes visible in a person's late teens and early twenties, growing in intensity and cruelty as the narcissist ages. Unfortunately, no long-term treatments exist for narcissism; once it develops few narcissists will admit they have a problem since one of the signs of narcissism is the tendency to play

NARCISSISTIC

PERSONALITY DISORDER

The Diagnostic and Statistics Manual, Rev IV, lists the following as descriptive of Narcissistic Personality Disorder:

1. Has a grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements);
2. Is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, 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. Has a sense of entitlement, i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations;
6. Is interpersonally exploitative, i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends;
7. Lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others;
8. Is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her;
9. Shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes.

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victim and blame everyone else for any ill will, problems and incomplete or substandard work, most won't seek help. They consider themselves perfect.

A famous case of narcissism involves a former housewife, mother and socialite in San Diego, California by the name of Betty Broderick. Today a convicted murderer doing life for killing her ex-husband Dan Broderick and his new wife of six months Linda in the late 1980's, Betty's story illustrates the classic symptoms of narcissism in the movie, "*A Woman Scorned*" and its sequel, "*Her Final Fury*".

In the movie, Betty's marriage begins to fall apart, due predominantly to her overbearing attitude, accusations of infidelity, sense of entitlement and self-perceived victimization and persecution. Rather than addressing the issues, her behavior goes from bizarre, (burning her husband's clothing and throwing a ring across the room because it isn't exactly what she wanted at Christmas) to callous, (dropping her young children off in the middle of the night and leaving them sitting alone outside without supervision or even knowing if her husband is home) and finally violent, (driving her car into her ex's house while her children are home, destroying family pictures and heirlooms and using psychological blackmail on her children for sympathy). Throughout all of this, the harm she's doing to her children remains insignificant to her. How her four children feel, think or the effect her behavior has on them matters not. All that matters is hurting the cause of her perceived persecution, Dan and Linda. Ultimately she sneaks in the house and kills the couple while they sleep. Ironically, apologizing to her two eldest dollars a few hours later by saying, "I hope I didn't ruin your day. You didn't have anything special planned did you?"

Throughout the trial and even from prison, Betty continues to stress her persecution, her grief, her victimization at the hands of her husband and feels no remorse or responsibility for causing their deaths or the impact on her own children stating "There may be two dead bodies, but there are five victims, me and my four children."

SPOTTING NARCISSISM

Seeing narcissism before it finds you can be a task. Self-absorbed and narcissism are not the same thing. Each human possess some trends toward narcissism and we all can be selfish from time-to-time. Empathy is the easiest distinguishing factor between self-absorption and narcissism. Someone who is self-absorbed feels empathy and can show genuine sympathy. Someone who is narcissistic cannot and does not understand the concept. He or she may act sympathetic because this is what is expected and this person is mirroring those around them rather than expressing emotion. But when pressed to discuss, reflect or analyze why he or she has feelings of empathy, a narcissist cannot.

One of the reasons Couples Company and most relationship experts recommend dating, (seeing each other at least twice a week and speaking on the phone nearly everyday…long distance does not count in this recommendation) a full year before marrying comes from a concern over spotting psychological problems, anti-social behavior and sociopaths in the dating pool before you say *I do*. Some problems like

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active drug and alcohol addition, mental or physical abuse and con-artists bubble to the surface during this period. Most people, including narcissists can behave well for 3-to-6 months. Very few can hide who they really are on a day-to-day basis for a full year.

Living a lie takes a tremendous amount of energy and one of the advantages of dealing with narcissists, self worshipping elitists, is they think they are smarter and better than everyone else so they tend to slip up sooner than con-artists or addicts, whom are somewhat paranoid and hyper-vigilant due to the fact they know they are hiding something. Narcissists do not believe they have a problem. Everyone else does, but not them. Second, they are very good at superficial relationships, possessing charm, a sense of excitement about being with them, (remember they are grandiose and attribute a high level of sophistication and elitism to self and often look like the 'person in the know' the person to be with. A little research into their background will tell you if their boasting matches their presented achievements. Narcissists, you'll find are generally smoke and mirrors with little substance). With that said, what types of signs should you be looking for in dates, friends and business associates to discover if you are dealing with a narcissist?

NINE WARNING SIGNS OF NPD

1. Narcissists refrain from introspection, rarely discussing memories, dreams or thoughts of self-analysis

2. Cause and effect are foreign ideas as nothing is ever a narcissist's fault. Personal accountability is an unknown concept.

3. Narcissists are unable to relate the process of how they learned a lesson about themselves or the world at large.

4. Self-improvement rarely enters a narcissist's realm as the narcissist already sees him or herself as perfect, superior and above most others. If efforts are taken, generally it is done for manipulation's purpose: to get something he or she wants. At the same time, they are very good at pointing out everyone else's faults, shortcomings or handicaps.

5. Narcissists do not share thoughts, feelings or dreams of their own. Rather if thoughts are shared, they quote others, rarely thinking for themselves. When asked to elaborate or explain how they came to such a conclusion, unless it's scripted, they cannot. Ask where the opinion came from, few will source this information as to do so takes the spotlight from them and places it on another. If feelings are shared, they'll respond with what is expected and they perceive to be the answer you want to hear based upon behavior they've seen in others. When pressed to elaborate, they cannot.

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6. Narcissists consider themselves superior and never ask for collaboration in problem solving. Rather, they prefer to find someone else to do it and then minimize their contribution, taking the glory or ignore it all together.

7. When asked about their past, narcissists are vague and ambiguous. Childhood friends, siblings and others hold no importance unless they can be used to make the narcissist seem more important than he or she is.

8. Empathy is a foreign language. Narcissists are void of empathy and cannot "put the situation on the other foot to look at it from both sides."

9. People are tools to narcissists, not human beings. A narcissist sees no problem with using people to attain his objectives and does not care if he destroys others in the process because his needs, objectives or agenda are the only thing that matters. He is superior and everyone else is here to serve him, the legend in his own mind. The God complex illustrates why physical contact rather than long-distance relationships are needed. This type of behavior surfaces through interaction with others, specifically family and friends. If you are not there, you won't see it.

So what can you do if you find yourself involved with a narcissistic personality? If dating and not married or employed in a situation where you are required to work with someone like this in close cooperation, run, leave and do whatever you can to limit contact and distance yourself from this person. You cannot fix a narcissist and the nature of their disorder prevents them from fixing themselves. The emotional cost to you is not worth. A narcissist cannot love you and cannot receive love for love's sake. They think differently than you and me. Stay with a narcissist and you will spend the rest of your life, unfulfilled, snatching scraps of attention and rationalizing while the rest of your energy squanders setting right the escalating damage the narcissist leaves in his/her wake.

If married and you've had children with this person, once you've determined you are dealing with a narcissistic personality disorder, your primary responsibility is the children. The cost to them and their self-esteem on a daily basis can produce issues that last a lifetime. If divorce isn't an option, counseling is a must. The children need to learn how to deal with this disorder without undermining their self-worth. Parental approval and recognition means a lot to children and the withholding of it or attaching conditions to it causes extreme confusion and angst. Children need to learn that though they express love, this person is sick and cannot, but this is no reflection on the quality of their love or being. Children brought up by a narcissistic parent often find themselves chasing poor relationships because this is the only definition of love they know, that which is given and never returned. As the healthy parent, you have the ability to prevent a lifetime of heartache once you realize this is the cause.

By far, the best way to deal with persons with NPD is not to deal with them. If avoidance is not possible, limiting exposure is essential for your health, sanity and the health and sanity of those around you.

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