

Narcissism

Counselor's Corner

By Matt Shollenberger, Ph.D.

Narcissism is a popular word used to label a person whom is self centered. There is some accuracy to this definition. In Greek mythology, Narcissus was a very handsome young man who was in love with his own looks and believed he was just as beautiful as the gods. His selfishness offended the gods, and as a punishment, he was subjected to stare at his own reflection in a pond until he withered away and died. And so the flower narcissus that tends to grow on the edge of ponds was named after him.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is not a myth, it is a serious medical problem that affects only 1% of the population. The most important feature of NPD is *grandiosity*, which is an exaggerated sense of self importance. A person with NPD will exaggerate or simply lie about their achievements and talents, and expect to be *recognized as exceptional* without any hard evidence of experience or training. People with NPD also tend to be obsessed with fantasies of wealth, power, success, love, and intelligence, but rarely follow through with the sacrifices it takes to achieve these qualities. People with NPD have a sense of *entitlement*, believing they are special and deserving of high status treatment. They need excessive *admiration*, and tend to hook up with others only when they perceive self gain from the relationship.

Simply put, Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is a learned behavior, usually formed out of a childhood with an emotionally neglectful parent(s). People with NPD tend to be very distrustful, although they may initially come across as open and friendly. They lack understanding of their own negative behaviors, even when numerous people tell them repeatedly that they have problems. Due to this, they rarely enter therapy and when they do, therapy tends to be a very lengthy, emotional process. Neither prescription medications, nor supplements have proven to be helpful. Popular, safe medications such as SSRI's (antidepressants) tend to make grandiosity worse in people with NPD.

The word "narcissism" comes from the Greek word, *narke*, which means numb. This is symbolic of people with Narcissistic Personality Disorder because they are numb to empathy; they cannot feel for others, although they sometimes can put on a convincing act that they really care. But don't get wrong ideas; people with NPD are not psychotic, they are rarely a physical threat, and they typically do not commit blatant crimes. The worst crimes they tend to repeatedly commit are those of using others

for personal gain and never taking responsibility for the pain they cause in relationships. People might think after reading this article that their child/children show narcissistic tendencies and wonder if their children may have NPD. It is important to note that it is a normal part of a child's development to have some of these tendencies. However, if these tendencies carryover to adulthood and negatively impact the way they interact with others, they may be found to have NPD. As a result, NPD is considered to be an adult disorder, not a disorder assigned to children.

Many people believe Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is most prevalent among Hollywood stars. I never personally or professionally knew any stars, but I had recently worked for a Hollywood production company and certainly met people with narcissistic tendencies. I am unsure if people with narcissistic traits are attracted to Hollywood life, or life as a movie star creates some narcissistic traits. Narcissistic tendencies were certainly prevalent when Matt Lauer interviewed Tom Cruise in June of 2005. This was an embarrassing moment when Cruise stated, "Matt, you don't even---you're glib... You don't even know the history of psychiatry, I do." Cruise attempted to portray himself as an expert in psychiatry (grandiosity), and seemingly expected to be recognized as an exceptional authority in this field, despite the fact that he holds no degree beyond a high school diploma. A few times I've had to remind clients that fame does not make one an expert, particularly in fields where one is not trained. Movie stars are trained to act; they exist for our entertainment.

The Greek mythological figure Narcissus, was doomed by the gods to live a short life in love with him self. But unlike Narcissus, a child brought up in an emotionally neglectful household does not have to have their fate sealed in adult life. Because narcissism is learned, it can be unlearned.

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