

INFORMATION

Responding to Narcissism in a Loved One

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What is narcissism?

Sally gave birth two days before she and Joe were scheduled to move. At Joe's insistence, she and the new baby came immediately from the hospital to their torn-up apartment rather than resting at her parents' house. Joe instructed Sally to watch his four-year-old son from a previous marriage, implying that since she "wouldn't help" him move heavy boxes, she had nothing else to do. Although he refused to buy diapers for the baby — yelling that Sally should ask her parents to do it — he had no problem buying a round of celebration drinks for the guys from work. By the time he returned — quite late — from his party, the movers had gone home. Joe was furious. He threw a box of breakable kitchenware across the room and blamed Sally for letting them leave.

"Selfish" might be the first word that comes to mind when you think of Joe. But the issue goes deeper than that. Joe displays signs of a personality issue called narcissism — a pattern of traits and behaviors characterized by a lack of empathy, lying, grandiosity, self-focus, obsession with self-gratification to the exclusion of others, inflated sense of entitlement and denial of all inappropriate behaviors or circumstances. It's all about the narcissist — they may look like they are sacrificial, but it really is about maintaining an image in front of others. Appearance — physically, socially and spiritually, matters most. Conversations focus on the narcissist to the exclusion of other people.

It is fruitless to try to provide a "reality check" to a narcissist; he is so unequipped to deal with shame (the painful emotion caused by consciousness of guilt, shortcomings or impropriety) that he's actually developed ways to bypass it altogether and never experience shame or humility at all.¹ He may deny, blame, belittle, rage, punish or take on the role of martyr or victim in any given circumstance. It's also common for a narcissistic individual to be arrogant, perfectionistic or controlling to mask the deep-rooted inadequacy and fear of abandonment he (unconsciously) feels. It's impossible for him to admit his faults to others — or even to himself.²

Narcissism can be mild, moderate or severe to the point of revealing sociopathic behaviors. It may also be a temporary response to a trauma or crisis. The most persistent and severe cases of narcissism are diagnosable as Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). A personality disorder can be described as a pattern of abnormal behaviors that the person refuses to change even though it causes disruption in relationships.³ Less than one percent of the general population suffers from NPD, and 50 percent to 75 percent of those that do are male.⁴ There is a continuum, and though a person may have narcissistic traits, he may not fit the actual

diagnosis. Though you may see characteristics described here in a loved one which are important to note, we would encourage you not to attempt to diagnose another person with NPD. Such a diagnosis should only be made by a competent professional. Keep in mind that some who would be diagnosed with NPD may never be, simply because they don't think they need to see a therapist — they don't have a problem!

How does narcissism develop?

Genetic predisposition to narcissism may exist, but it is most commonly understood as a learned behavior.⁵ Researcher Sandy Hotchkiss reports that "how well children learn to manage shame is what will ultimately determine who becomes a narcissist."⁶

To further explain: At an early age, a healthy child begins the process of separation/individuation. In other words, the child starts to distinguish that he is distinct from his caregivers and develops an understanding of his separateness from others — a sense of self. With this comes an awareness of how our behaviors impact the people around us; and the ability to feel empathy toward others is formed.⁷

Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend identify two parenting factors that may develop narcissism. A mother or parent may 1) ignore the bad and 2) fail to limit the grandiose perceptions of the child.⁸ The child develops an unrealistic, over-exaggerated sense of worth that impacts all his future relationships. It should be noted, however, that the first two to three years of life for any child are usually characterized by "narcissistic thinking" (a lack of awareness of others, all-powerfulness, all-knowing attitude, magical thinking, insensitivity and lack of interpersonal boundaries). And, for the normal child, this is a temporary state. However, for the narcissist, these traits endure into adulthood if he is not taught normal consideration/empathy toward others, an accurate assessment of one's mistakes, anger management, boundaries and interpersonal skills.

Ways to Help Prevent Narcissism in a Child

- Avoid indicating that your child is superior and deserves to have every advantage in life.
- Allow your child to experience the natural consequences of his actions, while providing clear feedback and helping him maintain his dignity.
- Listen well and provide a safe, respectful home and community environment.
- Provide age-appropriate information and help in establishing boundaries.
- Encourage your child to develop his potential, thoughtfully evaluate choices and value interpersonal relationships.
- Model unconditional love.
- Affirm children for their consistent positive and Christ-like behaviors.
- Teach your child to submit to God, understand personal wrongdoings and accept forgiveness.

How to Deal With the Behavior of a Narcissistic Loved One

If you recognize patterns in a loved one as you learn about narcissism, you may be wondering what you can and should be doing. First, bear in mind that a person's response to you is not a reflection of you. It simply indicates where they are. Try not to take their criticisms too deeply

or personally. One author has suggested viewing the narcissist as if they have the emotional capability of a two-year-old.⁹ Of course, it's always important to maintain the respect that every human is due; nonetheless, conceptualizing the individual's emotional maturity in these terms can lessen the blow of their remarks or behaviors. What's more, it can prevent you from launching "missiles" of heated retaliation which, in fact, are rarely useful or productive.

When faced with confrontations, these truths and tips may be helpful:

- Know that your authority is Christ, not another human being.
- Be confident in who you are.
- Set boundaries (since the narcissist probably cannot) and allow the resulting consequences and God's work to enlighten the individual.
- Avoid reacting by first recognizing the narcissist's underlying issues.
- Pray, meditate and/or seek counseling.
- Focus on reality, as opposed to the inaccuracies and fantasy world embraced by the narcissist. They will often try to convince you that you are crazy, and their view is the only "accurate" one don't believe it!

Boundaries are how much you will do to and for someone, and how much you will allow them to do to and for you. Let's say that you are being asked by a person, for a second time, to borrow your car. When you allowed this person to borrow it the first time, the car was returned in a trashed condition. Setting a boundary is saying, "No." Boundary setting with a narcissistic person may also require using the "broken record." You have told them the answer is "no," but they try to convince you otherwise. To maintain your boundary you avoid going down any of these "rabbit trails" and continue to repeat in a nonchalant fashion your position of "no." There can be a variety of responses by the narcissist to this approach. Since they do not welcome any level of confrontation, in some there may be the possibility of actual physical violence. Making choices to protect yourself apply here; you need to be safe and domestic violence is never an acceptable behavior. There are times when separation is necessary to protect yourself and your children. However, the narcissist may appear to give up as a means of manipulation. Setting boundaries is our role in getting out of God's way, so He can do His work in the life of another.

In marriage, a wife might ask, "But doesn't the Bible tell me to submit to my husband in all things?" If your spouse were to tell you to rob the local bank, you would likely say "no" because to do so would be sin. Yet the pattern of selfishness and manipulation in a narcissist is sin as well, and to cater to it perpetuates the problem. A wife setting boundaries doesn't mean she has given up on the biblical principle of submission, it does mean that she will respect herself and her husband. Keep in mind, Ephesians 5:21 (the verse that precedes submission in marriage) says, "Submit to *one another* out of reverence for Christ" (emphasis added).

Counseling may be necessary for you and your loved one, particularly if you've endured their abuse so long that you "need" it on some level. At times, the behaviors of a spouse or others in the narcissist's life only serve to enable or reinforce the symptoms. Likewise, those closest can get "sucked into" the narcissist's viewpoint. Though the narcissist will often try to convince the counselor that he is the victim, counseling can help bring reality and more appropriate behaviors to all parties involved.

One positive counseling approach for husbands and wives is "Intensive Couples Therapy." This method allows for concentrated work in a short period of time and can prevent the narcissistic person from avoiding and dropping out of counseling. Individual therapy for each spouse may also be vital in order for healing to occur because each person needs to address their response to emotional pain and to draw near to God for their healing. Typically, counseling for this issue focuses on identifying the roots of narcissistic thinking and behavior as well as recognizing triggering thoughts, emotions or interpersonal interactions that lead to the problem.

If you'd like to speak to a licensed counselor or get a referral to a counselor in your area, we invite you to contact the Counseling department at Focus on the Family. We can be reached at (800) A-FAMILY (232-6459) and welcome your call. We also recommend the following resources, which are available through our online Family Store:

- Boundaries by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend
- Boundaries in Marriage by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend
- Boundaries with Kids by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend

Everyone has a need to feel loved, accepted and to overcome shame. Zephaniah 3:17 reminds us that God is the source of perfect and unconditional love:

The Lord your God is with you, He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing.

Gaining this true sense of worth and security involves having an accurate view of self and allowing the Lord to lift us up:

Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment... (Romans 12:3)

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up. (James 4:10)

Ultimately, the gospel call itself — acknowledging personal sin and gratefully experiencing the freedom of Christ's forgiveness — is the greatest deterrent to allowing dysfunctional self-importance of disabling shame which are characteristic of narcissism.

References:

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- 3. www.halcyon.com/jmashmun/npd/dsm-iv.html
- 4. *Diagnostic and Statistics Manual of Mental Disorders,* IV edition, (1994). Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association.
- 5. Kaplan, Harold I. and Benjamin J. Sadock. (1991). *Synopsis of Psychiatry Behavioral Sciences Clinical Psychiatry* (pp.521-531). Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins.
- 6. Hotchkiss, 35.
- Nida, R. E. and S. Pierce. (2000). "Children's social and emotional development: Applications for family therapy." In C.E. Bailey (Ed.), *Children in Therapy: Using the Family as a Resource*. (pp.428-474). New York: W.W. Norton.
- 8. Cloud, Henry and John Townsend. (1996). The Mom Factor (p. 136). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- 9. www.samvak.tripod.com/faq66.html

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