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Is Everyone A Narcissist Now? Or Are We Just Obsessed With The Label?

We unpack the difference between narcissistic traits and having NPD



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Echo and Narcissus by John William Waterhouse, 1903

Jacob Skidmore was 11 when he first had an inkling that he may be a bit different.

“I went to a funeral for a family member, and I remember being annoyed at everybody crying,” he says.

“I thought it was performative, that they were just doing it to get attention. On my way home, I was thinking, ‘What if they were genuine expressions of emotion? And [is it] weird that I didn’t have any reaction?’”

Skidmore admits that there were plenty of “subtle signs” over the course of his adolescence that pointed towards his eventual diagnosis of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) in his early twenties.

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The Brunette in the Mirror by Henry Caro-Delvaile, 1906

“Even [as a child] I was pretty exploitative,” Skidmore, a content creator who goes by the moniker The Nameless Narcissist on social media, says, recalling times he manipulated or took advantage of friends and family for personal gain. One of those was when he convinced his parents to buy a certain Yu-Gi-Oh trading card for his friend’s birthday because Skidmore had already convinced the friend to hand that card over if he ever got one. It was kids’ stuff, but with a hint of nastiness.

“Then it really started to become more pathological and dysfunctional around my early teens,” he says. “That’s when a lot of my aggression started showing; I was more openly domineering. I had this violent incident, and because of some court stuff I was made to go into treatment, and that’s the first time narcissistic traits were brought up.”

Taking its name from the Greek myth of Narcissus, who became so obsessed with his own reflection in a pool that he fell in and drowned, NPD evades a concrete definition. Characterised in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders by a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for adulation and a lack of empathy, those presenting with NPD may also have a tendency to exploit people, as well as the belief of entitlement to special treatment and problems with intimacy and interpersonal relationships.



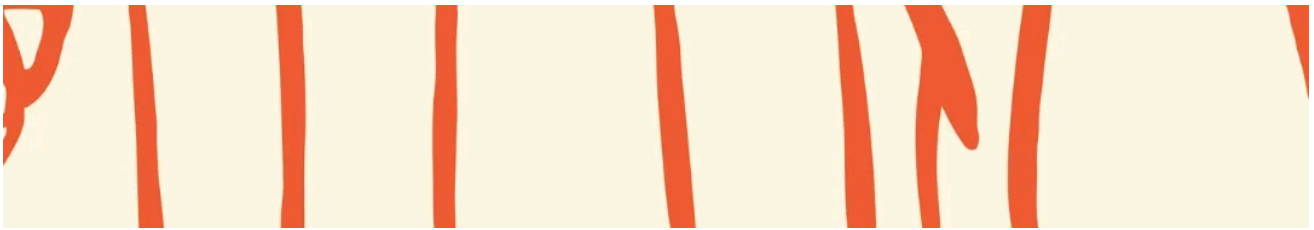


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On the surface, narcissists can appear charming, charismatic and confident, but underneath possess a fragile ego, an insatiable desire for validation and a powerful drive that sees them stepping on others to end up on top. Today, “narcissist” is a buzzword – like “genius” and “toxic” – that’s been overused to the point of losing all meaning. Was your ex really a narcissist, or just self-centred? Is your boss really a narcissist, or just egotistical? The word is thrown around to describe almost anyone who exhibits vain or self-serving tendencies.

The topic abounds online, with countless articles about how to spot narcissism in someone, how to deal with it, how to recover from being on the receiving end of it. On TikTok, the hashtag #narcotokadvice has more than 21,000 posts, with pseudo-experts offering advice including “Words that destroy a narcissist” (e.g. “You’re a failure,” “I’m busy,” “You’re wrong”) and “5 psychological tricks to outsmart a narcissist” (e.g. “Flip their tactics back on them,” “Use the power of silence,” “Stay unpredictable”).

As with many phrases derived from psychology – much like gaslighting or OCD – once the word narcissist made it into the common lexicon, it became an oversimplified term that could be applied to anyone with unpleasant or vain tendencies. However, in its most extreme iteration, NPD is a highly complex and often deeply misunderstood mental illness.

“It can be a double-edged sword,” clinical psychologist Dr Katie Kjelsaas says of the overuse. “On the one hand it raises awareness, hopefully means more people talk about the disorder. But on the other side, it can dilute or confuse understanding of what narcissism is.”

There is a monumental difference between displaying narcissistic traits and actually having NPD. “Regrettably, many confuse the [traits] with the disorder when they come across someone who is brash, abrasive, thuggish, bullying, goal-oriented, defiant, entitled, has a huge level of self-esteem and self-confidence,” explains Dr Sam Vaknin, a professor of clinical psychology at the Commonwealth Institute of Advanced and Professional Studies (CIAPS).

“[Calling someone a narcissist] is a way to humiliate and denigrate and criticise [that person].” When everyone who’s ever hurt you is a narcissist, it means the word loses “its clinical potency and accuracy”, he adds. While it’s estimated that between one and six per cent of people may suffer from NPD, Vaknin is adamant it’s closer to one per cent.



Image: Gone Girl

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There are conflicting stances on the diagnostic criteria, how many people have it, and its root causes. Irony of ironies: it’s nearly impossible for a narcissist to identify their own narcissism, because they are a narcissist. There are also multiple types of narcissism. NPD rarely exists in isolation, which can complicate the diagnosis because it can present differently in people depending on their additional mental health issues. Borderline personality disorder, antisocial personality disorder, mood disorders, substance abuse problems or disordered eating can result in completely opposing iterations of NPD.

“The overt/grandiose narcissist is the life of the party, the centre of attention, demanding adulation and admiration,” explains Vaknin. “The covert narcissist is fragile, vulnerable, shy, avoids the limelight – the opposite. The somatic narcissist is addicted to sex as the way [they] regulate [their] sense of self-worth. [Whereas] the cerebral narcissist is asexual.”

Although the true narcissists may be few and far between, Dr Ramani Durvasula, clinical psychologist and professor specialising in narcissism, posits that the number of people with “enough narcissism that it causes trouble in relationships”, is probably closer to 10 to 12 per cent of the population. For those dealing with true narcissists in close quarters, the collateral damage can be immense, with coercion and abuse rendering life untenable and potentially dangerous. Justine Martin had no idea her mother was a narcissist until she sought

counselling in her mid-forties after a string of abusive relationships.

“I’m sure there are many people out there who don’t realise that having a narcissistic [parent] is going to affect all of your relationships later in life,” says Martin, who is now a speaker and author on the topic of resilience. “You feel that you have to put up with the trauma, the abuse that goes with it, [because] that’s what you experienced as a child as love.” It wasn’t until she ended up with a broken arm from a violent partner, who was later clinically diagnosed with NPD, that she realised she had to end the pattern.

“I’m angry that I ignored the red flags,” she says. “He love-bombed me, which is what they do. There were flowers, declarations ... they put you on a pedestal. There is life after a narcissist, and there is a happy life after a narcissist: without them. Not alongside them.”

“These are horrible people, but not by choice. So there should be no stigma.”

— DR SAM VAKNIN, A PROFESSOR OF CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY AT CIAPS

For those confronted by a narcissist who has an official diagnosis and is in therapy, it turns out a little forgiveness and understanding can go a long way. “Narcissism is perceived as a choice: You can easily not be obnoxious, and yet you choose to be obnoxious. You couldn’t care less. You are contemptuous,” says Vaknin. “[But] narcissism is not anyone’s fault. There are good grounds to assume that narcissism is hereditary, involves brain abnormalities, and is the outcome of childhood trauma and abuse or adverse childhood experiences. These are horrible people, but not by choice. So there should be no stigma.”

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Skidmore says his NPD has been debilitating. He “eventually burned all bridges”, when it came to his relationships. “I’ve always been lonely, and didn’t really feel connected to people emotionally,” he says.

“The question my entire life has been, ‘Why the hell did I do that? That was dumb.’ I’ve never gone out of my way to intentionally [hurt somebody]. Honestly, most of the harm that I do, it’s [due to] not thinking about other people. I’m thinking about myself. I struggle with empathy and guilt and remorse, so I can still be callous, like, ‘Well, I didn’t mean to do it, so why are you so upset?’ Or if I get defensive, I can start lashing out. But there’s not

usually this malice that people attribute to my disorder. I don't enjoy hurting people for the sake of hurting people."

Now, Skidmore creates content to raise awareness of NPD and encourages people who share his traits to seek help. He believes that people with NPD can change, and that there's a lot of misinformation in the media about the condition.

"Take your meds please" reads his Instagram tagline. He says his 35,000 followers tend to fall into two groups: people who are trying to understand NPD because they've been hurt by someone, and people who relate to his content because they've been diagnosed themselves. "We're not monsters; we're mentally ill people who need help," he said in a recent video.



Image: Getty

Think You Have Narcissistic Traits?

So what should you do if you've had someone point out narcissistic traits in yourself? Skidmore offers some sage advice. "Obviously I would recommend therapy," he says. "[But] I want to emphasise that just because you do identify with these traits, it doesn't mean that you're an inherently bad person. It's a personality disorder [and] it fucking sucks. Focus on your maladaptive behaviours that are making you or the people in your life unhappy [or] are causing problems. That's a way more constructive way to view it than doing it through the lens of NPD."

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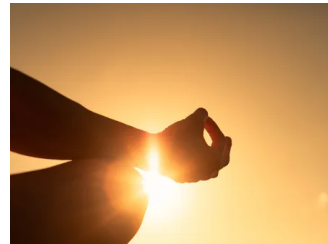


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