



## **What is Narcissistic Personality Disorder**

Everyone believes they understand the meaning of the term “narcissist,” as it is certainly one that is applied widely to everyone from celebrities to politicians. Although psychology’s understanding of what constitutes a narcissist is reasonably well-established, there is still considerable controversy regarding its basic underlying dimensions. You may already know about the difference between a “grandiose” and “vulnerable” narcissist, a distinction based on the idea that some people with narcissistic qualities seem to have a truly inflated sense of self (the grandiose) but others have deep-seated insecurities about their true self-worth (the vulnerable). Indeed, there’s also the view that grandiosity is just a cover for those deep-seated insecurities.

People in relationships with others who suffer from Narcissistic Personality Disorder typically find it difficult to get along with them; being in a relationship with a narcissist is emotionally draining and can impact your mental health. The reasons for such difficulty are not abundantly clear from psychological diagnosis alone, which is based on a cluster of symptoms that define the disorder.

The American Psychiatric Association *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM 5) defines NPD as “a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy”. The patient with NPD has a grandiose sense of self-importance manifested in terms of unreasonable

expectations such as being recognized as superior or special; receiving favorable treatment, and automatic compliance. Fantasies, in turn, revolve around “unlimited success, power brilliance, beauty or ideal love”

Narcissistic personality disorder includes symptoms such as poor self identity, inability to appreciate others, entitlement, lack of authenticity, need for control, intolerance of the views/opinions of others, emotional detachment, grandiosity, lack of awareness or concern regarding the impact of their behavior, minimal emotional reciprocity, and a desperate need for the approval and positive attention of others.

Not everyone with pathological narcissism or narcissistic personality disorder will have the same presentation of the condition. There is heterogeneity, of course, because people are complex. There are differing levels of intensity and dimensions. For example, some with pathological narcissism are shy and avoidant (vulnerable), while others are primarily outgoing and overtly boastful (grandiose).

## **Cluster B Personality Disorders**

Narcissistic personality disorder falls under the category of Cluster B Personality Disorders within the DSM-5. The conditions under this grouping include Borderline Personality, Narcissistic Personality, Histrionic Personality, and Antisocial Personality. Psychopathy, a condition marked by a lack of conscience, incapacity to bond, aggression, and interpersonal violations, is a subgroup within Antisocial Personality Disorder.

Although the disorders are distinct and reflect different categories of symptoms, it would not be unusual for someone to have symptoms of more than one Cluster B condition. As many psychologists and psychiatrists will attest, the personality profile of our patients does not always fit into a nice little box. There can be traits of other personality disorders that accompany the main condition. Take, for example, the combination of narcissistic and antisocial personality in describing **malignant narcissism**.

## **Self-Enhancement**

*"I am so smart! My IQ is above 140."*

Self-enhancement is a prominent feature of narcissistic personality disorder, regardless of the dimension. They view themselves in an overly positive light and believe they are unique and superior to others. In a meta-analysis review, researchers Grijalva and Zhang explored the insight of individuals with narcissistic personality disorder. The studies supported that people high in

narcissism tend to over-estimate or exaggerate their abilities, status (for example, intelligence), and looks, more than could be supported by reality.

They believe they are better than other people, and usually the variables that are self-enhanced are related to "power and status" (agency). Even if evidence to the contrary is presented, such as the results of an IQ test. Often that reality will be challenged, rather than accepted. They might become extremely defensive and verbally attack or degrade the examiner who gave the test or the test itself ("What a stupid test!"). Indisputable evidence of their inaccurate, overly inflated self-assessment does not change the self-view of someone high in narcissism.

In a 2013 publication, using neuroimaging, researchers from the University of Germany examined the brain patterns of individuals with narcissistic personality disorder. They yielded similar findings to the afore mentioned study. The group that met criteria for the condition demonstrated smaller gray matter volume within areas of the brain associated with "emotional empathy" (the anterior insula and the fronto-paralimbic areas).

Neuroscience studies of this nature lend considerable evidence that people with pathological narcissism have limited capacity to interact pro-socially with society. Faulty brain functions are a significant hindrance.

### **Dimensions of Narcissistic Personality Disorder**

- **Grandiose.** The descriptors often offered for this pattern of narcissism are extroversion, overt attention seeking, and grandiosity.
- **Vulnerable.** This reflects a neurotic style whereby an individual demonstrates a quieter/introverted presentation, anxiety, mood problems, avoidance, and modesty.

### **Malignant Narcissism**

I want to explore with you the darker side of narcissistic personality disorder, where aggression, antisocial behaviors, and suspiciousness are as prominent as their poor sense of self, fragility, and egocentricity.

A person with malignant narcissism has the potential to destroy families, communities, nations, and work environments. This condition reflects a hybrid or blending of narcissistic and antisocial personality disorders. Psychologist Eric Fromm termed the disorder in 1964. Psychoanalyst Otto Kernberg later delineated the symptoms of the condition and presented it as an intermediary between narcissistic and antisocial personality disorders.

## Why is the behavior of malignant narcissism often considered dangerous?

Individuals with this profile can form connections with others. However, they process information in ways that can hurt society in general, but also the people who love or depend on them. Family, co-workers, employees, and others in their lives often have to walk on eggshells to appease a fragile ego and minimize the occurrence of their unstable, impulsive, or aggressive behaviors.

They lash out or humiliate others for infractions of even the most frivolous nature (for example, you gave an opinion that differed from theirs; you demonstrated confidence, and it made them look bad; you told a joke that involved poking fun at them).

For some, their grandiosity and protection of their fragile "true self" can be at such extreme levels that they will **lie** and give the impression that simply because they say it, that makes it reality. Many will become angered if their lies are challenged with truth or facts. Of course, this can create problems for the people close to them, as this pattern of behavior can easily veer into gaslighting.

Malignant narcissism is a blend of two disorders that pose problems interpersonally for their victims — narcissistic and antisocial personality disorders. It is not uncommon for others to feel anxious, intimidated by, and fearful of people with this condition. The combination of poor empathy coupled with aggression, hypersensitivity, and suspiciousness can bring pain to others.

Those who interact with malignant narcissists often consider them jealous, petty, thin-skinned, punitive, hateful, cunning, and angry. Given their shallowness, they are not regulated emotionally and have beliefs that swing from one extreme to the next.

Their decisions can hurt others, because they rank relationships and people based on superficial standards and categories. They want to land on top, even when pretending to be altruistic or engaging in an activity that should not be "all about them." They often view the world through a **primitive binary lens** (for example, winner/loser; smart/dumb; rich/poor; pretty/ugly; black/white) — all the while sustaining the belief that they are superior. This is likely associated with problems processing emotional information, which reflects faulty neurobiology.