

Narcissism; Self Love Disordered By Dvora Levy, LCSW

What are we talking about when we speak of narcissism? Narcissistic traits lie on a spectrum. At one end is what I call the healthy narcissist. Toward the middle, we encounter the benign narcissist. At the other end of the spectrum is the malignant narcissist, aka clinical narcissist or one with narcissistic personality disorder, NPD. It is the malignant narcissist we are referring to when we speak of narcissistic abuse. If you are married to someone you suspect of having NPD, it may be helpful for you to better understand this disorder and recognize the very predictable forms of abuse you may be enduring. Finding the right help and discovering and then building up your healthy “self” can be a life changer. For others in the community, my hope is that we learn to recognize NPD and provide emotional support to victims of narcissistic abuse.

We all have narcissistic parts to us. You read that right. That is because there is something called healthy narcissism. It’s the part of us that makes us write an article thinking others will find it useful, get up on a stage to address a crowd or walk into the boss’s office to request a raise. It is the part of us that knows we are worthwhile and therefore have the ability to be confident and assertive in the world. We can embrace our healthy narcissist parts, as they reflect healthy self-love.

Toward the middle of the spectrum lies the benign narcissist. I imagine you too have encountered individuals who like to talk about themselves ... a lot. And when you share something with them, they bring the conversation back to themselves.

You: I wasn’t feeling well this morning.

The narcissist: There are many mornings I wake up and don’t feel well. Just yesterday ...

You: I am planning a vacation this winter.

The narcissist: I took a vacation last year, and I went to ...

What’s unique about this type of narcissist is that they don’t engage you in the conversation. A healthy conversation is akin to a ping-pong game, where the ball is meant to go back and forth; in cases like this, the narcissist keeps the “ball,” triggering a disconnect and often a desire in the listener to move on and converse with someone else. What we see at this point on the narcissist spectrum is a decline in empathy for and awareness of others. Their relationships lack depth, but as people, they tend to look to do good and receive approval rather than be abusive.

At the other end of the narcissism spectrum is the malignant narcissist. Those with NPD can be most hurtful to others. They are often proud and shameless; they are not bound emotionally by the needs and wishes of others. They maintain their sense of self-importance by diminishing, debasing and degrading others. They consider themselves superior, even above the law. These symptoms are rooted in an inability to experience empathy. In the absence of empathy, they often exploit others and see others as existing to meet their needs or perhaps not existing at all.

If you are the partner of a malignant narcissist, you are suffering the kind of abuse that eats at the very core of your sense of self. Nothing you do is correct; your narcissist always knows better what is good for you. Your needs are irrelevant and inconvenient, your memories are twisted and inaccurate, and everything is your fault. In the fight to maintain a good feeling about him- or herself, the narcissist will look at you much like an object, as if to say, “You are here to make me feel whole, and you do that by being an extension of me. I’ll determine what you do, whom you do it with and when you do it.” Relationships with malignant narcissists are emotionally abusive, and you may feel you are going crazy.

Adding to the feeling of “going crazy” is that malignant narcissists can be quite charismatic and successful. Many of them attain positions of power and respect. There is often a chasm between their public and private personae, leaving their partners once again doubting their reality and feeling repressed anger and shame. Marital angst often remains private, and this keeps partners isolated and miserable.

It is difficult for those experiencing narcissistic abuse to make the assertive move to get psychological help. They often fluctuate between feeling hopeless and, during calm spells, thinking that everything really is fine. Prioritizing self-care is an oxymoron for someone whose sense of self has been beaten down. And then there is the narcissist’s response. Narcissists are quite unsupportive when their partners do seek help, often making disparaging comments like “Oh, so is that your therapist talking?” or “It appears that your therapist only wants your money.” There is a similar message regarding friends and family—“They’re dysfunctional, using you, a bad influence on you,” all leading to isolating their partners from support and connections with others.

We are all born worthwhile and worthy of love and respect. I know you are strong. You’ve had to be. The best response for the partners of someone with NPD is to develop and support him- or herself every which way possible and to respond to their partners with strong and clear personal boundaries. How to do that? Well, that’s the work...

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