

Study

Narcissistic Personality Disorder

Diagnostic Criteria 301.81 (F60.81)

A pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by five (or more) of the following:

1. Has a grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements).
2. Is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love.
3. Believes that he or she is “special” and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions).
4. Requires excessive admiration.
5. Has a sense of entitlement (i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations).

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6. Is interpersonally exploitative (i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends).
7. Lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others.
8. Is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her.
9. Shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes.

Diagnostic Features

The essential feature of narcissistic personality disorder is a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy that begins by early adulthood and is present in a variety of contexts.

Individuals with this disorder have a grandiose sense of self-importance (Criterion 1). They routinely overestimate their abilities and inflate their accomplishments, often appearing boastful and pretentious. They may blithely assume that others attribute the same value to their efforts and may be surprised when the praise they expect and feel they deserve is not forthcoming. Often implicit in the inflated judgments of their own accomplishments is an underestimation (devaluation) of the contributions of others. Individuals with narcissistic per-

sonality disorder are often preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love (Criterion 2). They may ruminate about “long overdue” admiration and privilege and compare themselves favorably with famous or privileged people.

Individuals with narcissistic personality disorder believe that they are superior, special, or unique and expect others to recognize them as such (Criterion 3). They may feel

that they can only be understood by, and should only associate with, other people who are special or of high status and may attribute “unique,” “perfect,” or “gifted” qualities to those

with whom they associate. Individuals with this disorder believe that their needs are special and beyond the ken of ordinary people. Their own self-esteem is enhanced (i.e., “mirrored”) by the idealized value that they assign to those with whom they associate. They are

likely to insist on having only the “top” person (doctor, lawyer, hairdresser, instructor) or

being affiliated with the “best” institutions but may devalue the credentials of those who disappoint them.

Individuals with this disorder generally require excessive admiration (Criterion 4). Their self-esteem is almost invariably very fragile. They may be preoccupied with how well they are doing and how favorably they are regarded by others. This often takes the form of a need for constant attention and admiration. They may expect their arrival to be greeted with great fanfare and are astonished if others do not covet their possessions. They may constantly fish

for compliments, often with great charm. A sense of entitlement is evident in these individuals’ unreasonable expectation of especially favorable treatment (Criterion 5). They expect

to be catered to and are puzzled or furious when this does not happen. For example, they may assume that they do not have to wait in line and that their priorities are so important that others should defer to them, and then get irritated when others fail to assist “in their very important work.” This sense of entitlement, combined with a lack of sensitivity to the wants and needs of others, may result in the conscious or unwitting exploitation of others (Criterion 6). They expect to be given whatever they want or feel they need, no matter what it might mean to others. For example, these individuals may expect great dedication from others and may overwork them without regard for the impact on their lives. They tend to form friendships or romantic relationships only if the other person seems likely to advance

their purposes or otherwise enhance their self-esteem. They often usurp special privileges and extra resources that they believe they deserve because they are so special.

Individuals with narcissistic personality disorder generally have a lack of empathy and

have difficulty recognizing the desires, subjective experiences, and feelings of others (Criterion 7). They may assume that others are totally concerned about their welfare. They tend to

discuss their own concerns in inappropriate and lengthy detail, while failing to recognize that others also have feelings and needs. They are often contemptuous and impatient with

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others who talk about their own problems and concerns. These individuals may be oblivious to the hurt their remarks may inflict (e.g., exuberantly telling a former lover that “I am now in the relationship of a lifetime!”; boasting of health in front of someone who is sick). When recognized, the needs, desires, or feelings of others are likely to be viewed disparagingly as

signs of weakness or vulnerability. Those who relate to individuals with narcissistic personality disorder typically find an emotional coldness and lack of reciprocal interest.

These individuals are often envious of others or believe that others are envious of them (Criterion 8). They may begrudge others their successes or possessions, feeling that they better

deserve those achievements, admiration, or privileges. They may harshly devalue the contributions of others, particularly when those individuals have received acknowledgment or

praise for their accomplishments. Arrogant, haughty behaviors characterize these individuals; they often display snobbish, disdainful, or patronizing attitudes (Criterion 9). For example, an individual with this disorder may complain about a clumsy waiter’s “rudeness” or “stupidity” or conclude a medical evaluation with a condescending evaluation of the physician.

Associated Features Supporting Diagnosis

Vulnerability in self-esteem makes individuals with narcissistic personality disorder very sensitive to “injury” from criticism or defeat. Although they may not show it outwardly, criticism may haunt these individuals and may leave them feeling humiliated, degraded,

hollow, and empty. They may react with disdain, rage, or defiant counterattack. Such experiences often lead to social withdrawal or an appearance of humility that may mask and

protect the grandiosity. Interpersonal relations are typically impaired because of problems derived from entitlement, the need for admiration, and the relative disregard for the sensitivities of others. Though overweening ambition and confidence may lead to high achievement, performance may be disrupted because of intolerance of criticism or defeat. Sometimes vocational functioning can be very low, reflecting an unwillingness to take a risk in competitive or other situations in which defeat is possible. Sustained feelings of shame or humiliation and the attendant self-criticism may be associated with social withdrawal, depressed mood, and persistent depressive disorder (dysthymia) or major depressive disorder. In contrast, sustained periods of grandiosity may be associated with a hypomanic mood. Narcissistic personality disorder is also associated with anorexia nervosa and substance use disorders (especially related to cocaine). Histrionic, borderline, antisocial, and paranoid personality disorders may be associated with narcissistic personality disorder.

Prevalence

Prevalence estimates for narcissistic personality disorder, based on DSM-IV definitions, range from 0% to 6.2% in community samples.

Development and Course

Narcissistic traits may be particularly common in adolescents and do not necessarily indicate that the individual will go on to have narcissistic personality disorder. Individuals with narcissistic personality disorder may have special difficulties adjusting to the onset of physical and occupational limitations that are inherent in the aging process.

Gender-Related Diagnostic Issues

Of those diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder, 50%–75% are male.

Differential Diagnosis

Other personality disorders and personality traits. Other personality disorders may be confused with narcissistic personality disorder because they have certain features in

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common. It is, therefore, important to distinguish among these disorders based on differ-

ences in their characteristic features. However, if an individual has personality features that meet criteria for one or more personality disorders in addition to narcissistic personality disorder, all can be diagnosed. The most useful feature in discriminating narcissistic personality disorder from histrionic, antisocial, and borderline personality disorders, in which the interactive styles are coquettish, callous, and needy, respectively, is the grandiosity characteristic of narcissistic personality disorder. The relative stability of self-image as well as the relative lack of self-destructiveness, impulsivity, and abandonment concerns also help distinguish narcissistic personality disorder from borderline personality disorder. Excessive pride in achievements, a relative lack of emotional display, and disdain for others' sensitivities help distinguish narcissistic personality disorder from histrionic personality disorder. Although individuals with borderline, histrionic, and narcissistic personality disorders may require much attention, those with narcissistic personality disorder specifically need that attention to be admiring. Individuals with antisocial and narcissistic personality disorders share a tendency to be tough-minded, glib, superficial, exploitative, and unempathic. However, narcissistic personality disorder does not necessarily include characteristics of impulsivity, aggression, and deceit. In addition, individuals with antisocial personality disorder may not be as needy of the admiration and envy of others, and persons with narcissistic personality disorder usually lack the history of conduct disorder in childhood or criminal behavior in adulthood. In both narcissistic personality disorder and obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, the individual may profess a commitment to perfectionism and believe that others cannot do things as well. In contrast to the accompanying self-criticism of those with obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, individuals with narcissistic personality disorder are more likely to believe that they have achieved perfection. Suspiciousness and social withdrawal usually distinguish those with schizotypal or paranoid personality disorder from those with narcissistic personality disorder. When these qualities are present in individuals with narcissistic personality disorder, they derive primarily from fears of having imperfections or flaws revealed.

Many highly successful individuals display personality traits that might be considered narcissistic. Only when these traits are inflexible, maladaptive, and persisting and cause significant functional impairment or subjective distress do they constitute narcissistic personality disorder.

Mania or hypomania. Grandiosity may emerge as part of manic or hypomanic episodes, but the association with mood change or functional impairments helps distinguish these episodes from narcissistic personality disorder.

Substance use disorders. Narcissistic personality disorder must also be distinguished from symptoms that may develop in association with persistent substance use.