

Narcissistic personality disorder (NPD)

The word narcissism gets tossed around a lot in our selfie-obsessed, celebrity-driven culture, often to describe someone who seems excessively vain or full of themselves. But in psychological terms, narcissism doesn't mean self-love—at least not of a genuine sort. It's more accurate to say that people with narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) are in love with an idealized, grandiose image of themselves. And they're in love with this inflated self-image precisely because it allows them to avoid deep feelings of insecurity. But propping up their delusions of grandeur takes a lot of work—and that's where the dysfunctional attitudes and behaviors come in.

Narcissistic personality disorder involves a pattern of self-centered, arrogant thinking and behavior, a lack of empathy and consideration for other people, and an excessive need for admiration. Others often describe people with NPD as cocky, manipulative, selfish, patronizing, and demanding. This way of thinking and behaving surfaces in every area of the narcissist's life: from work and friendships to family and love relationships.

People with narcissistic personality disorder are extremely resistant to changing their behavior, even when it's causing them problems. Their tendency is to turn the blame on to others. What's more, they are extremely sensitive and react badly to even the slightest criticisms, disagreements, or perceived slights, which they view as personal attacks. For the people in the narcissist's life, it's often easier just to go along with their demands to avoid the coldness and rages. However, by understanding more about narcissistic personality disorder, you can spot the narcissists in your life, protect yourself from their power plays, and establish healthier boundaries.

Signs and symptoms of narcissistic personality disorder

Grandiose sense of self-importance

Grandiosity is the defining characteristic of narcissism. More than just arrogance or vanity, grandiosity is an unrealistic sense of superiority. Narcissists believe they are unique or “special” and can only be understood by other special people. What's more, they are too good for anything average or ordinary. They only want to associate and be associated with other high-status people, places, and things.

Narcissists also believe that they're better than everyone else and expect recognition as such—even when they've done nothing to earn it. They will often exaggerate or outright lie about their achievements and talents. And when they talk about work or relationships, all you'll hear is how much they contribute, how great they are, and how lucky the people in their lives are to have them. They are the undisputed star and everyone else is at best a bit player.

Lives in a fantasy world that supports their delusions of grandeur

Since reality doesn't support their grandiose view of themselves, narcissists live in a fantasy world propped up by distortion, self-deception, and magical thinking. They spin self-glorifying fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, attractiveness, and ideal love that make

them feel special and in control. These fantasies protect them from feelings of inner emptiness and shame, so facts and opinions that contradict them are ignored or rationalized away. Anything that threatens to burst the fantasy bubble is met with extreme defensiveness and even rage, so those around the narcissist learn to tread carefully around their denial of reality.

Needs constant praise and admiration

A narcissist's sense of superiority is like a balloon that gradually loses air without a steady stream of applause and recognition to keep it inflated. The occasional compliment is not enough. Narcissists need constant food for their ego, so they surround themselves with people who are willing to cater to their obsessive craving for affirmation. These relationships are very one-sided. It's all about what the admirer can do for the narcissist, never the other way around. And if there is ever an interruption or diminishment in the admirer's attention and praise, the narcissist treats it as a betrayal.

Sense of entitlement

Because they consider themselves special, narcissists expect favorable treatment as their due. They truly believe that whatever they want, they should get. They also expect the people around them to automatically comply with their every wish and whim. That is their only value. If you don't anticipate and meet their every need, then you're useless. And if you have the nerve to defy their will or "selfishly" ask for something in return, prepare yourself for aggression, outrage, or the cold shoulder.

Exploits others without guilt or shame

Narcissists never develop the ability to identify with the feelings of others—to put themselves in other people's shoes. In other words, they lack empathy. In many ways, they view the people in their lives as objects—there to serve their needs. As a consequence, they don't think twice about taking advantage of others to achieve their own ends. Sometimes this interpersonal exploitation is malicious, but often it is simply oblivious. Narcissists simply don't think about how their behavior affects others. And if you point it out, they still won't truly get it. The only thing they understand is their own needs.

Frequently demeans, intimidates, bullies, or belittles others

Narcissists feel threatened whenever they encounter someone who appears to have something they lack—especially those who are confident and popular. They're also threatened by people who don't kowtow to them or who challenge them in any way. Their defense mechanism is contempt. The only way to neutralize the threat and prop up their own sagging ego is to put those people down. They may do it in a patronizing or dismissive way as if to demonstrate how little the other person means to them. Or they may go on the attack with insults, name-calling, [bullying](#), and threats to force the other person back into line.

9 official criteria for NPD

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5, 2013) indicates that a person with NPD possesses at least five of the following nine criteria, typically without possessing the commensurate personal qualities or accomplishments for which they demand respect and status:

- grandiose sense of self-importance
- preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love
- belief they're special and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people or institutions
- need for excessive admiration
- sense of entitlement
- interpersonally exploitative behavior
- lack of empathy
- envy of others or a belief that others are envious of them
- demonstration of arrogant and haughty behaviors or attitudes