

What Narcissists REALLY Want—and Can Never Get

What narcissists long for is worlds apart from what they actually pursue. [SHARE](#)

Post published by [Leon F Seltzer Ph.D.](#) on Jul 28, 2015 in [Evolution of the Self](#)

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IT'S ALL ABOUT
ME

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more deserving of our sympathy.

Among other things, narcissists typically come across as arrogant, grandiose, manipulative, entitled, and woefully lacking in [empathy \(/basics/empathy\)](#). But if these defining features are understood at a deeper level—as powerful psychological defenses to protect them from experiencing a truly frightening vulnerability—a quite different picture of them emerges. As a result, they may not be any more likable but can at least be viewed as

To begin, the most concise summary of what I'll be portraying here comes from the *Psychodynamic Diagnostic Manual* (<https://sites.google.com/a/icdl.com/pdm/>), 2006), which states:

“Although some [narcissistic \(/basics/narcissism\)](#) children and adolescents seem ‘spoiled’ and entitled [in other words, were *raised* to feel and act “privileged” through regularly being overindulged and told they were special], most are clearly defending against feelings of low [self-esteem \(/basics/self-esteem\)](#) and are trying to avoid shame and [humiliation \(/basics/embarrassment\)](#).”

This pointed description makes it clear that virtually all the so-offensive characteristics of narcissists can best be perceived as defenses against unresolved hurts, disappointments, and painful insecurities. They simply were unable to develop the kind of positive, stable [attachment \(/basics/attachment\)](#) bond to their caretakers that could make them feel loved and accepted.

So what narcissists diligently cultivate as personal “strengths” or “virtues” are accurately comprehended as rather pitiable attempts to cover up—and every bit as much from *themselves* as from others—their underlying feelings of weakness, inadequacy, and non-deservingness. And this sense of personal insufficiency is typically one that’s plagued them from early childhood (/basics/child-development).

As children, because they couldn’t get the warmth, caring, validation, or support from their caretakers they so sorely needed, they were forced to conclude that they weren’t good enough—or worthy enough—to warrant them. So their defenses against—or way of *hiding from*—such an impoverished self-image (/basics/identity) were to fabricate an attitude, mindset, or demeanor that might permit them to feel they were actually a lot *more* worthy than others. In fact, so superior to them as to routinely be entitled to special treatment. Intimately related to these exaggerated compensatory mechanisms are their literally anti-social proclivities to deceive (/basics/deception), devalue or debase others—even to show disdain for them.

The final tragedy of their mostly unconscious (/basics/unconscious) stratagems to help them feel better about themselves (unfortunately at others’ expense) is that eventually most, or *all*, of the people they’ve exploited to achieve their self-centered ends (individuals commonly referred to as their “narcissistic supply”) end up deserting them. When that, almost inevitably, occurs, ancient feelings of emptiness, abandonment, and shame return. And do so with such “vengeance” that they’re compelled to turn up their defenses a notch, prompting them to further denigrate—through what’s commonly referred to as “narcissistic rage (/basics/anger)”—those now able to see through their phony façade.

Such an inflamed reaction constitutes a frenetic, last-ditch effort to protect their gravely threatened vulnerability. And if this defense fails them, they’re likely to sink into a severe depression (/basics/depression/depression-and-society), hardly distinguishable from what they experienced earlier as children—before, that is, they pretty much contrived to shut down their softer feelings altogether. Which is the reason their partners find them lacking both in empathy and emotional accessibility.

What, all along, they desperately required to rectify—however artificially and superficially—the serious deficits in their sense of self has depended on the outside world’s acknowledging them in a far more positive way than did their parents or early environment (/basics/environment). So when their grandiose defenses can’t succeed in compensating them for what was so disturbingly missing

in their past, the intense vulnerability they've spent their whole lives trying to *escape* can hit them like the most vicious slap across their face. And, *given how their highly rigid defense system has come to define their very personality (/basics/personality)*, even in such crises they're unable to sustain any (purely pragmatic) shift in behavior. In fact, they're far more likely to *repeat* these ultimately self-defeating behaviors—but with greater intensity or vehemence.

So let's now take an even closer look at the narcissist's characteristic defenses. Further exploring their psychological armor will help us better understand how—despite its overall effectiveness in safeguarding their extreme vulnerability—it's ultimately counter-productive. For it actually guarantees that they'll never come anywhere close to fulfilling their heart's innermost desires. Which is simply to believe that *who they are* (with no “embellishments”) is okay and acceptable—in a word, *lovable*. Such an idea about themselves is diametrically opposed to their implicit, and hopelessly grandiose, belief that to be okay they need to be no less than perfect and constantly get others to, enviously, look up to them.



Source: Narcissist's Little Sister, Deviant Art, Used with Permission

Such self-exaltation is intimately tied to their similar traits—or actually *defenses*—of arrogance, interpersonal exploitiveness, sense of superiority, and (as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (<http://www.dsm5.org/Pages/Default.aspx>)—DSM-5—puts it) “preoccup[ation] with fantasies (/basics/fantasies) of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty (/basics/beauty), or ideal love (/basics/relationships).” These personality features are a reaction—or better, overreaction—to truly enormous self-doubt. And such doubt is rarely “on display,” though to the astute observer in various situations it's clearly *betrayed*.

That is, though on the surface their self-regard would appear to suggest confidence (if not cockiness), all this bravado masks what in themselves they secretly fear (/basics/fear) is defective or unworthy. And what makes this much more negative sense of self even trickier to discern is the fact that many of them, in their desperate attempts to convince others of their superiority, are

highly motivated to achieve much more than most people. For this will give them something to *really* brag about. And narcissists can be among the most boastful—and sometimes obnoxious!—of people (Donald Trump, anyone?).

As I describe it in an earlier piece on narcissism: “Given their customary ‘drivenness,’ it’s not uncommon for them to rise to positions of power and influence, as well as amass a fortune (and see here my post ‘Narcissism: Why It’s So Rampant in Politics.’

(<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201112/narcissism-why-its-so-rampant-in-politics>) 2011).” And to better grasp the dynamics of their driven behavior, I then add: “But if we examine what’s beneath the surface of such elevated social, political, or economic stature—or their accomplishments (which they frequently exaggerate)—what typically can be inferred is a degree of insecurity vastly beyond anything they might be willing to avow.”

And here’s how I characterize their worrisome uncertainties: “In various ways they’re constantly driven to *prove* themselves, both to others and to their *not-so-confident* “inner child” self. This is the self-doubting, recessive part of their being that, though well hidden from sight, is nonetheless afflicted with feelings and fears of inferiority. Inasmuch as their elaborate defense system effectively wards off their having to face what their bravado masks, they’re highly skilled at exhibiting, or ‘posturing,’ exceptionally high self-esteem. But their deeper insecurities are yet discernible in their so often fishing for compliments. . . .” (L. Seltzer, “6 Signs of Narcissism You May Not Know About,” (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201311/6-signs-narcissism-you-may-not-know-about>)2013).

The narcissist’s symptomatic need for admiration is all about propping up an extraordinarily fragile ego. So when they’re unable to get such outward adulation, they can collapse from within. The PDM summarizes their dilemma this way:

“The characteristic subjective experience of narcissistic individuals is a sense of inner emptiness and meaninglessness that requires recurrent infusions of external confirmation of their importance and value. . . . When the



Source: Self-Love, Pixabay, Used with Permission

environment fails to provide such evidence, narcissistic individuals feel depressed, shamed, and envious (/basics/jealousy) of those who succeed in attaining the supplies that they lack.”

This vulnerability is also suggested by just how *defensive* narcissists can be when others negatively evaluate them. At the same time that they’re super-critical of others (so as to regularly “remind” themselves of their superiority), their egos are so frail that when someone attacks their words or actions they can fly into what I’ve already alluded to as an unruly “narcissistic rage.” As I explain it in my *PT* article, “The Narcissist’s Dilemma: They Can Dish It Out, But . . .”

(<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201110/the-narcissists-dilemma-they->

gr: to them. . . . Deep down, clinging desperately not simply to a positive but grandiose sense of self, they’re compelled at all costs to block out any negative feedback about themselves.”

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After all, as chi r ign ir ca stan them, or
held to unrealistically high standards they couldn’t meet. In consequence, they needed to develop really potent defenses against the loneliness (/basics/loneliness), rejection, hurt and humiliation so inextricably linked to such abusive parenting (/basics/parenting). However unconsciously, over time they contrived to “pump up” their deflated ego through at least cultivating the *illusion* that they were actually far superior to the detrimental messages repeatedly received in growing up. They needed—and with as much psychological vigor as possible—to combat the unfavorable assumptions about self they earlier imbibed from their parents (who were woefully insensitive as to how their words could so deeply wound their offspring)..

And this is the well-known “narcissistic injury,” which has provided the focal point for many writers seeking to characterize the remarkable phenomenon of pathological narcissism. Having had

parents incapable of supplying the nurturing that they (like everybody else) required, narcissists are compelled to cajole or coerce others to function as “*surrogate* narcissistic supplies.” Doing so is a constituent element in their notorious habit of not simply using others but “objectifying” them—which, in this sense, almost has a certain childlike “innocence” to it.

Such derogative objectification also serves the purpose of lessening their vulnerability by reducing any power that, alternatively, others might have over them. (Not to mention its deep-rooted connection to their pronounced lack of empathy.) Having learned earlier not to trust anyone—the outcome of the emotional pain inflicted on them by insufficiently caring, non-approving parents—they refuse to accept the risks associated with allowing another to get really close to them.

So if they're to feel safe in the context of an intimate relationship, they need to keep their partner at a distance. And the exorbitant cost of avoiding any emotional hazards by acting in this radically self-protective way is that true intimacy with another remains forever beyond their reach. And the grave misfortune in their decision to safeguard their (actually *false*) self should by now be obvious.

For in refusing (or being *unable*) to open up their heart to others, they prevent themselves from ever getting what—deep, deep down and totally out of their awareness—they most desire. . . . And oh-so-desperately need.

NOTE 1: As a blogger for *Psychology Today*, I've written quite a few posts on the subject of narcissism. If you'd like to explore them, here are their titles and links:

[“The Vampire's Bite: The Victims of Narcissists Speak Out”](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201404/the-vampire-s-bite-victims-narcissists-speak-out)

[\(https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201404/the-vampire-s-bite-victims-narcissists-speak-out\)](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201404/the-vampire-s-bite-victims-narcissists-speak-out)

[“9 Enlightening Quotes on Narcissists—and Why”](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201404/9-enlightening-quotes-narcissists-and-why)

[\(https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201404/9-enlightening-quotes-narcissists-and-why\)](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201404/9-enlightening-quotes-narcissists-and-why)

[“6 Signs of Narcissism You May Not Know About”](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201311/6-signs-narcissism-you-may-not-know-about)

[\(https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201311/6-signs-narcissism-you-may-not-know-about\)](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201311/6-signs-narcissism-you-may-not-know-about)

[“Narcissism: Why It’s So Rampant in Politics” \(https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201112/narcissism-why-its-so-rampant-in-politics\)](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201112/narcissism-why-its-so-rampant-in-politics)

["The Narcissist's Dilemma: They Can Dish It Out, But . . ."](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201110/the-narcissists-dilemma-they-can-dish-it-out)

[\(https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201110/the-narcissists-dilemma-they-can-dish-it-out\)](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201110/the-narcissists-dilemma-they-can-dish-it-out)

[“Our Egos: Do They Need Strengthening—or Shrinking?”](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/200809/our-egos-do-they-need-strengthening-or-shrinking?)

[\(https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/200809/our-egos-do-they-need-strengthening-or-shrinking\)](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/200809/our-egos-do-they-need-strengthening-or-shrinking?)

[“LeBron James: The Making of a Narcissist” \(Parts 1](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201007/lebron-james-the-making-narcissist-part-1-2)

[\(https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201007/lebron-james-the-making-narcissist-part-1-2\)](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201007/lebron-james-the-making-narcissist-part-1-2) & [2 \(https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201007/lebron-james-the-making-narcissist-part-2-2\)](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201007/lebron-james-the-making-narcissist-part-2-2))

[“Reality as a Horror Movie: The Case of the Deadly Sweat Lodge” \(Parts 1](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/200911/reality-horror-movie-the-case-the-deadly-sweat-lodge-part-1)

[\(https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/200911/reality-horror-movie-the-case-the-deadly-sweat-lodge-part-1\)](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/200911/reality-horror-movie-the-case-the-deadly-sweat-lodge-part-1) & [2 \(https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/200911/reality-horror-movie-the-case-the-deadly-sweat-lodge\)](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/200911/reality-horror-movie-the-case-the-deadly-sweat-lodge)—centering on James Arthur Ray).

NOTE 2: If you know of others who might be interested in the subject of this post, please consider forwarding them its link.

NOTE 3: Finally, if you’d like to check out my writings for *Psychology Today* online generally—on a broad variety of psychological topics—click [here \(http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self\)](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self).

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