

What Is Narcissism?

By Gerti Schoen

Narcissism has many faces. It is usually associated with people who are “selfish” or only talk about themselves without paying any attention to others. We think of television characters like the greedy and reckless “JR” from the TV-series “Dallas” or, a more modern version of it, the sex-obsessed “Edie” of “Desperate Housewives”. It has often been used as a cause to characterize a particularly bad relationship. In the age of live competitions like “American Idol” and reality-TV like “Survivor”, we think about young adults who want to be famous and be showered in adoration without bothering much about the responsibilities daily life holds. We believe it’s about the grandiose fantasies of an immature mind that focuses solely on fame, perfection and simply on either being the “The Best” or finding the perfect mate in whose glory they can shine. Sometimes people fall victim to a narcissist, be it a partner or a parent, who has no capacity to consider their point of view, and thus the victim’s personality is obliterated by that domineering persona who can barely tolerate, when even the slightest attention is paid to others.

But there is a flipside to that single-minded picture of narcissism that was taken over by the mainstream. Narcissism is not only at play in people who need to showcase their ego to the extreme. It is just as prevalent in those, who constantly do away with their needs and put others first at all times while depleting their resources and neglecting their own point of view. It is those of us who can’t ever say

no to other people's demands and are too fragile to stand up for themselves. Their sense of self is such that they feel predominantly inferior to others, and it sometimes remains altogether undefined. They don't know who they are and what they want and how to get what they need. Their narcissistic needs have been oppressed and destroyed by other people's agendas, and they feel they have no choice but to continue to suppress their own instincts and desires.

Narcissism basically means that one's sense of self is out of balance, that there is either too little of us or too much of us, which puts others off either way and makes equal relationships difficult. In many narcissistic relationships, one partner will always have the upper hand and the weaker part will either suffer from chronic depression or will walk away in pursuit of something that promises to be more fulfilling, which often ends up equally dissatisfying. What's lacking is a genuine ability to engage with the other, to connect on a deeper level, and an environment that feels safe enough to disagree with the other without losing face or the whole relationship. Because many people who chronically suppress their own needs come across as gentle and accommodating to others, they are exclusively seen as "nice guys" or "sweet girls" who can easily be asked a favor or made friends with. What often ends up happening is that the favors they are being asked of become too much, and carrying the burden of maintaining a friendship turns one-sided. Because the "nice guy" has never learned how to ask for having his own needs met, he has no other choice than to walk away and lose another relationship in the process.

To children of narcissistic parents it often comes as a shock to recognize stark similarities between their own narcissistic self-preoccupation and that of the parent. Where the classical narcissist complains loudly about being neglected and demands attention, the gentle narcissist craves the same but remains withdrawn into his own mind. Where the former can't stop talking in the most praiseful tone about herself, the latter can't stop thinking in the most self-critical ways about herself. Both are constantly wondering about how they come across to others, what they did right or wrong, fully absorbed in their relentless thinking about the self.

Some of those gentle narcissists, as I call them, are shy and withdrawn and suffer from social anxiety. Others are very sociable, but their relationships remain shallow and devoid of intimacy, and they are always at risk of falling apart. What the two types have in common is a certain softness and fragility in their personality, which tends to make it hard to face relationships head on. As soon as the imbalance between their own needs and those of others gets out of hand, they become withdrawn and lonely and have a hard time dealing with their environment that is often experienced as overly aggressive and uncaring. The main way they cope with their insecurities and their vulnerable selves is by withdrawing from the world, which cuts them off the most basic sources of self-esteem and well-being: relationships. In their heart of hearts, they crave nothing more than to be more involved with the world and other people but cannot bring themselves to overcome a certain paralysis and fear of rejection and remain on the outskirts of life, never quite able to express themselves fully and to verbalize their frustrations openly.

The term “Gentle Narcissist” is derived from the work of the American self-psychologist Heinz Kohut whose groundbreaking work on narcissism has never received the attention outside of psychoanalytic circles it deserves. In this book, I will explain how their inner lives are organized, why so many feel compelled to retreat from the world, how to form fulfilling relationships, and how to get back on track to live a fuller and happier life.

Many people dread to be called narcissistic, mostly because narcissists have a reputation as being self-absorbed and vain. Unlike many of their well-known siblings, the self-involved and attention demanding classical narcissists, gentle narcissists are quite able to form meaningful relationships once they feel safe enough to come out of their shell and begin to trust a world that is experienced as overwhelming and insensitive. They do have a genuine capacity to connect, but are forced to use defenses like avoidance, non-commitment and emotional distance out of fear that their weakened self will be taken over too easily, and ultimately because they are terrified of losing or being rejected by the people they have learned to trust. Underneath of their aloof and standoffish behavior, they crave very much to connect with others.

Paradoxically, there is no proper clinical diagnosis for the gentle narcissist in the medical world, and their mental health charts often contain simple diagnostic terms like “depression”, “anxiety” or “Personality Disorder, Not Otherwise Specified”.

Because of their prominent anxiety that they may try to distract themselves with by being overly clean and organized, by overeating or picking on their bodies, they sometimes end up being diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Other times they are told they suffer from Adult Attention Deficit Disorder, which stems from their tendency to be pulled in a million directions at once and being unable to make a decision. Sometimes they are being thrown into the same category as Schizoid and Avoidant Personalities, who have much less potential to form meaningful relationships with others.

Only very recently, this personality style was included in a new textbook called the “Psychodynamic Diagnostic Manual” published by a number of international psychoanalytic associations. Unfortunately, even there it is summed up in just four lines. The gentle narcissist is here classified as “Narcissistic Personality Disorder: Depressed/Depleted” as opposed to the classic “Arrogant/Entitled” narcissist of the well-known variety. Indeed, many gentle narcissists who seek psychotherapeutic treatment are depressed, lack energy and feel depleted by what they had to go through in their individual lives. A large part of their life force was suppressed and squeezed out of them, and they are longing for a new life that provides more energy, passion and joy.

Like with every psycho-emotional style, this personality type spreads out over a very wide continuum: in their severest form and on their worst days, gentle narcissists do feel chronically depleted and depressed and are unable to cope with

the world. They feel so vulnerable that every human contact is unconsciously seen as a threat to their well-being, and the only thing they feel capable of is to withdraw or sleep. On these days they might even cut out other people who care about them. At other times they might feel uncomfortable and empty and in need of a supportive listener, and when they get what they need they go about their normal business all day without being impacted much by any kind of stress.

The key to change and a happier life is to become aware: aware of our needs, aware of what we are saying and what we are doing and how this affects others. Once we know what we need, it is important to have the support to go through with it.

Awareness and support are the two columns for change for the gentle narcissist.

When they are in place, it is a lot easier to battle the mountain of negative beliefs they have about themselves. One of the hardest tasks is to quiet the endless voices in their heads that convince them all too easily that “something is wrong with me”, “I am a burden to others” or “I am worthless” and the many variations of hate and self-loathing. Once they know that many of these beliefs are mostly in their heads and usually have nothing to do with reality, the grip they have on them fades away and they can focus simply on what the present moment has to offer without having it spoiled by all these negative convictions.

We all know the story of Narcissus who fell in love with his own mirror image in the water and drowned while adoring himself. It’s a tragic and beautiful metaphor for our unending self-involvement that takes up most of our energy, and leaves little

room to genuinely think about others. Gentle narcissists too are involved in an endless spiral of self-centered thoughts – even though, sadly, these thoughts focus usually on what they think is wrong with them. For them, the journey is to start looking in the mirror and to begin noticing what is beautiful about them and to take pride in what they have to offer. Only by regarding one's own needs can we truly begin to give to others.

How We Came to Be Gentle Narcissists

The most prevalent sense of difficulty gentle narcissists have, is that they miss out on a certain engagement with the world: either they feel that they are too shy or aloof to really be themselves around others, or their relationships remain on the surface without any intimate contact. Withdrawal becomes part of the problem.

Withdrawing from a world that seems harsh and hostile is the most dominant characteristic of the gentle narcissist. By withdrawing they continue a behavioral pattern that was most likely formed when they were little. The pattern begins early: Research on infants, for example, has shown that toddlers spontaneously fall asleep when they feel overwhelmed. Who hasn't observed one of those overburdened parents on the subway or in the street who screams at the child in distress, while the only reaction the child has left is to turn away or stand in frozen terror. Other babies are simply neglected by mothers who ignore their crying repeatedly. They

become frustrated and try to pick up the volume, and if that doesn't do the trick, at one point they will just give up. If a repair of what is experienced as an emotional shock and rejection doesn't occur, if the parent does not pick the child up and soothe his fear and frustration but leaves him to his own undeveloped devices, he will inevitably learn to withdraw from these overwhelming situations, especially if this happens over and over again and there is no one else who can compensate for the repeated failure to soothe the child's distress.

The message the child hears is, *I am not really welcome here, so I'll just make myself smaller or invisible. If I can make myself not want anything and need as little as possible, then I don't have to endure any more frustration.* Later in life, the capacity to pay attention to other people's needs and to have a sense of responsibility for others is diminished because the person feels fragile and unsupported and believes that she has nothing of value to give. The outcome later in life is habitual turning away, escaping, distancing, becoming unavailable for others—a pattern we are observing so often in our friends and loved ones. The so neglected child becomes an adult who is cautious of others and frequently falls back onto his own inner world, which feels safer and easier to control, but at the same time empty and disconnected.

Not everybody who experiences such failures in the way our parents raised us turns into a hermit. Depending on your parents' personalities, your genes, and the influences of other important people in your upbringing and throughout your life, it can go just the opposite way. Maybe someone in your immediate environment, an

aunt or a grandparent, was positive and encouraged you to express yourself. Some may feel inspired to engage in the artistic field, write novels, make art, act, or sing. We crave positive feedback and seek a means to express ourselves without running into someone else's opposition or resistance or jealousy of what we have to show. Although an audience can always boo and a critic can write a bad review, at least that person isn't present and we don't have to deal with his or her criticism and the dreaded confrontation directly. The need to retreat is far greater when the injury has been inflicted by someone we wanted to trust but came back to hurt us, than when it's coming from an anonymous person.

Behavioral patterns often have to do with the convictions we attained about ourselves as children. If you feel undeserving of an admired person's attention, like that of a parent or a teacher, or that you have to thank someone a thousand times for doing you a small favor, then your caregivers somehow very early on have communicated to you that you can't expect to get their attention, or that it is not to be taken for granted that you deserve to be cared for. That doesn't necessarily mean that your parents didn't actually care about you. They might have made a sincere attempt at providing a nurturing environment, but may not have had the financial or emotional capacities to become a supportive parent. Maybe they had no choice than to spend all their energy on a seriously ill family member. Or they were depressed and anxiety-ridden because of their own insecurities and unfulfilled desires. But because children – and many times adults - have no concept of relational and circumstantial factors and always fall back onto their own developmentally

appropriate, self-centered perspective, they inevitably end up feeling rejected and not really loved and build convictions like *I am a burden*, *It is all my responsibility*, or *I am not lovable*, *Something is wrong with me*. Unfortunately, these beliefs tend to hang around a long time. We may or may not be aware of them, but they influence our daily lives and our relationships. The inevitable consequence of having those particular underlying convictions in our heads is withdrawal.

Another reason for an involuntary retreat is intrusion. A parent who finds meaning only in her unending love for her child can end up constantly intruding into the child's personal space. Smothering the kid with what gets to be too much attention and not leaving her any room to decide for herself about how to engage with the other, will also result in withdrawal. The child experiences the constant interest in her physical appearance or emotional process as intrusive, over-stimulating, and overwhelming and has no other choice than to disengage. The same thing happens when an overly self-interested parent constantly imposes his own needs and opinions onto the child without leaving any room for his own preferences to unfold, which is often done in a seemingly loving manner. *I am doing this because I love you* becomes the modus operandi, which leaves the child no choice than to comply with what is expected from him, and his own sense of self remains undeveloped. The child is condemned to passivity and learns to leave it up to others to make the decisions.

An insecure parent who has a lot of anxiety himself will sometimes try to gloss over his own sense of instability by constantly checking in with the child. Feeling empty and chronically unsure of how to deal with a newborn, an overly anxious parent will nervously watch every movement of the infant, for fear he or she may do something wrong. Her own sense of insecurity becomes a part of the child's emotional organization, manifesting in the child in a constant watchfulness of others, hoping that they will provide some clues of what would be the right thing to do, while failing to develop his or her own core values and self-esteem with the help of a stronger, a more stable caregiver.

Other parents, who haven't been sufficiently nurtured by their own mothers and fathers, try to use their child as a means to finally get the attention and care they missed out on in their own upbringing. Some of these kids become their mothers' or fathers' best friends and confidantes, and they have to carry the needs of the parents, not the other way around. In extreme cases, it might happen that an eight-year-old ends up having to make important decisions for the overwhelmed mother, a dynamic that is defined as child abuse in many states in the U.S. The child is being robbed of a self that hasn't even had the chance to develop enough, in order to nurture a fragile parent and remains overburdened and weakened in his or her own sense of self. All those examples of faulty parenting are representations of what is called *misattunement*: a profound lack of understanding what the child really needs as opposed to what the parents thinks the child needs.

Kohut divided these narcissistic personalities into several categories, the most important being the under-stimulated, the over-stimulated, or the overburdened selves. Most people who are in their core fragile and vulnerable belong to one of them. Children who grow up in an under-stimulating environment were put on the back burner of family life and parental attention. They remained in the background when the goodies were handed out, held still when an injury had to be treated, spoke up only when asked, and even then said only the most necessary things. Because of this restraint, they often experience themselves as boring or even dead, and some start to seek stimulation by going to extremes. They look for a physical thrill, like going skydiving or bungee jumping. Some experience devastating arguments and fights as stimulating when it is the only source of vitality in their lives. Or, more self-destructive personalities will resort to drugs, gambling, promiscuity, or alcohol to provide them with a stimulating emotional experience. This kind of acting out is also used as distraction from unwanted feelings like anxiety or depression. Under-stimulated kids might spend long parts of their days alone without any energizing influence and thus learn to always keep their life force on a low flame. There is no one there to share their experiences with or to infuse some extra energy into them. Their creative and intellectual capabilities might never unfold fully because no one shows interest. They are never taught how to engage others and remain passive and withdrawn.

To the contrary, the over-stimulated self feels intruded upon by the parents in ways that don't promote development. Over-stimulated kids tend to feel crowded because

they are overly or inappropriately mirrored, that is, their parents try to convey to their children what they think is going on with them, but never really understand. This later may lead to confusion as to what the child wants from life. These children might have had a dominating, powerful, or famous parent, whose glamour overshadowed the child's need to shine. There was no calming presence that would have enabled the child to develop self-soothing mechanisms. One or both parents may have been very anxious or overbearing personalities, who constantly worried about the child without giving her room to experiment and explore. Perhaps the parents tried to push sex education on their little boy too early or constantly pried into his relationship with the other parent. The kid may have been overwhelmed with too much education or the unattainable demand to become a sports star by his ambitious parents, and had no other choice than to withdraw and avoid even more stimuli—regardless of whether he lived up to their expectations or not.

Over-stimulated selves may come to feel that everything they try to accomplish is doomed to fail, that their own lack of discipline or determination will undermine any accomplishment, and that they were robbed of a certain vigor and strength they crave to have and admire in others. The danger later in life is that these personalities get stuck in an environment that lacks any stimulation at all, and they experience their lives as empty and boring. They see their own or their parents' grandiose visions of their future as a burden, they become anxious and flooded with emotion because they feel that they have already failed and are afraid of more

failures. These children often have great difficulties later in life pursuing their goals for fear of being overwhelmed again.

In popular culture, the “South Park” character Tweek is an example. Tweek, whose parents run a coffee shop, is literally permanently over-stimulated because the daily diet of the eight-year-old consists of massive amounts of coffee. “Have a cup,” the father will say when Tweek, who is always shaking, is unnerved by some dispute among the kids, and all you hear from him is his hysterical trademark shriek and what you see is him running off. In one episode he wakes up in the middle of the night to some kind of authority banging on his bedroom door, warning him that a child abuser is out to get him. When he, as ordered, slowly stumbles to the door and opens it to get away, it is the father who holds a gun to his head, yelling, “Bang. You are dead. Haven’t we told you to never open the door to anyone but your mother and me?” Psychoanalytically speaking, Tweek is driven out of his mind by too much of everything, most of all his parents’ craziness and the absence of a soothing person that he trusts and where he can rest.

Overburdened personalities feel unsupported and can’t shake the feeling that they are responsible for everything and that they can’t be bothered with anything anymore. They turn out to be hypersensitive to any kind of stimulus. They might constantly complain about the weather, about having to do chores, about having to work too much, about having to adjust their schedules to other people’s needs. They are hypersensitive and tend to take any casual remark as an insult, often become

preoccupied with their health and their bodies or turn into hypochondriacs. As with this type of narcissistic injury, they never had the chance to merge with the calmness of a mature caretaker, and were instead always pointed to when it came to chores no one else was up to. They often are taken over by anxiety and the ongoing fear of not being up to the task. Sometimes this manifests particularly in relationships: when a child was always responsible to take care of the parents needs he may come to believe that this is what he has to do for his girlfriend or spouse as well. But because he unconsciously feels overburdened and doesn't know how to ask for his own needs to be met, he engages only in shallow relationships and shies away from any kind of commitment out of fear of being taken advantage of all over again. He may go on, constantly looking for "someone better" who will finally understand his needs. If at the same time he is afraid of being alone, he may end up cheating on his partner in the hope of finally having found a new love who will know what he needs. But without knowing for himself what his needs are, she too, will fail.

All these narcissistic injuries result, when ongoing, in a weakened and fragile self that is easily swayed and vulnerable to more hurt. The three types are not always so clear-cut. Sometimes one person can turn out to be under-stimulated and yet overburdened by expectations at the same time. Gentle narcissists often are the good girls and good boys of the family, always stepping back when someone else demands attention, trained to cater to the needs of the parents or siblings. Because nobody ever seemed to wonder or really understand what this fragile little person wanted, and because she mostly paid attention to what other people needed, she is

having trouble later in life to know what she wants. She doesn't know whether to pursue this career path or the other, whether to give in to the courtship of this man or another, live in this town or the next. The basic problem with all those child-rearing failures is that one way or another they communicated to the child:

Something is wrong with you. You don't live up to my expectations. I don't like the way you are. You really should be different. The psychologist Stephen Johnson put it this way: "When what you are is too much or too little, too sexual, or not sexual enough, too stimulating or not stimulating enough, too precocious or too slow, too independent or not independent enough, you cannot freely realize yourself. *That is the narcissistic injury.*"

On the flip side, as a parent or psychotherapist, one has to wonder just how many mistakes we are making all day long trying to raise children—and treat patients for that matter. We all make tons of mistakes. But it's not about the occasional failure to provide the best care possible. To some extent it's even necessary that children learn how imperfectly the world treats them, because this is what awaits them as adults, and they need to learn how to cope with it. But what's important is that we provide them with an overall stable environment and with a set of morals and values that we teach them by being role models, not by feeding them a constant diet of what's right and wrong or by ignoring what they have to bring to the table. And, even more crucial, we have to demonstrate that a screw up can always be repaired. Even if you do forget your son's soccer tournament, you can make up for it by allowing him to complain and by showing up the next time.

Many people feel uncomfortable blaming their parents or caretakers for what they believe are their own inadequacies. So instead they blame themselves, complaining that they should have gotten over any childhood traumas. It is hard for them to see anybody else's contribution to their misery and put it solely upon themselves to right what's been wronged. But the truth is, assigning blame is an essential part of every social system, including the family, as a tool to do justice. When a kid kicks the dog to act out his own anger, he will get punished for it. When the father kicks the dog, he most likely will get away with it, because most children—especially when they are fragile and forced to please the parents—won't point their finger at the almighty adult, even less so when the father kicks the child himself. The sense that injustice took place may linger for many years and won't go away until it was rectified or acknowledged as such. And while there are many forms in which blame can be expressed, the sheer act of assigning blame becomes an important part in the functioning of relationships because it enables the process of repair. As the sociologist Charles Tilly has argued:

Blame occurs in public debate, in courts, and in everyday life. Although the word "justice" alone often calls up a warm glow, justice commonly consists first of fixing blame, then of imposing penalties for blame. More so than the giving of credit, assigning blame can easily become a persistent, destructive habit. Many a friendship, partnership, and marriage break up over the assignment of blame. But when carried out successfully through retaliation, incapacitation, deterrence, rehabilitation or restoration, blaming brings struggles to an end. We should salute the creative destruction of just blame.