23 Defining Characteristics of Narcissists
31. januar 2013 kl. 04:57

Several authors such as Linda Martinez-Lewi, Dr Gregory Ross, Dr Jeffrey Young, Paul Babiak, and others, note a number of key defining dynamics and characteristics that are common to unhealthy narcissists. Here is a compilation of 23 common dynamics or characteristics culled from such authors and their writings, to look for if you are wondering about a potential unhealthy narcissist.

It is not true that all 23 characteristics will be present, but a majority will typically be present in the case of a potential unhealthy narcissist. For instance the achieving narcissist may not steal others work to claim as their own, but in other respects will be seen to have a number of the other characteristics outlined below.

Each characteristic also reveals the two extremes of Narcissism, that being the classic overt Narcissist written about in many books, and the more sublime but equally challenging Covert or Closet Narcissist.

The characteristics capture the key defining behaviours dispositions and attitudes of the various subtypes of Narcissists documented in literature. We all possess a few of these traits as we all possess some narcissism, but it is at the wrong end of the continuum of this behaviour does the Personality disorder start to exist. It takes a trained clinician to make an accurate diagnosis for any Personality Disorder, so do not read this and label someone around you a Narcissist.

This information will assist associates of narcissists to realise they may be entangled at some level with one, and so with awareness to set new boundaries or limit exposure to such a personality. The 23 characteristics are:

1) FALSE SELF – The Overt Narcissist has a grandiose and exaggerated sense of achievements or skills or talents, and expects to be recognised as superior even when having no demonstrated record in this area. As an example I once personally attended a wealth creation course being smoked by a charismatic figure. I later found out this person

Søk etter personer, steder og ting

Their life was a mess of conflicts and failed relationships yet they presented with professional aplomb. You would not have picked the chaos in the person from the idealised “false self” seducing the audience in the sales pitch and talk. The audience had no idea that behind the facade there was no effective “walk your talk”.

The Covert Narcissist is quite understated which disarms others with a meek and mild manner or social mask. This too is deceptive as it fools most audiences as they quietly go about achieving their aims and projecting an assured aloofness or pleasant manner.

2) UNGROUNDED REALITY – The Overt Narcissist is typically preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty or ideal love. Their belief in themself is not rooted in reality. They will often compare themself to the real leader in their chosen or imagined field, and with envy state out loud statements like “why is he or she so successful, I have more to offer than them!!”.

They belittle normally rivals, and underrate others achievements from this place, as they cannot entertain being upstaged, even when reality does not match their grandiose imaginings of their supposed real standing in life. They cannot understand why others do not see or perceive this grandiose reality. A rival threat is often simply someone else making a success that the paranoid narcissist wrongly infers undermines or challenges them.

The Covert Narcissist also harbours self-delusions of grandeur but is not often boastful of that in public. They may quietly observe and judge, “sniff” their disapproval from a place of feeling more enlightened or talented. They may drop a barbed comment that reveals their true feelings but are seen to more act rather than talk as if they are the best in some filed or
3) GRANDIOSE – The Overt and Covert Narcissist has a belief system that they are “visionary”, “strategic”, “innovative”, “special”, “psychic”, “mystic”, and so can only be understood, associate with, or tolerate, other special or high-status persons. They will often drive a flashy car, or shift to a prestigious suburb, or dress or be seen in special places to cultivate this idealised false self image.

They put themselves on a pedestal and expect others to worship them as they worship themselves. The Overt Narcissist is more flashy and loud than the Covert Narcissist who is more apt to typically act in an understated, aloof way that simply conveys “I’m special, can you not see that”.

4) NARCISSISTIC EGO SUPPLY – Both the Covert and Overt Narcissist requires constant admiration and recognition from others. They will gather a following of needy or co-dependent followers and “sidekicks” who feed their narcissistic ego supplies by reminding them of how good they are, idealising them, putting them on a pedestal. The understated Covert Narcissist uses silence and looks to control their partners.

The follower will also self-delude themself that they are privileged and “seen” and “wanted” by being hard working “special” persons of interest to the narcissist. The sidekick is essentially co-dependent with the narcissist, often having a “caretaker” or low self-image personality disorder themself. This starts to create the basis of a cult dynamic. Narcissists often are cult leaders or start groups that elevate them alone to a “special” status. In organisations the “special” end game is to get to the top, get on the Board of Directors, and/or be the CEO where money, power, publicity, status and greatness all lie in wait for them.

5) DEMANDS ON OTHERS – Both the Overt and Covert Narcissist have unreasonable expectations of how they will be treated. Both lack feelings and so have no empathy for partners, is personally exploitative of others, including colleagues, peers, managers, followers and “sidekicks”, to get own needs met, and is not concerned with their impact on others.

They are ruthless and exploitative in business and personal relationships, and paranoid of betrayal by others. They claim more than what is their actual entitlement without remorse, do not feel a need to justify themselves, and believe that as special, unique rules should operate in their favour.

In organisations while impatiently “climbing the ladder” they often try to claim their special status by demanding bonuses and recognition awards for others work, or for projects or initiatives that are not yet delivered or proven. The Covert Narcissist will often convey a cool, logical demand which coldly puts down others and makes the demand appear reasonable, and the receiver emotional, irrational and stupid.

6) NO REAL FEELINGS – Both types of Narcissist lack true empathy for others, and is cut-off from their own feelings. They will “feign” or act feelings and empathy from their idealised false self mask they present to the world.

The Overt Narcissist reveals their true nature when they are not accommodated as beneath their social veneer what intrudes from the real personality are arrogant, haughty behaviours and attitudes from their unresolved angry and self doubting inner life.

In organisations they have no issue or feelings about “downsizing” staff or making unethical decisions as it proves to their superiors they are a “man of action and decisiveness”, when really it simply represents their disdain and predatory nature to use and devour others to their own end.

The Covert Narcissist uses a withdrawn, emotionally shutdown presence to face the world and so one rarely sees emotions being exhibited in such an individual. Everything is “fine” in their world which is carefully hidden away from view. A silence and superficiality replaces real depth or substance to their communication but they are adept at shaping conversation
to fulfill their agendas.

7) ENVY – Both the Overt and Covert Narcissist are often envious of others, and normally they scan others they meet, doing a comparison of where the other person is relative to them. The Overt Narcissist reacts to envy by having a predatory drive to usurp and conquer the other person, and replace them if they are a threat to exposing the narcissists own insecure, real self hidden under their false self social mask. They may become louder and more grandiose around their competitors. The Covert narcissist may avoid or stay silent around competitors and then work quietly behind the scenes to silently assassinate them.

They are both jealous and paranoid of those above them in the world or the organisation, with whom they employ a combination of seduction, control, manipulation, character assassination, undermining and avoidance. They may attempt to initially befriend them to “work them out” and decide if they can overcome them, especially where they cannot be “converted” into a follower, or at least sidelined into neutrality.

8) RATIONALISATION – Both the Overt and Covert Narcissist “live in their heads” and use logic, argument and rationalisation to justify themselves, to shape others perceptions of them, and to control and intimidate others. They pretend and delude to themself that others are envious of them and their “special” self and achievements. This is a typical compensation to cope with emerging feelings of inadequacy that constantly and secretly haunt them. The sense that others envy them is in a distorted sense a form of adulation and recognition they use on themself when external narcissistic supplies from others are not available to them at that time.

They also rationalise that others in organisations or in groups who are quite rightly challenging them from time to time, are just competing and envious of their talents and “specialness”. Overt Narcissists often tell others it is such a “burden” to carry such special talents and be in such demand due to it, and say from their grandiose delusion that only they could carry or “hold a space” for those who need them, or live amongst others who do not understand them. Covert Narcissists may think this but are less open in stating it to others directly.

9) LIES AND MANIPULATION – Both Overt and Covert Narcissists have learnt that truth is a subjective reality and work to create perceptions in their favour, utilising lies and truth interchangeably. Both types of Narcissists are deceptive of others and themself, often lying and distorting the truth to suit their needs, and also in their own thinking. Both types of Narcissist will also “toy” with another person’s reality as a manipulative game that they derive negative pleasure from, as a form of arrogant superiority where they reinforce their own sense of being able to control other weaker persons, thus reinforcing their own sense of being superior or having special gifts.

One of my narcissistic therapists often remarked to me that they “knew me better than I did”. They may lie even when the truth is available and it not being a truth that would negatively affect them. Life is a game for them and lies hold up their entire false reality.

Covert Narcissists particularly employ silence as a tool of control and mental torture of others. Silence normally causes the other party to “fill in the blanks or silence” with their own story of what is going on, and can lead to great anxiety and fear in that person.

Overt Narcissists will tend to get their followers and “sidekicks” to lie or deceive for them, thus proving their loyalty, binding them with a secret that the follower does not realise at the time could be used to betray them later if it suits the narcissist’s purpose. Loyalty is not a long term 2 way street. “Sidekicks” eventually get “drop kicked” or betrayed when it suits the narcissist.

10) EMOTIONAL OUTBURSTS – The overt Narcissist reacts to and is overly sensitive to any criticism or threat of being exposed, which is countered with rage and retribution. As the narcissist is always right in their own mind, and will lie without conscience, you cannot constructively argue or negotiate with them. They will attack and humiliate those who they already judge as inferior, which is most of the rest of us.
An aggressive attack is not only usually effective against those who are defenceless or in an unequal power relationship with the narcissist, but in the moment the aggression overcomes any other uncomfortable feelings from coming up which the narcissist finds hard to tolerate. The Covert Narcissist rarely erupts into emotional outbursts as they are invested in maintaining control. Their reaction may be to punish via withdrawal, silence, or going off and doing their own activity and then stating carefully "you made me do this". In either case if someone has equal or more power, or the resources the narcissist needs, or is effectively a peer, then the social mask is maintained and they feign but do not feel fake humiliation and shame.

In both types they take criticism personally as it threatens their whole false self, and so a tantrum may erupt which the social mask cannot contain, and they will mark anyone who crosses them with plans for revenge, humiliation and destruction, which then dominate their paranoid thinking.

11) MINIMISE RIVALS- Both the Overt and Covert narcissist will not acknowledge others achievements, normally belittling or minimising such achievements, and instead will try to bring the focus back to them, and use exaggerated claims, or will hide others achievements, or claim others achievements as their own. The Covert Narcissist just tends to stay silent and overlook or not acknowledge others achievements.

Narcissists are highly competitive, and envy others but will never acknowledge that envy. They only envy until they have surpassed or overcome the competitor, as the acquisition of power means that once they dominate or surpass another, they are relegated to indifference or contempt, or to be used as a victim if they possess some utility for the narcissist. The silent assassin that is the Covert Narcissist will work quietly in the background to bring down their rival.

For example once a follower of a powerful spiritual group leader wrote a timely and well informed book directly positioned in the core area of the leaders community and work. The book was never promoted or encouraged by the leader, and sales fell away. Energetically it seemed like the authors efforts could not be celebrated or recognised within the community. The leader minimised the contribution of the book to the field and did not promote it at all. When the leader wrote small pieces or quite shallow articles, they were actively promoted and positioned throughout the community, and the leader chastised anyone he felt was not actively promoting his articles with their clients.

12) SELF DELUSION – There will typically be found to exist in both the Overt and Covert Narcissist a narcissistic gap between their own perceived self, which is the false self mask they portray to others, and what others notice about them over time. This aspect becomes observed by others over time and is a large gap that represents a blind spot to their own awareness. Narcissists learn to feign or mimic real feelings, real empathy, to talk the smart leadership theory and teamwork concepts, spiritual dogma etc, yet act totally differently and contrary to their own words.

They typically do not walk their talk, and indeed feel that rules are for others but not them, so they have no conscience about double standards. Their grandiose sense of self entitlement and being special, gives them a distorted logic that they are an exception to what others must comply to, or be bound by. They lie because their whole lives are built on lies and a false self.

Peers, team members, and followers all get confused, traumatised, and their reality denied in the chaos of having one set of rules or truths espoused by the Narcissist, yet experience another set of rules or behaviours or information visited upon them, or see the Narcissistic manager or leader embody a totally contradictory reality to what they portray through their false self social mask.

Narcissists have no feelings for the trauma they cause others around them. The process of numbing or cutting off their own feelings mean that they are not interested or concerned with the feelings of others. Feelings are both a sign of weakness and something to be manipulated and exploited in others. A certain coldness is obvious to others from that place of their detachment.

The Overt Narcissists tendency to confront and argue is partly due to the fact they know others are uncomfortable with conflict. They however enjoy the conquering and submission of others as they are numb to their own feelings, but yet get fuel from power, the exercise of power, and the adrenalin of the challenge of competing and winning.

The Covert Narcissist will tend to be more dismissive and use silent looks, moods, and crisp but cold words to achieve the same end. If the process of denial via lying during conflict does not work, they switch to blaming others, often a faithful “sidekick” who will “cop it” and
even cover for the narcissist, taking on the blame out of “loyalty”.

13) STATUS – In both the Overt and Covert Narcissist there is typically an obsession with having the latest gadgets and status symbols of wealth. They also need to be seen with important people, or dropping the names of senior organisational people(when they are still climbing the ladder themselves), and often cultivating a youthful, healthy, perfect appearance where possible.

These externalised self esteem objects and associations are compensations for the internalised reality of low self esteem that Narcissists possess. Their energy is being constantly poured into maintaining this false self which then becomes their operative identity and they convince themselves that their mask is their real self.

Overt Narcissists will need to boast in their CV’s and communications of every small accomplishment, will use inflated terms for previous jobs, get degrees from dodgy or “online” universities where there may be a way of avoiding the “grind” of achieving their degree like “normal folks”. Covert Narcissists tend to feign or act accomplished to convey that impression. For both it’s all part of the pretence.

Both Overt and Covert Narcissists may shift locations and even countries every decade or less as they get “found out” and face potential exposure by dumped victims, followers and “sidekicks” who have been controlled, used and then spat out when they no longer serve any useful purpose. This may also be due to criminal behaviour.

14) CONTROLLING - Both Overt and Covert Narcissists attempt to control the realities of those above them, their peers, and their followers or those below them by acting as gate keepers of all communication and information. Narcissists know that perception is reality and they know how to manage and manipulate others perceptions via the control of interactions, information, and communication between parties.

Narcissists typically “insert” themself between themself and other communicating parties to control perceptions. Given they stage manage their whole life and reality it is not surprising they invest in this micro-managing behaviour of others. Deep inside, all narcissists fear being uncovered and exposed, and also judged and criticised, and so by “tracking” and controlling all communication, and altering that communication and resulting perception, they stay in control, and maintain their “marionette” or puppet like control of others realities about themself, others, and events.

This is a critical function of narcissists who feel they must work one-on-one with those around them in a manipulative fashion, and prevent a “bigger picture”, or comparison of versions of events being shared across stakeholders. It is often only after narcissists are uncovered and exposed, do “sidekicks”, peers and those above them come to realise how they have been deceived and manipulated in this way, often for some period of time.

Narcissists also cultivate “sidekicks” into becoming informers for them as part of managing the flow of information and events, as their paranoid reality sees everyone as a potential threat of uncovering their false reality. Narcissists denounce critics as being envious of them and their achievements.

15) WORKAHOLIC OR WORK AVOIDANCE – Functional Narcissists are typically extremely hard working and demanding of themselves and others. The unhealthy Overt and Covert Narcissists may also be quite hard working and even have workaholism as an issue in their life.

However quite a few Overt and Covert Narcissists will tend to feel many tasks at home and in life are beneath them. At work they may avoid and lose interest in long term, hard grind projects, as there is no quick payoff.

Predatory Overt or Covert Narcissists have a grandiose and exaggerated sense of achievements or skills or talents, and expects to be recognised as superior even when having no demonstrated record in this area. They may be parasitic and live off others achievements.

Remember that Functional Narcissists are often very driven, hard working and achieve excellent outcomes. They do not tolerate fools, errors, laziness, or poor quality. They can be critical task masters on both themselves and others.

In contrast the unhealthy Covert or Overt Narcissist may be an opportunist. For instance in organisations they have an antennae for spotting the looming end of a critical, high profile project and like a vulture will swoop in at the end, try and ingratiate themselves into the project in some way, or hijack it, and then feast on the glory and acclaim at its successful delivery and acclaim, which they will claim for themselves at the expense of others.

In situations where they are stuck running or being part of a hard grind project, they are quick to delegate and manipulate others and “side kicks” into carrying their responsibilities for them. They may micro-manage others from this place or be incompetent depending on
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16) RIGID AND PERFECTIONISTIC – As a general rule any traumatised person will seek to anchor their reality around black and white, fixed and stable constructs. This helps them to stabilise their own self especially when they feel anxiety levels or emotional arousal climbing out of control.

For this reason Both Overt and Covert Narcissists typically possess a rigid perfectionistic component to their personality. Alexander Lowen denotes the narcissist as having both psychopathic and rigid perfectionistic character structures.

Their rigid, inflexible thinking leaves them prone in their paranoid reality to personalise others different opinions or arguments as an attack or criticism of themself, which sparks their intense and angry retribution or tantrums against others.

A characteristic of narcissists is they will never offer an apology to you, nor accept or admit they were at fault. If caught out being wrong they tend to rationalise or blame their way out of it. Narcissists are “above” apologies and being perfect they never lower themself to admit faults which would threaten their false grandiose reality.

17) SUPERFICIAL RELATIONSHIPS – For Overt Narcissists their romantic relationships are often an extension of the grandiose false self. Partners will need to be beautiful, public “show ponies” or acceptable extensions of the narcissists self image. Covert Narcissists tend to be more sublime in their choice of partner and may have a more middle of the road caretaker personality as a partner. Both will need to control their partners.

Some writers state that both the Overt and Covert narcissist sets up a Madonna-Whore complex, which is a classic example of how they employ “splitting” of their relationship into extreme good and extreme bad polarities. In the “good” extreme they have as a partner a “public accessory”, submissive and compliant, and wholesome effigy who allows them to portray their family as squeaky clean as The Brady Bunch.

Effectively the partner is a “sidekick” who is normally passive, co-dependent or even possibly a traumatised personality in some way. Sex inside the relationship drops away soon after marriage, and instead the narcissist punishes or belittles the partner in private.

The Narcissist then harbours secretly their disowned “bad” extreme in terms of fantasies or actual persons as the “whore” archetype. In this aspect of self they often then entitle themself to have affairs or fantasise affairs with a whore-like figure who represents the narcissists contempt for the other sex. This may be a prostitute, a work colleague, the partners best friend or someone who acts in secret to service that Narcissists darker sexual themes and fantasies.

Romantic partners of narcissists often suffer post traumatic stress disorder, or suffer some form of breakdown in a long term relationship. Partners of narcissists have to live with the projection of the narcissist’s inner world that is an environment of bitterness, suspiciousness, meanness, self absorption, reality manipulation, aggression and pettiness.

Partners are often reported to living with resulting feelings of self-guilt, self-reproach, self-retribution, self-punishment, and self-denial, all which eventually cause a partner to collapse in some shape or form. Narcissists typically try to “educate” or mind-control their partners from a compulsive, incessant, harsh and critical position.

The effect is to erode their partner’s reality and self esteem, to humiliate, create reality dependence, to intimidate, to restrain, control and isolate the partner. Narcissists often labour on the “sacrifices” they make for the partner, invoking guilt instead of accepting that such actions are just part of their adult responsibility in relationship.

Only a masochistic or co-dependent partner can survive such attention for any long period. Ex-partners of narcissists take time and often trauma therapy or counselling to recover their reality after living in such a chaotic hell with such a “loved one”.

Narcissists often denounce their ex-partners as crazy, mentally unwell, betrayers or liars, never admitting their part in their partner’s descent into divorced, collapsed, ill or unwell outcomes. This mirrors their denouncing of ex-business partners and colleagues in business settings when things take a turn for the worse.

Some authors note that a person with Borderline Personality Disorder(BPD) will often be attracted to a person with a Narcissistic Personality Disorder(NPD).

18) CHARACTER ASSASSINS – Both Overt and Covert Narcissists are known to use character assassination as a subtle tactic to undermine critics and others who pose a threat to them via potential exposure of their activities. Narcissists in general will use gossip, confidential one-on-one chats or talks, using a mask of either “being concerned” about the person they are attacking, or with a trusted “sidekick”, will outright denigrate or belittle, lie, defame, and otherwise destroy their reputation, knowing that perception creates reality and doubt.
The old saying, “mud sticks” is well demonstrated here. The “sidekick” will typically already subscribe to the narcissists worldview and so is conditioned to accept their behaviour, their modus operandi, and “truth”, without question.

The “sidekick” often becomes the unwitting character assassin for the narcissist, further spreading the disinformation, and creating degrees of separation from the narcissist, who will later deny they are the source of the disinformation, and will sacrifice and cut loose the “side kick” if they risk exposure in this dynamic.

19) ITS ALL ABOUT ME!! – Overt Narcissists will want to discuss themselves constantly. Their language is peppered with constant use of “I”, “me”, and “my”, and in group settings, when the topic of conversation leaves them, they either steer it back to themselves with arrogance, impatience and restlessness.

If this fails they may leave the group and find someone else they can brag to about themself, their accomplishments, their connections to important people, resources, information etc.

Narcissists do not listen well to others and may be seen to interrupt mid sentence, or may be gazing about at others when you are trying to talk to them, unless you have something they want then you will have their undivided attention.

The Covert Narcissist is more likely to push their grandiosity through a subtle detached pose where they “drop” information that garners admiration and acclaim, but also with a controlling detached air that is designed to induce inferiority and envy in the listeners, thus reinforcing the grandiosity of the narcissist.

Overt Narcissist’s CV’s are often grandiose and overstated, full of every possible minor achievement which represents their grandiosity. Quite often their CV is also a fabrication as they lie routinely and rely on the statistic that only 20% of companies ever check out the claims made in senior appointment CV’s.

20) NEGOTIATIONS - Narcissists in general cannot be compromised with, mediated, or negotiated with, in good faith. They are obsessed with winning and not win-win, whatever the cost. The other person(s) in the dynamic are unimportant to the narcissist and its winner take all, with the narcissist always feel a sense of entitlement to what they crave.

The Overt Narcissist will attempt to intimidate, bluster and control the opponent through a variety of seduction, control, and attacking gestures and behaviours. The Covert Narcissist is more a listener who will use their silence to place pressure on an opponent. It is psychologically true that when two people engage that when a silence ensures one may feel uncomfortable and want to engage with speech and move forward.

If the Covert Narcissist stays rooted in the silence then the opponent may break and reveal themself, and in so doing may make a mistake and may caretake the silent person so as to “fix” the apparent break in contact. This plays into the hands of the Covert Narcissist who can then carefully craft words of meaning and stay in total control and manipulate the situation at hand.

21) HEALING – Many Narcissists resist authentic therapy and typically resist healing as their state of denial and blind spots about their true nature mean that they see nothing wrong with themselves. Unfortunately they may be your therapist as the whole area of healing, Self Development and spirituality is a perfect fit for the grandiose, God-like figure that the Narcissist believes themself to be. They will always have God-connections, channel great ascended masters, have gifts, divine insights, and have angels working through them!!

They may be attracted to narcissistic self development organisations that reinforce their grandiose and self-entitled egocentric views about life. They can often fool unwary therapists with their polished false self presentation. They may come to therapy to act as “the victim” and to find out what their partner has been saying, and what the therapist has been advising in return.

Many authors believe it is better to move away from a Narcissist than try to change them, manage them, bargain with them, or partner with them, in business or in a romantic sense.

For many of them compromise is weakness in their reality, and they will punish and seek revenge as routine, if they can orchestrate that through others. You are only in a narcissist’s life for as long as you have “utility” or value for them, as life is all about them, not you.

22) FINANCIAL CONTROLLERS OR FINANCIAL DISASTERS!!

The Narcissist may either completely control finances, and be secretive about their own or household finances as a form of manipulation or control of partners.

Alternatively they may have a secret addiction and spend money impulsively, or be incompetent and unable to manage finances, relying on trustworthy “sidekick” partner to manage and prop up financial matters and routines.

23) ADDICTIONS.

Both the Overt and Covert Narcissist may have an underlying but often secret addiction...
which they use to self-soothe with, or to emotionally numb out their stress and anxiety that they keep hidden from public view.
Addictions may include one or combination of alcohol, drugs, sex, food, gambling, work, shopping, smoking, internet, etc. Functional Narcissists tend to overwork and clamp down on their anxiety and so may not be seen to have visible addictive traits.
Any addiction is often kept hidden away in their disowned shadow side of Self and may only come to light after years in the relationship or known to colleagues through a lapse of self control or self disclosure. Addictions represent secrets and a narcissit often has secrets they would rather not have revealed.
The above 23 characteristics are generalised and applicable across most contexts where Covert and Overt Narcissists gravitate. Narcissists are like bees to honey where the honey of power, success, money, public adoration and exposure exist.

Narcissist

\( (n) \): a more polite term for a self-serving, manipulative, evil asshole with no soul.