

## **Narcissistic Personality Disorder**

### **What is Narcissistic Personality Disorder?**

Narcissism is a spectrum disorder. We all have a degree of narcissism and that's healthy, but the further up the spectrum we go the more problems are encountered. And at the top end is full-blown Narcissistic Personality Disorder or NPD which includes:

- a significant degree of empathy impairment
- a grandiosity – hidden or otherwise, being preoccupied with fantasies about success, power and beauty
- having a sense of entitlement and behaving in an arrogant or haughty manner
- exploitation
- being envious of others and believing they envy you

NPD is part of the Cluster B group of personality disorders that are characterised by the person tending to be manipulative and self-focused

The disorder is a clinical diagnosis and reckoned to be present in one per cent of the UK population. But narcissism is thought by many leading authorities to be on the increase, and people with strongly narcissistic traits are not a rarity.

### **How are narcissists formed?**

There's no general agreement on how narcissism originates – it's believed to be a mix of biological, genetic, social and psychological factors.

One theory is that, subjected to a parent's anger or shaming behaviour, a young child goes into a form of trauma-like shock. They rationalise this by deciding they're a bad person who deserved it and in the process 'split' themselves into two parts – a 'good child' and 'bad child'. They 'disown' the feelings of the 'bad child' by repressing them in the subconscious and present only the 'good child' to survive their environment.

The 'good child' is the mask the narcissist presents to the world and that false self has an excessive need to for attention, thought to be due to a lack of 'mirroring' by the parent or caregiver.

Attention or 'supply' as it's known is something the narcissist needs like oxygen to bolster their self-identity and self-esteem, and you might find in talking to a narcissist that they're not really listening to what you're saying because all they're soaking up is the fact that you are looking at them and interacting with them, thus giving them fuel.

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So the pathology of narcissists is that they typically operate with a 'split' consciousness as a result of that early experience, and one of the biggest signs of a narcissist is that they have an absolute drive to triangulate (see website). So for example as adults with their own children they will have a 'golden child' who is in receipt of all their 'good child' feelings and aspirations, and a scapegoat, who is the recipient of all their 'bad child' projections that they deny. There can also be an invisible child by the way in that mix, and you can have only children as scapegoats. In offices a narcissistic manager will have favoured employees and those selected to be in receipt of their 'bad child' projections. In this way, chaos reigns and a toxic workplace results in high levels of employee sickness and general absenteeism as well as high-churn.

### **Several types of narcissist**

There are several types of narcissists. The most well-known are the grandiose narcissists such as Joan Crawford, whose daughter wrote about her alleged behaviour in the book *Mommie Dearest*

There are also somatic narcissists – everything is about the body; cerebral narcissists – the cold as a computer type who loves to have others admire their intelligence; a newish definition the 'communal narcissist' who brags about their good works for charity for example, but only really cherish their status as givers and they believe this makes them better than the rest of humanity.

And last but not least the covert or vulnerable narcissist. With a covert the usual traits of a narcissist are there but manifest at a far more subtle level. So for example you might have experienced the person liking a particular item of clothing and going out the very next day and buying it, or picking up their mobile to call a friend at the same time as you are talking to them about an upsetting event. That empathy impairment, envy and grandiosity is there in coverts, but mostly at a less glamorous, more workaday level, but that doesn't mean they are any the less injurious to those around them.

Importantly, coverts' personality structure is even more fragile than the other types of narcissist, and they have a constant need to project an idealised image of the person they would like to be but know they aren't.

They literally need to convince themselves and others that they are this ideal person to receive supply, so they can appear to be incredibly thoughtful, helpful and generous. But you tend to see the words and behaviours don't match.

As part of that more fragile personality construct, for example, at a party held at home, a grandiose narcissist would love to entertain and be the centre of attention, but a covert will disappear into the kitchen while the guests are in the lounge, because they don't have the confidence to entertain those who might not be in their inner circle, but can't stand not being the centre of attention.

Coverts are the true mask wearers who will tailor themselves to your core needs accordingly. They are the wolf in sheep's clothing, the charmer whose mask slips most often behind closed doors and with the person they're targeting.

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Their (fake) charm and ability to be attentive means they tend to attract huge loyalty and feelings of protectiveness, and they're geniuses at playing the victim when it suits. But even though they tend to have so many people around them their deprivation schema means they always feel unattended to.

Coverts can be very consistent parents for example, so to the outside it looks good. But they're only good at 'doing' parenting. Unlike a grandiose, whose behaviour would be so overt that the scapegoat would have a higher chance of support in the family, coverts are so adept at only presenting the 'good child' that any story of their nastiness would seem incomprehensible, so the scapegoated child of a covert is in a much more difficult situation. And added to that some of those bad child projections are out of the narcissist's conscious awareness, making the situation even more complicated. You can imagine this scenario playing itself out in the office environment too, and very often people who have been scapegoated in their own family make ideal victims for the office narcissist.

Having a covert in the family is like witnessing an earthquake but not knowing where the epicentre is. But the evidence tends to be in the fact the family is dysfunctional – the adult children aren't living lives at their full potential, siblings are out of touch and there are misunderstandings, resentments and hostilities that are too toxic to heal and often become inter-generational.

So the covert manages to carry out this laser targeted abuse of the scapegoat at the same time as manipulating the enabler and golden child (or gullible colleagues) into believing the scapegoat really is the problem, and so it becomes the norm for them to be judged, gossiped about, unsupported physically and mentally, falsely accused and marginalised.

Amazingly, many of those inside the family (or office) don't see a problem with what's going on. Narcissists tend to partner with 'enablers' to the disorder who are known for almost blindly supporting them.

One of the most insidious aspects of being parented by a covert or working with them, is that they will forcefully state their version events, especially changing the facts around abusive events, literally with the ability to persuade themselves they're telling the truth because they cannot tolerate situations that might reveal their 'bad child' part.

When they might be forced to confront their failures bad deeds and general negligence, or feel out of their depth emotionally, the gaslighting kicks in (see website). Gaslighting is a defense mechanism known as projective identification. The narcissist's thinking becomes disrupted and they can start to feel like they're not holding it together – at those times they're likely to say to the target for example, 'You need to be sectioned' or 'you have a problem, you should get yourself checked out'.

Narcissists cannot be confronted or criticised. They experience that as a kind of existential threat to their core and will go into what's known as narcissistic rage. This rage will play itself out in open and no so open ways in order for the narcissist to regain feelings of superiority and control. The scapegoat might not know the result of that rage until years later, because coverts especially, are tremendous grudge bearers and seek long-term revenge.

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Narcissists can appear to be incredibly rational in their summing up of events but they are just crudely reductionist. They will never let the scapegoat forget past mistakes, everything is stored up and designed to keep the person in that small and painful place.

They never genuinely apologise. That early abuse means they tell themselves they will never allow themselves to be that vulnerable again, so a lack of apologising is part of that.

But the picture isn't black and white obviously. Narcissistic parents, partners and colleagues can have phases where they're really pleasant, which serves to keep the victim maintaining a sense of hope. But that hope would be folly. Narcissism at the extreme end is not curable. There will always be more shocks and hurts in store. The work to be done is on oneself.