

# The Narcissist's Dilemma: They Can Dish It Out, But .

Sure, the narcissist's many defenses protect them--but at what cost? [SHARE](#)

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The ability to take criticism well depends mostly on how secure we feel about ourselves. Yet it could hardly be said that any of us actually *enjoys* being criticized. For it's a challenge to avoid feeling defensive when we experience ourselves as attacked. At such times, it's more "natural"--or rather, more aligned with our conditioning--to go into self-protective mode. And typically, the way we choose to protect ourselves is through denying the criticism, indignantly turning on the criticizer, or hastening to disengage from the uncomfortable situation entirely.

Such a well-nigh universal tendency is elevated almost to an art form with those afflicted with narcissistic personality disorder (/conditions/narcissistic-personality-disorder) (NPD). When criticized, narcissists show themselves woefully incapable of retaining any emotional poise, or receptivity. And it really doesn't much matter whether the nature (/basics/environment) of that criticism is constructive or destructive. They just don't seem to be able to take criticism, period. At the same time, these disturbed individuals demonstrate an abnormally developed capacity to criticize others (as in, "dish it out" to them).

Although narcissists don't (or won't) show it, all perceived criticism feels gravely threatening to them (the reason that their inflamed, over-the-top reactions to it can leave us so surprised and

confused). 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. Their dilemma is that the rigidity of their defenses, their inability ever to let their guard down (even with those closest to them), guarantees that they'll never get what they most need, which they themselves are sadly--no, *tragically*--oblivious of.

To better grasp why narcissists are so ready to attack others *and* so unable to deal with being attacked themselves, it's useful to understand something about their childhood ([/basics/child-development](#)). People aren't born narcissistic--it's powerful environmental influences that cause them to become so.

As a caveat, however, I should add that no single theory adequately accounts for every instance of NPD. The explanation I'll be offering, though seminal among those proposed, is still just one of several. But even though it's a bit oversimplified, I think it elucidates the essential dynamic of the narcissistic ([/basics/narcissism](#)) defense system better than any of the theoretical alternatives.



Briefly, in growing up future narcissists had many reasons to doubt whether they were good enough. Neglected and ignored, or constantly disparaged and berated by their parents ([/basics/parenting](#)), they were held to unrealistically high standards of behavior. And their caretakers were quick to judge them whenever they failed to live up to such unreasonable, perfectionist ([/basics/perfectionism](#)) expectations. As a result, they couldn't help but feel defective, not okay, and insecure, doubting their fundamental worth as humans. In most instances, neither did they feel cared about or wanted--as though they were factory seconds,

to be tolerated but not respected or loved. Anxiously experiencing their bond to their parents as tenuous (for regardless of how hard they tried, they never seemed able to acquire their approval or validation), in their head they cultivated an imaginary "ideal self" that *could* get the parental acceptance--even adulation--they craved. If narcissistic adults project an air of importance,

superiority, entitlement, and grandiosity, it's a pronounced reaction (or over-reaction) to the massive self-doubt that, frankly, they keep well-hidden beneath the self-satisfied facade they present to others.

The narcissist's marked lack of accurate empathy (/basics/empathy) for the feelings, wants, and needs of others is all too well known. But what is less appreciated is that this deficiency represents an unfortunate consequence of their growing up so preoccupied with their own frustrated needs--and emotional distress generally--that they could never develop sufficient sensitivity to others. Intensely driven to succeed, or at least see themselves as successful, their focus inevitably became myopic, pathologically self-centered. Others simply weren't in their line of (tunnel) vision.

Without any clear recognition of what's motivating them, in their relationships as adults they continue to seek the encouragement, support, and acceptance denied them earlier. Yet, however unconsciously, at the same time they've cultivated the strongest defenses against ever having to feel so excruciatingly vulnerable again. And so when they're criticized, or *think* they're being criticized (and they're definitely hyper-alert to the possibility), they're compelled to react aggressively, in the frantic effort to avoid re-experiencing the terrible feelings of loneliness (/basics/loneliness), abandonment, or rejection they suffered when they were younger.

It's especially suggestive that two common terms in the psychoanalytic literature used to describe NPD are "narcissistic injury" and "narcissistic rage (/basics/anger)." The "injury" results from their parents' deficiencies in being able to adequately nurture them, and so make them feel loved--a prerequisite for *self-love*. Which is why they need constantly to prove themselves by arrogantly claiming a superiority over others that, alone, can make themselves feel "good enough" to be loved . . . but which, ironically, serves in time only to alienate these others.

It's precisely this need to be viewed as perfect, superlative, or infallible that makes them so hypersensitive to criticism. And their typical reaction to criticism, disagreement, challenges-or sometimes even the mere *suggestion* that they consider doing something differently-can lead to the "narcissistic rage" that is another of their trademarks. To protect their delicate ego in the face of such intensely



felt danger, they're decidedly at risk for going ballistic against their perceived adversary.

All of which indicates just how fragile their artificially bloated sense of self really is. Given the enormity of their defenses, they regard themselves not on a par with, but *above* others. Yet they're mortally threatened when anyone dares question their words or behavior. Ancient fears about not being acceptable are never that far from the surface, which is why narcissists must forever be on their guard with anyone who might disbelieve or doubt them. For any external expression of doubt can tap into their *own* self-doubts.

And this is why, though they can certainly "dish it out" (by way of affirming to themselves their superiority over others), they just can't "take it" themselves. Obviously, if the child part of them was unequivocally convinced about their basic acceptability--was, that is, *adequately integrated* into their adult part--they wouldn't need to boast about (or exaggerate) their accomplishments, or vehemently debate anyone who took exception to their viewpoint. But it's definitely the case with narcissists that they see their best defense as mandating a good offense.

To sum up the above (as well as extend it), when criticized, narcissists--acutely sensitive to negative evaluation--can begin to experience anxiety (/basics/anxiety) or degradation. A certain shame (/basics/embarrassment) at their non-family-bonded core may rise perilously close to consciousness. So, by way of safeguarding themselves from such never-resolved feelings of worthlessness or defeat, they're likely to react to present-day threats with contempt or defiance, or with a verbal violence frequently referred to as "narcissistic rage."

Another way of putting this is that, exquisitely susceptible to criticism because it endangers their frail sense of internal validation, they take great pains to devalue or *invalidate* the person criticizing them. To achieve such dismissal of



the threatening other, they'll do everything possible to negate their viewpoint. And this can include much more than blaming or indignantly challenging them. For narcissists, when their position has been exposed as false, arbitrary, or untenable, will suddenly become evasive, articulate half-truths, lie (actually, as much to themselves as others), flat-out contradict themselves (and to a degree that can leave the other person gaping!), and freely rewrite history (literally--and audaciously--making things up as they go along). This is why at such times they don't seem adults so much as six-year-olds. And in

fact, when others inadvertently trigger mini emotional crises in them, there's little doubt that, both cognitively and emotionally, they can regress to a maturity level of that age (or less).

So what's the final cost of all the narcissist's efforts to ward off what constitutes for them the unbearable sting of criticism? As already suggested, it's immense. Though not consciously realized by them, their heart's deepest desire is to form an intimate bond with another that would successfully address the huge void their parents' denigration or neglect left in them. But because they're so strongly motivated to avoid re-experiencing this keenly felt hurt, their overpowering defenses prevent them from letting anyone get close enough to assist them in recovering from their pain. A pain that they conceal quite as much from themselves as others.

Blaming and excessively criticizing others to shore up an extraordinarily vulnerable ego--and reacting antagonistically in the face of anything regarded as critical of themselves--they keep others at a distance that renders any true intimacy impossible. The way they "set things up" in relationships, particularly intimate relationships, makes their self-created dilemma unsolvable. And if they're married, they can be expected to be especially hard on their spouse.

Recall that they need somehow to see themselves as perfect, for they can't perceive anything less than that as good enough for the critical parent they've internalized (who's now "immortalized" inside their own head). Consequently, they're made extremely uncomfortable whenever their mate--implicitly viewed as an extension, or reflection, of their idealized self--reveals an imperfection or

makes a mistake. In that moment they experience an irresistible urge to *dis-identify* themselves from their partner, for their partner is now inextricably linked to parental disapproval and rejection. At such times, they can be extremely unkind--and yes, even brutal--in how they react to them.

At last, the prodigious defenses of those with NPD simply don't permit them to grow, to evolve, or to take full responsibility for their lives. They're so "bound" by these defenses (which are more varied than I've been able to do justice to here) that there's a stagnant, two-dimensional quality about them. They're not really free to reform, to change, to progress, to expand. Given their considerable drive, they're frequently able to attain more and more *things*. But as Huston Smith wisely declared: "You can never get enough of what you don't really want."



So they remain emotionally and spiritually unfulfilled, hungry for a nebulous something they can't even conceive. Lacking the ego strength that would allow them to be genuinely vulnerable to others--*the* prerequisite for the intimacy they secretly long for--their relationships demonstrate a level of detachment not entirely dissimilar from their original so-hurtful disconnection from their parents. But this time they're not just the victim but the "perpetrator," too.

In attempting to avoid any resurgence of the acute pain they once felt with their non-nurturant caretakers, they succeed only in

muting--or burying--this pain. They're unwilling to take the chance that authentically opening themselves up to another could lead to a personal fulfillment beyond anything they ever experienced in growing up. So, in playing it safe, they present others with an impenetrable facade. And the price they pay for such habitual self-protectiveness is that their wounded inner child--well-hidden beneath their carefully cultivated, false exterior--can never be healed.

**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 the links*:**

**"The Vampire's Bite: The Victims of Narcissists Speak Out."**

(<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201404/the-vampire-s-bite-victims-narcissists-speak-out>)

**"9 Enlightening Quotes on Narcissists—and Why."**

(<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201404/9-enlightening-quotes-narcissists-and-why>)

**"6 Signs of Narcissism You May Not Know About."**

(<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201311/6-signs-narcissism-you-may-not-know-about>)

(<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201311/6-signs-narcissism-you-may-not-know-about>)**"Narcissism: Why It's So Rampant in Politics."**

(<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201112/narcissism-why-its-so-rampant-in-politics>)

**"Our Egos: Do They Need Strengthening—or Shrinking."**

(<http://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 &**

(<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201007/lebron-james-the-making-narcissist-part-1-2>)**2), and** (<http://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 &**

(<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/200911/reality-horror-movie-the-case-the-deadly-sweat-lodge-part-1>)**2—centering on James Arthur Ray).**

(<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/200911/reality-horror-movie-the-case-the-deadly-sweat-lodge-part-2>)

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