

NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY DISORDER AND SUICIDE

Leo Sher

James J. Peters Veterans' Administration Medical Center and Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai,
New York, NY, USA

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The American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-V) suggests that the essential characteristic of narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) is a persistent pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy that begins by early adulthood and is present in a variety of circumstances (American Psychiatric Association 2013). DSM-V also suggests that in individuals with NPD feelings of shame or humiliation and the attendant self-criticism may be associated with social withdrawal, depressed mood, and persistent depressive disorder (dysthymia) or major depressive disorder. In contrast, sustained periods of grandiosity may be associated with a hypomanic mood.

There is a popular belief that "Narcissists rarely commit suicide. When a Narcissist threatens to do this, it's generally as a means of manipulation" (Saeed 2014). However, studies suggest that NPD is associated with suicidal behavior (Stone 1989, Links et al. 2003, Heisel et al. 2007). For example, a 15-year follow up study of patients admitted to a psychiatric hospital in New York showed that patients with NPD or narcissistic traits were significantly more likely to die from suicide compared to individuals without NPD or narcissistic traits (Stone 1989). Another study found that depressed older adults with narcissistic personalities were at increased suicide risk (Heisel et al. 2007). It has been observed that patients with NPD can be at elevated suicide risk not only during periods when they are depressed but also during periods when they are not suffering from depression (Ronningstam & Maltzberger 1998). Suicidal behavior in individuals with NPD has been explained by the fact that their self-esteem is fragile and suicide attempt may be a response to a perceived narcissistic injury (Perry 1990). It has been suggested that suicidal behavior in individuals with NPD can be a) an attempt to increase self-esteem via a sense of mastery; b) an attempt to defend themselves against expected narcissistic threats; c) a revengeful action against narcissistic damage; d) a false assumption

of indestructibility (immortality?); and e) desire to abolish an imperfect self (Ronningstam & Maltzberger 1998). It is important to note that NPD is frequently comorbid with other personality disorders such as borderline personality disorder. Comorbid personality disorders may substantially contribute to suicidality observed in individuals with NPD.

The prevalence of NPD in the general population is not high. However, many people have narcissistic personality features. Therefore, studies of suicidal behavior in persons with NPD or narcissistic traits may be important for suicide prevention efforts.

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Correspondence:

Leo Sher, MD

James J. Peters Veterans', Administration Medical Center
130 West Kingsbridge Road, Bronx, New York 10468, USA
E-mail: Leo.Sher@mssm.edu