

All Eyes on Me: Inside Narcissism

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Key points:

- History
- Symptoms
- Causes
- Experiences
- Genetics
- Cultural and Environmental Factors
- Biological Factors
- Subtypes
- Treatment
- Diagnosis

Introduction

A mental disorder characterized by excessive self-importance, need for admiration and lack of empathy.¹

History

In Greek mythology Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection in still water; unable to tear himself away from it, he died of languor. Havelock Ellis first invoked this myth to illustrate a psychological state in reporting a case of male autoeroticism. In commenting on Ellis' work, Nacker first used the term "narcissus." The term "narcissistic" was first used by Freud in a 1910 footnote to "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality". Otto Rank wrote the first psychoanalytic paper on narcissism in 1911, and Freud's paper "On Narcissism" was published in 1914.²

Symptoms

1. Craving for attention
2. Self-centeredness
3. Self-importance
4. No respect for others' opinions
5. Taking advantage of others
6. Envy others

7. No empathy

8. Extreme self-interest³

Causes

There is no single cause of narcissistic personality disorder, but a combination of genetics, early life experiences, and cultural and environmental factors are likely to play a role in someone's development of the condition.⁴

Subtypes

1. Grandiose narcissism is what most people may think of as narcissism. People with grandiose narcissism may be more extraverted, have low levels of neuroticism, and openly express feelings of superiority.
2. Vulnerable narcissism shares the same basic traits of NPD, but may involve more hidden thoughts and behaviors. Those with vulnerable narcissism tend to have higher levels of neuroticism and need more reassurance

Early Life Experience

Research suggests that childhood experiences can contribute to the development of NPD, including:

1. Not receiving emotional support or validation as a child.
2. Rejection or criticism from a loved one.
3. Experiences of abuse or neglect
4. Excessive praise
5. A lack of discipline and boundaries in childhood
6. Over-protective parenting
7. Traumatic events ⁵

Genetics

Narcissism can run in families, which suggests that genetics might play a role in the development of NPD. Some research published in the American Journal of Psychiatry has found evidence of 94 genes that can increase your risk of NPD and other psychiatric disorders. Experts currently believe that inheriting a specific gene from one or both of your parents' grandiosity and entitlement. However, having a family history of the disorder does not mean you will develop narcissism— but, you may be at an increased risk of experiencing symptoms. ⁶

Treatment

One moderator of the longitudinal course of NPD is treatment. Can treatment lead to significant change, and what seem to work?

Many people with NPD do not think there is anything wrong with them. They may not seek treatment, or if

they do it's often for another condition like depression or substance use. If you do see a mental health professional, he or she will ask you about your symptoms, including their severity and duration. They will also likely conduct a psychiatric interview to understand more about your personality, coping skills, and interpersonal relationships. Psychotherapy or pharmacotherapy has been tested empirically in randomized controlled trials. Treatments for patients with this disorder are challenging. When samples of patients with the disorder have been followed, categorical diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder has been associated with a 63%–64% drop-out rate from psychotherapy, and the presence of elevated dimensional measures of pathological narcissism predicted an increased drop-out rate. ⁷

Diagnosis

Making a diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder can be challenging because, more often than not, NPD is present along with other mental health disorders such as

1. depression
2. anxiety
3. bipolar disorder
4. other personality disorders such as antisocial personality disorder, borderline personality disorder, histrionic personality disorder or schizotypal personality disorder. ⁷

consequences, coping mechanisms, and therapeutic approaches. *EC Psychol Psychiatry*. 2024;13:1-21.

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