

Narcissism

Gifts Differing by Isabel Briggs Myers, Peter B. Myers

The New Personality Self-Portrait by John M. Oldham, Lois B. Morris

Type Talk at Work/How the 16 Personality Types Determine Your Success on the Job by Otto Kroeger, Janet M. Thuesen

What Type Am I? by Renee Baron

Narcissists' self-reports are unreliable. This is troubling, considering that lying is the most common complaint about narcissists and that, in many instances, defects of empathy lead narcissists to **wildly inaccurate** misinterpretations of other people's speech and actions, so that they may believe that they are liked and respected despite a history of callous and exploitative personal interactions.

1. An exaggerated sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements)

Translation: Grandiosity is the hallmark of narcissism. So what is grandiose?

The simplest everyday way that narcissists show their exaggerated sense of self-importance is by talking about family, work, life in general **as if there is nobody else in the picture**. Whatever they may be doing, in their own view, they are the star, and they give the impression that they are bearing heroic responsibility for their family or department or company, that they have to take care of everything because their spouses or co-workers are undependable, uncooperative, or otherwise unfit. They ignore or denigrate the abilities and contributions of others and complain that they receive no help at all; they may inspire your sympathy or admiration for their stoicism in the face of hardship or unstinting self-sacrifice for the good of (undeserving) others. But this everyday grandiosity is an aspect of narcissism that you may never catch on to unless you visit the narcissist's home or workplace and see for yourself that others are involved and are pulling their share of the load and, more often than not, are also pulling the narcissist's share as well. An example is the older woman who told me with a sigh that she knew she hadn't been a perfect mother but she just never had any help at all — and she said this despite knowing that I knew that she had worn out and discarded two devoted husbands and had lived in her parents' pocket (and pocketbook) as long as they lived, quickly blowing her substantial inheritance on flaky business schemes. Another example is claiming unusual benefits or spectacular results from ordinary effort and investment, giving the impression that somehow the narcissist's time and money are worth more than other people's. [Here is an article about recognizing and coping with narcissism in the workplace; it is rather heavy on management jargon and psychobabble, but worth reading. [“The Impact of Narcissism on Leadership and Sustainability”](#) by Bruce Gregory, Ph.D. “When the narcissistic defense is operating in an interpersonal or group setting, the grandiose part does not show its face in public. In public it presents a front of patience, congeniality, and confident reasonableness.”]

In popular usage, the terms **narcissism**, **narcissist**, and **narcissistic** denote absurd vanity and are applied to people whose ambitions and aspirations are much grander than their evident talents. Sometimes these terms are applied to people who are simply full of themselves — even when their real achievements are spectacular. Outstanding performers are not always modest, but they aren't grandiose if their self-assessments are realistic; e.g., Muhammad Ali, then Cassius Clay, was notorious for boasting “I am the greatest!” and also pointing out that he was the prettiest, but he was the greatest and the prettiest for a number of years, so his self-assessments weren't grandiose. Some narcissists are flamboyantly boastful and self-aggrandizing, but many are inconspicuous in public, saving their conceit and autocratic opinions for their nearest and dearest. Common conspicuous grandiose behaviors include expecting special treatment or admiration on the basis of claiming (a) to know important, powerful or famous people or (b) to be extraordinarily intelligent or talented. As a real-life example, I used to have a neighbor who told his wife that he was the youngest person since Sir Isaac Newton to

take a doctorate at Oxford. The neighbor gave no evidence of a world-class education, so I looked up [Newton](#) and found out that Newton had completed his baccalaureate at the age of twenty-two (like most people) and spent his entire academic career at Cambridge. The grandiose claims of narcissists are superficially plausible fabrications, readily punctured by a little critical consideration. The test is performance: do they deliver the goods? (There's also the special situation of a genius who's also strongly narcissistic, as perhaps Frank Lloyd Wright. Just remind yourself that the odds are that you'll meet *at least* 1000 narcissists for every genius you come across.) [More on [grandiosity](#).]

2. Preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love

Translation: Narcissists cultivate solipsistic or "autistic" fantasies, which is to say that they live in their own little worlds (and react with affront when reality dares to intrude).

3. Believes he is "special" and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions)

Translation: Narcissists think that everyone who is not special and superior is worthless. By definition, normal, ordinary, and average aren't special and superior, and so, to narcissists, they are worthless.

4. Requires excessive admiration

Translation: Excessive in two ways: they want praise, compliments, deference, and expressions of envy all the time, and they want to be told that everything they do is better than what others can do. Sincerity is not an issue here; all that matter are frequency and volume.

5. Has a sense of entitlement

Translation: They expect automatic compliance with their wishes or especially favorable treatment, such as thinking that they should always be able to go first and that other people should stop whatever they're doing to do what the narcissists want, and may react with hurt or rage when these expectations are frustrated.

6. Selfishly takes advantage of others to achieve his own ends

Translation: Narcissists use other people to get what they want without caring about the cost to the other people.

7. Lacks empathy

Translation: They are unwilling to recognize or sympathize with other people's feelings and needs. They "tune out" when other people want to talk about their own problems.

In clinical terms, empathy is the ability to recognize and interpret other people's emotions. Lack of empathy may take two different directions: (a) accurate interpretation of others' emotions with no concern for others' distress, which is characteristic of psychopaths; and (b) the inability to recognize and accurately interpret other people's emotions, which is the NPD style. This second form of defective empathy may (rarely) go so far as alexithymia, or no words for emotions, and is found with psychosomatic illnesses, i.e., medical conditions in which emotion is experienced somatically rather than psychically. People with personality disorders don't have the normal body-ego identification and regard their bodies only instrumentally, i.e., as tools to use to get what they want, or, in bad states, as torture chambers that inflict on them meaningless suffering. Self-described narcissists who've written to me say that they are aware that their feelings are different from other people's, mostly that they feel less, both in strength and variety (and which the narcissists interpret as evidence of their own superiority);

some narcissists report “numbness” and the inability to perceive meaning in other people’s emotions.

8. Is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him

Translation: No translation needed.

9. Shows arrogant, haughty, patronizing, or contemptuous behaviors or attitudes

Translation: They treat other people like dirt.

Nearly everyone has some narcissistic traits. It’s possible to be arrogant, selfish, conceited, or out of touch without being a narcissist. The practical test, so far as I know, is that with normal people, no matter how difficult, you can get some improvements, at least temporarily, by saying, essentially, “Please have a heart.” This doesn’t work with narcissists; in fact, it usually makes things worse. [See [discussion](#) of the relationship between normal personality traits and personality disorders.]

It’s impossible to overemphasize the importance of narcissists’ lack of empathy. It colors everything about them. I have observed very closely some narcissists I’ve loved, and their inability to pay attention when someone else is talking is so striking that it has often seemed to me that they have neurological problems that affect their cognitive functioning. These are educated people with high IQs, who’ve had ordinary middle-class backgrounds and schooling, and their thinking is not only illogical but weird: with narcissists, you have to know them pretty well to understand their behavior. For instance, they always fill in their gaps (which make up just about the entirety of their visible life) with bits of behavior, ideas, tastes, opinions, etc., borrowed from someone else whom they regard as an authority. Their authoritative sources, as far as I know, are always people they’ve actually known, not something from a book, for instance, and narcissists’ opinions may actually come from someone you know, too, but who is not to you obviously an authority on the matter at hand, so narcissists can seem totally arbitrary, virtually random in their motivations and reasoning. They are evidently transfixed by a static fantasy image of themselves, like Narcissus gazing at his reflection, and this produces an odd kind of stillness and passivity. Because their inner life is so restricted and essentially dead, it doesn’t contain images of how to live a full life — these things are not important to them, they expect others to look after day-to-day chores, they resent wasting their specialness on common things, they don’t put their heart into their work (though they’ll tell you how many hours they put into it), they borrow their opinions and preferences and tastes from whomever strikes them as authoritative at the moment.

From my personal experience, and from what I’ve seen in the clinical literature, narcissists don’t talk about their inner life — memories, dreams, reflections — much at all. They rarely recount dreams. They seem not to make typical memory associations — i.e., in the way one thing leads to another, “That reminds me of something that happened when I was...of something I read...of something somebody said...” They don’t tell how they learned something about themselves or the world. They don’t share their thoughts or feelings or dreams. They don’t say, “I have an idea and need some help,” or “There’s something I’ve always wanted to do...did you ever want to do that?” They do not discuss how they’ve overcome difficulties they’ve encountered or continuing problems that they’re trying to solve (beyond trying to get someone else to do what they want). They often say that they don’t remember things from the past, such as childhood events, their schooldays or old friends, and it seems to me that they really don’t most of the time. Anyhow, for all these reasons, I’ve tried to refrain from speculating about (i.e., novelizing) what goes on in their heads. Writer [John Cheever](#) (who recorded having been diagnosed as a narcissist when he went to marriage counseling at his wife’s insistence) describes some of his persistent fantasy images — and, with Cheever, they’re very striking, as you’ll know if you’ve read any of his fiction; his characters and plots tend to be narcissistic (i.e., self-obsessed tunnel vision spiraling into nihilism), but his stories often contain memorably glorious set pieces or tableaux, such as the the hunt for the golden Easter egg in one of the *Wapshot* novels. Cheever also gives

unself-conscious expression to the ways in which his obsessive preoccupation with himself (and his penis — sort of a magic wand in his mind) obstructed his ability to relate to his wife and children, obstructed even his ability to perceive them: to see what they looked like, to pay attention to what they said and did, though with Cheever everything is also soaked with the sorrows of gin. Alice Adams's novel, *Almost Perfect*, also gives things from a narcissistic point of view in a way that I found convincing and credible, based on my personal experience of narcissistic individuals. A striking thing about narcissists that you'll notice if you know them for a long time is that their ideas of themselves and the world don't change with experience; the ones I've known have been stalled at a vision that came to them by the age of sixteen.

There are different [theories](#) of how narcissists are made. Some psychologists trace NPD to early infantile neglect or abuse, and some blame over-indulgence and indiscriminate praise by parents who don't set limits on what's acceptable from their children. Others say that NPD shows up in adolescence. Some say narcissists tend to peak around middle age and then mellow out. Others say that narcissists stay pretty much the same except they tend to depression as they get older and their grandiose fantasies are not supported, plus they're not as good-looking as they used to be. The narcissists I've known have apparently always been "that way" and they get worse as they get older, with dramatic regression of their personas after the deaths of their parents and other personal authority figures who have previously exerted some control over the narcissists' bad behavior. And, yes, chronic depression gets to be obvious at least by their forties but may have always been present. Depressed narcissists blame the world, of course, and not themselves for their personal disappointments.

Essentially, narcissists are unable or unwilling to trust either the world or other people to meet their needs. Perhaps they were born to parents unable to connect emotionally and, thus, as infants learned not to let another person be essential to them in any way. Perhaps NPD starts later, when intrusive or abusive parents make it dangerous for the child to accept other people's opinions and valuations. Maybe it comes from a childhood environment of being treated like royalty or little gods. Whatever the case, narcissists have made the terrible choice not to love. In their imaginations, they are complete unto themselves, perfect and not in need of anything anyone else can give them. (NB: Narcissists do not count their real lives — i.e., what they do every day and the people they do it with — as worth anything.) Their lives are impoverished and sterile; the price they pay for their golden fantasies is high: they'll never share a dream for two.

Now, it **is** possible to have a relatively smooth relationship with a narcissist, and it's possible to maintain it for a long time. The first requirement for this, though, is distance: this simply cannot be done with a narcissist you live with. Given distance, or only transient and intermittent contact, you can get along with narcissists by treating them as infants: you give them whatever they want or need whenever they ask and do not expect any reciprocation at all, do not expect them to show the slightest interest in you or your life (or even in why you're bothering with them at all), do not expect them to be able to do anything that you need or want, do not expect them to apologize or make amends or show any consideration for your feelings, do not expect them to take ordinary responsibility in any way. But note: they are not infants; infants develop and mature and require this kind of care for only a brief period, after which they are on the road to autonomy and looking after themselves, whereas narcissists never outgrow their demands for dedicated attention to their infantile needs 168 hours a week. Adult narcissists can be as demanding of your time and energy as little babies but without the gratification of their growing or learning anything from what they suck from you. Babies love you back, but adult narcissists are like vampires: they will take all you can give while giving nothing back, then curse you for running dry and discard you as a waste of their precious time.

It is also essential that you keep emotional distance from narcissists. They're pretty good at maintaining a conventional persona in superficial associations with people who mean absolutely nothing to them, and they'll flatter the hell out of you if you have something they can use or if, for some reason, they perceive you as an authority figure. That is, as long as they think you don't count **or** they're afraid of you, they'll treat you well enough that you may mistake it for love. But, as soon as you try to get close to them, they'll say that **you** are too demanding — and, if you ever say "I love you," they'll

presume that you belong to them as a possession or an appendage, and treat you very very badly right away. The abrupt change from decent treatment to outright abuse is very shocking and bewildering, and it's so contrary to normal experience that I was plenty old before I realized that it was actually my expression of affection that triggered the narcissists' **nasty** reactions. Once they know you are emotionally attached to them, they expect to be able to use you like an appliance and shove you around like a piece of furniture. If you object, then they'll say that obviously you don't really love them or else you'd let them do whatever they want with you. If you should be so uppity as to express a mind and heart of your own, then they will cut you off — just like that, sometimes trashing you and all your friends on the way out the door. The narcissist will treat you just like a broken toy or tool or an unruly body part: "If thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off" [Matt. 18:8]. **This means you.**

So, yes, it's possible to get along with narcissists, but it's probably not worth bothering with. If family members are narcissists, you have my deep sympathy. If people you work with are narcissists, you will be wise to keep an eye on them, if just for your own protection, because they don't think very well, no matter what their IQs, they feel that the rules (of anything) don't apply to them, and they will always cut corners and cheat wherever they think they can get away with it, not to mention alienating co-workers, clients, and customers by their arrogance, lies, malice, and off-the-wall griping. Narcissists are threatened and enraged by trivial disagreements, mistakes, and misunderstandings, plus they have evil mouths and will say **ANYTHING**, so if you continue to live or work with narcissists, expect to have to clean up after them, expect to lose friends over them, expect big trouble sooner or later.

If you're reading this because of problems with someone you know now, the chances are excellent that one or both of your parents was a narcissist. Narcissists are so much trouble that only people with special prior training (i.e., who were raised by narcissists) get seriously involved with them. Sometimes narcissists' children become narcissists, too, but this is by no means inevitable, provided stable love was given by someone, such as the non-narcissist parent or grandparents. Beyond that, a happy marriage will heal many old wounds for the narcissist's child. But, even though children of narcissists don't automatically become narcissists themselves and can survive with enough intact psychically to lead happy and productive lives away from their narcissistic parents, because we all love our parents whether they can love us back or not, children of narcissists are kind of bent — "You can't get blood out of a stone," but children of narcissists keep trying, as if by bonding with new narcissists we could somehow cure our narcissistic parents by finding the key to their heart. Thus, we've been trained to keep loving people who can't love us back, and we will often tolerate or actively work to maintain connections with narcissistic individuals whom others, lacking our special training, find alienating and repellent from first contact, setting ourselves up to be hurt yet again in the same old way. Once narcissists know that you care for them, they'll suck you dry — demand all your time, be more work than a newborn babe — and they'll test your love by outrageous demands and power moves. In their world, love is a weakness and saying "I love you" is asking to be hurt, so be careful: they'll hurt you out of a sort of sacred duty. They can't or won't trust, so they will test your total devotion. If you won't submit to their tyranny, then you will be discarded as "no good," "a waste of time," "you don't really love me or you'd do whatever I ask," "I give up on you." (Note: In many instances, narcissists' demands are not only outrageous but also impossible to fulfill even if you want to please them. Plus if you actually want to do what they want you to do, that would be too much like sharing, so they won't want it anymore.)

If you've had a narcissist for a parent, you are probably not afraid of dying and going to hell — you have lived hell on Earth. Narcissists cannot be satisfied and do a tremendous amount of damage to their children and partners in their relentless demand for a perfect outer appearance to reflect the perfect inner image that obsesses them. *Kyrie eleison.*

Here follows a discussion of [traits](#) I've observed in the half-dozen or so narcissists of both sexes that I've known well over many years. Remember that narcissism is a personality disorder and narcissists'

personalities are disordered: they don't make sense! They are not concerned with making sense and they are also impulsive, so you will waste your time trying to understand the details of every little thing they do.

Almost everyone has some narcissistic traits, but being conceited, argumentative, or selfish sometimes (or even all the time) doesn't amount to a personality disorder. [Narcissistic Personality Disorder](#) is a long-term pattern of abnormal thinking, feeling, and behavior in many different situations. The traits on this page will seem *peculiar* or *disturbing* when someone acts this way — i.e., you will know that something is not right, and contact with narcissists may make you feel bad about yourself. It's not unusual for narcissists to be outstanding in their field of work. But these are the successful people who have a history of alienating colleagues, co-workers, employees, students, clients, and customers — people go away mad or sad after close contact with narcissists.

How many narcissists does it take to change a light bulb?

- (a) *Just one — but he has to wait for the whole world to revolve around him.*
(b) *None at all — he hires menials for work that's beneath him.*
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This is a compilation of observations I've made from various people I've known well for many years. Most of these traits apply to all of the narcissists I've known, but that doesn't mean that they'll all apply to the narcissists you know. My narcissists are all high-functioning — that is, they've maintained gainful employment, marriages and family life — and there may certainly be narcissistic traits that I haven't observed among the narcissists I've known. You can go directly to my [full commentary](#) on narcissists' traits or you can select what you're most interested in from the [pink box](#) below. Narcissism is a personality disorder and that means that narcissists' personalities aren't organized in a way that makes sense to most people, so the notes below do not necessarily go in the order I've listed them or in any order at all. Interaction with narcissists is confusing, even bewildering — their reasons for what they do are not the same as normal reasons. In fact, treating them like normal people (e.g., appealing to their better nature, as in "Please have a heart," or giving them the chance to apologize and make amends) will make matters worse with a narcissist.

[For general discussion of cognition, affectivity, interpersonal functioning, and impulse control in [personality disorders](#) and [NPD](#). It's also interesting to compare these traits below with [characteristics of normal six-year-olds](#).]

[amoral/conscienceless](#)
[authoritarian](#)
[care only about appearances](#)
[contemptuous](#)
[critical of others](#)
[cruel](#)
[disappointing gift-givers](#)
[don't recognize own feelings](#)
[envious and competitive](#)
[feel entitled](#)
[flirtatious or seductive](#)
[grandiose](#)
[hard to have a good time with](#)
[hate to live alone](#)
[hyper-sensitive to criticism](#)
[impulsive](#)
[lack sense of humor](#)
[naive](#)

passive
pessimistic
religious
secretive
self-contradictory
stingy
strange work habits
unusual eating habits
weird sense of time

The most telling thing that narcissists do is **contradict themselves**. They will do this virtually in the same sentence, without even stopping to take a breath. It can be trivial (e.g., about what they want for lunch) or it can be serious (e.g., about whether or not they love you). When you ask them which one they mean, they'll deny ever saying the first one, though it may literally have been only seconds since they said it — really, how could you think they'd ever have said *that*? You need to have your head examined! They will contradict FACTS. They will lie to you about things that you did together. They will misquote you to yourself. If you disagree with them, they'll say you're lying, making stuff up, or are crazy. [At this point, if you're like me, you sort of panic and want to talk to anyone who will listen about what is going on: this is a healthy reaction; it's a reality check ("who's the crazy one here?"); that you're confused by the narcissist's contrariness, that you turn to another person to help you keep your bearings, that you know something is seriously wrong and worry that it might be you are all signs that you are not a narcissist]. NOTE: Normal people can behave irrationally under emotional stress — be confused, deny things they know, get sort of paranoid, want to be babied when they're in pain. But normal people recover pretty much within an hour or two or a day or two, and, with normal people, your expressions of love and concern for their welfare will be taken to heart. They will be stabilized by your emotional and moral support. Not so with narcissists — the surest way I know of to get a crushing blow to your heart is to tell a narcissist you love her or him. They will respond with a nasty power move, such as telling you to do things entirely their way or else be banished from them for ever. ^

If you're like me, you get into disputes with narcissists over their casual dishonesty and **cruelty** to other people. Trying to reform narcissists by reasoning with them or by appealing to their better nature is about as effective as spitting in the ocean. What you see is what you get: they have no better nature. The fundamental problem here is that narcissists lack empathy.

Lacking empathy is a profound disturbance to the narcissist's thinking (cognition) and feeling (affectivity). Even when very intelligent, narcissists can't reason well. One I've worked with closely does something I characterize as "analysis by eggbeater." They don't understand the meaning of what people say and they don't grasp the meaning of the written word either — because so much of the meaning of anything we say depends on context and affect, narcissists (lacking empathy and thus lacking both context and affect) hear only the words. (Discussions with narcissists can be really weird and disconcerting; they seem to think that using some of the same words means that they are following a line of conversation or reasoning. Thus, they will go off on tangents and irrelevancies, apparently in the blithe delusion that they understand what others are talking about.) And, frankly, they don't hear all the words, either. They can pay attention only to stuff that has them in it. This is not merely a bad habit — it's a cognitive deficiency. Narcissists pay attention only to themselves and stuff that affects them personally. However, since they don't know what other people are doing, narcissists can't judge what will affect them personally and seem never to learn that when they cause trouble they will get trouble back. They won't take other people's feelings into consideration and so they overlook the fact that other people will react with feeling when abused or exploited and that most people get really pissed off by being lied to or lied about. ^

Narcissists **lack a mature conscience** and seem to be restrained only by fear of being punished or of damaging their reputations — though, again, this can be obscure to casual observation if you don't know what they think their reputations are, and what they believe others think of them may be way out

of touch with reality [see remarks on [John Cheever](#) elsewhere on this page]. Their moral intelligence is about at the level of a bright five- or six-year-old; the only rules they recognize are things that have been specifically required, permitted, prohibited, or disapproved of by authority figures they know personally. Anyhow, narcissists can't be counted on not to do something **just because** it's wrong, illegal, or will hurt someone, as long as they think that they can get away with it or that you can't stop them or punish them (i.e., they don't care what you think unless they're afraid of you). [^]

Narcissists are **envious and competitive** in ways that are hard to understand. For instance, one I knew once became incensed over an article published in a national magazine — not for its content exactly, but because **she** could have written something just as good. Maybe she could have — she hadn't, but that little lapse on her part was beside the point to her. They are constantly comparing themselves (and whatever they feel belongs to them, such as their children and furniture) to other people. Narcissists feel that, unless they are better than anyone else, they are worse than everybody in the whole world. [^]

Narcissists are generally **contemptuous** of others. This seems to spring, at base, from their general lack of empathy, and it comes out as (at best) a dismissive attitude towards other people's feelings, wishes, needs, concerns, standards, property, work, etc. It is also connected to their overall [negative outlook on life](#). [^]

Narcissists are (a) **extremely sensitive to personal criticism** and (b) **extremely critical of other people**. They think that they must **be seen as** perfect or superior or infallible, next to god-like (if not actually divine, then sitting on the right hand of God) — or else they are worthless. There's no middle ground of ordinary normal humanity for narcissists. They can't tolerate the least disagreement. In fact, if you say, "Please don't do that again — it hurts," narcissists will turn around and do it again **harder** to prove that they were right the first time; their reasoning seems to be something like "I am a good person and can do no wrong; therefore, I didn't hurt you and you are lying about it now..." — sorry, folks, I get lost after that. Anyhow, narcissists are habitually cruel in little ways, as well as big ones, because they're paying attention to their fantasy and not to you, but the bruises on you are REAL, not in your imagination. Thus, no matter how gently you suggest that they might do better to change their ways or get some help, they will react in one of two equally horrible ways: they will attack or they will withdraw. Be wary of wandering into this dragon's cave — narcissists will say ANYTHING, they will trash anyone in their own self-justification, and then they will expect the immediate restoration of the status quo. They will attack you (sometimes physically) and spew a load of bile, insult, abuse, contempt, threats, etc., and then — well, it's kind of like they had indigestion and the vicious tirade worked like a burp: "There. Now I feel better. Where were we?" They feel better, so they expect you to feel better, too. They will say you are nothing, worthless, and turn around immediately and say that they love you. When you object to this kind of treatment, they will say, "You just have to accept me the way I am. (God made me this way, so God loves me even if you are too stupid to understand how special I am.)" Accepting them as they are (and staying away from them entirely) is excellent advice. The other "punishment" narcissists mete out is banishing you from their glorious presence — this can turn into a farce, since by this point you are probably praying to be rescued, "Dear God! How do I get out of this?" The narcissist expects that you will be devastated by the withdrawal of her/his divine attention, so that after a while — a few weeks or months (i.e., the next time the narcissist needs to use you for something) — the narcissist will expect you to have learned your lesson and be eager to return to the fold. If you have learned your lesson, you won't answer that call. They can't see that they have a problem; it's always somebody else who has the problem and needs to change. Therapies work at all only when the individual wants to change and, though narcissists hate their real selves, they don't want to change — they want the world to change. **And they criticize, gripe, and complain about almost everything and almost everyone almost all the time.** There are usually a favored few whom narcissists regard as absolutely above reproach, even for egregious misconduct or actual crime, and about whom they won't brook the slightest criticism. These are people the narcissists are terrified of, though they'll tell you that what they feel is love and respect; apparently they don't know the difference between fear and

love. Narcissists just get worse and worse as they grow older; their parents and other authority figures that they've feared die off, and there's less and less outside influence to keep them in check. ^

Narcissists are hostile and ferocious in reaction, but they are generally **passive** and lacking in initiative. They don't start stuff — they don't reach out. Remember this when they turn and rend you! They will complain about the same things for years on end, but only rarely do anything to change what dissatisfies them so badly. ^

Narcissists are **naive** and vulnerable, pathetic really, no matter how arrogant and forceful their words or demeanor. They have pretty good reasons for their paranoia and cynicism, their sneakiness, evasiveness, prevarications. This is the one I get suckered on. They are so out of touch with other people and what goes on around them that they are very susceptible to exploitation. On the other hand, they're so inattentive, and so disconnected from what other people are up to, that they don't recognize when someone is taking advantage of them. ^

Narcissists are **grandiose**. They live in an artificial self invented from fantasies of absolute or perfect power, genius, beauty, etc. Normal people's fantasies of themselves, their wishful thinking, take the form of stories — these stories often come from movies or TV, or from things they've read or that were read to them as children. They involve a plot, heroic activity or great accomplishments or adventure: normal people see themselves in action, however preposterous or even impossible that action may be — they see themselves doing things that earn them honor, glory, love, riches, fame, and they see these fantasy selves as personal potentials, however tenuous, something they'd do if they didn't have to go to school or go to work, if they had the time and the money.

As Freud said of narcissists, these people act like they're in love with themselves. And they are in love with an ideal image of themselves — or they want you to be in love with their pretend self, it's hard to tell just what's going on. Like anyone in love, their attention and energy are drawn to the beloved and away from everyday practicalities. Narcissists' fantasies are static — they've fallen in love with an image in a mirror or, more accurately, in a pool of water, so that movement causes the image to dissolve into ripples; to see the adored reflection they must remain perfectly still. Narcissists' fantasies are tableaux or scenes, stage sets; narcissists are hung up on a particular picture that they think reflects their true selves (as opposed to the real self — warts and all). Narcissists don't see themselves doing anything except being adored, and they don't see anyone else doing anything except adoring them. Moreover, they don't see these images as potentials that they **may** some day be able to live out, if they get lucky or everything goes right: they see these pictures as the real way they want to be seen right now (which is not the same as saying they think these pictures are the way they really are right now, but that is another story to be discussed elsewhere). Sometimes narcissistic fantasies are spectacularly grandiose — imagining themselves as Jesus or a saint or hero or deity depicted in art — but just as often the fantasies of narcissists are mediocre and vulgar, concocted from illustrations in popular magazines, sensational novels, comic books even. These artificial self fantasies are also static in time, going back unchanged to early adolescence or even to childhood; the narcissists' self-images don't change with time, so that you will find, for instance, female narcissists clinging to retro styles, still living the picture of the perfect woman of 1945 or 1965 as depicted in *The Ladies' Home Journal* or *Seventeen* or *Vogue* of that era, and male narcissists still hung up on images of comic-book or ripping adventure heroes from their youth. Though narcissists like pictures rather than stories, they like still pictures, not moving ones, so they don't base their fantasies on movies or TV.

Narcissists have **little sense of humor**. They don't get jokes, not even the funny papers or simple riddles, and they don't make jokes, except for sarcastic cracks and the lamest puns. This is because, lacking empathy, they don't get the context and affect of words or actions, and jokes, humor, comedy depend entirely on context and affect. They specialize in sarcasm about others and mistake it for wit, but, in my experience, narcissists are entirely incapable of irony — thus, I've been chagrined more than once to discover that something I'd taken as an intentional pose or humorous put-on was, in fact,

something the narcissist was totally serious about. Which is to say that they come mighty close to parody in their pretensions and pretending, so that they can be very funny without knowing it, but you'd better not let on that you think so. [Interestingly, this is the only trait on this list about which there seems to be any controversy. Maybe I've just been unlucky! I've known narcissists who'll make fun of others, repeat jokes they've heard others laugh at, and laugh at jokes when others laugh, but knowing how to make people laugh is not necessarily the same as having a sense of humor.] ^

Narcissists have a **weird sense of time**. It's more or less like they are not aware that the passage of time changes things, or maybe they just aren't aware of time's passing at all. Years can pass without touching narcissists. Narcissists often look, or think they look, significantly younger than they are; this youthful appearance is a point of pride to them, and some will emphasize it by either preserving the styles of their golden youth or following the styles of people the age they feel they "really" are. That their faces don't show their chronological age is a good sign that they haven't been living real lives with real life's wear and tear on the looks of normal people. The narcissists' years have passed without touching them. Bear in mind that narcissistic adults have had decades of not being in synch with the times or with other people, so that by now they are really out of it. Sometimes it just seems like they have a highly selective memory — which, of course, they do, sort of; they pay attention only to what has their name in it in the first place, so after 30 or 40 years, you shouldn't be surprised to hear a narcissist say something like, "Didn't the Beatles have a couple of hit songs while we were in high school?" or to suddenly discover that the narcissist doesn't know that M&M's have little m's on them or that smallpox was eradicated over 20 years ago. They are not being ironic: they really don't know. They were off in their own little world of fantastic perfection. On the other hand, as far as I've seen, all that stuff really is in there, but is accessible only intermittently or unpredictably. Narcissists ordinarily have spotty memories, with huge and odd gaps in their recollections; they may say that they don't remember their childhoods, etc., and apparently most of the time they don't. But they will have sudden accesses of memory, triggered by God knows what, when they remember details, everybody's names, what people were wearing, why the people in that picture from 1950 are standing the way they are, what the weather was like, etc. — in other words, every once in a while, their memories will be normal. But don't count on it. ^

Narcissists are **totally and inflexibly authoritarian**. In other words, they are suck-ups. They want to be authority figures and, short of that, they want to be associated with authority figures. In their hearts, they know they can't think well, have no judgment about what matters, are not connected with the world they inhabit, so they cling fanatically to the opinions of people they regard as authority figures — such as their parents, teachers, doctors, ministers. Where relevant, this may include scientists or professors or artists, but narcissists stick to people they know personally, since they aren't engaged enough with the world to get their authoritative opinions from TV, movies, books or dead geniuses/saints/heroes. If they get in trouble over some or another opinion they've put forth, they'll blame the source — "It was okay with Dr. Somebody," "My father taught me that," etc. If you're still thinking of the narcissist as odd-but-normal, this shirking of responsibility will seem dishonest and craven — well, it is but it's really an admission of weakness: they really mean it: they said what they said because someone they admire or fear said it and they're trying to borrow that person's strength. ^

Narcissists have **strange work habits**. Normal people work for a goal or a product, even if the goal is only a paycheck. Normal people measure things by how much they have to spend (in time, work, energy) to get the desired results. Normal people desire idleness from time to time, usually wanting as much free time as they can get to pursue their own thoughts and pleasures and interests. Narcissists work for a goal, too, but it's a different goal: they want power, authority, adulation. Lacking empathy, and lacking also context and affect, narcissists don't understand how people achieve glory and high standing; they think it's all arbitrary, it's all appearances, it's all who you know. So they try to attach themselves to people who already have what they want, meanwhile making a great show of working hard. Narcissists can put in a shocking amount of time to very little effect. This is partly because they have so little empathy that they don't know why some work is valued more highly than other work, why

some people's opinions carry more weight than others'. They do know that you're supposed to work and not be lazy, so they keep themselves occupied. But they are not invested in the work they do — whatever they may produce is just something they have to do to get the admiration and power they crave. Since this is so, they really don't pay attention to what they're doing, preferring the easiest thing at every turn, even though they may be constantly occupied, so that narcissists manage to be workaholics and extremely lazy at the same time. Narcissists measure the worth of their work **only** by how much time they spend on it, not by what they produce. They want to get an A for Effort. Narcissists lack empathy, so they don't know what others value or why. Narcissists tend to value things in quantitative ways and in odd quantities at that — they'll tell you how many inches of letters they received, but not how many letters or from how many correspondents; they know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

A narcissist may, in fact, hold himself to a grinding work schedule that gives him something like an addictive high so that, when wrought up, he can be sort of dazed, giddy, and groggy, making you wonder if he's drunk or otherwise intoxicated — now, that's a **real** workaholic. Usually, this excessive busyness appears to be — and some will even tell you this — an attempt to distract themselves from unpleasant or inconvenient feelings (i.e., it's a manic defense against depression — and, note, with narcissists it's inaccurate to use "happy" or "unhappy" because their feelings are just not that differentiated; "euphoria" or "dysphoria" are as close as they get to ordinary pleasure or distress) or to make themselves unavailable to others' emotional needs. ^

Narcissists **feel entitled** to whatever they can take. They expect privileges and indulgences, and they also feel entitled to exploit other people without any trace of reciprocation. ^

Some narcissists spend extravagantly in order to impress people, keep up grandiose pretensions, or buy favorable treatment, and some narcissists overspend, bankrupt themselves, and lose everything. My personal experience is that narcissists are **stingy, mean and frugal to the point of eccentricity**. This is a person who won't spend \$1.50 on a greeting card but will instead send you an advertising flyer that came with the newspaper. This is a person who will be very conscious of her appearance but will dress herself and her children in used clothes and other people's cast-offs. [*Note: Thrift is not in itself a narcissistic trait; neither is a fondness for old clothes. The important element here is that the narcissist buys clothes that other people she admires and wishes to emulate have already picked out, since she has no individual tastes or preferences.*] These are people who need labels or trademarks (or other signs of authority) to distinguish between the real thing and a cheap knock-off or imitation, and so will substitute something easy and cheap for something precious and dear and expect nobody else to know the difference, since they can't. These are people who can tell you how many miles but not how many smiles.

Narcissists are not only selfish and ungenerous — they seem to have to make a point of **not** giving what they know someone else wants. Thus, for instance, in a "romantic" relationship, they will want you to do what they want *because* they want it and not because you want it — and, in fact, if you actually want to do what they want, then that's too much like sharing and you wreck their fun and they don't want it anymore. They want to get what they want from you without giving you what you want from them. Period. If you should happen to want to give what they want to get, then they'll lose interest in you. ^

Something I had not connected with narcissism until I read about [Reactive Attachment Disorder](#) is that narcissists I've known have had **unusual eating habits** or appetites, including eating match heads, dry cake mix, chicken bones, raw meat, dog kibble, egg mash, bits of paper, wood pencils; some binge or gorge on ordinary foods, others seem always to be on one or another self-imposed, self-invented eccentric dietary regime. This behavior does not seem to have much in the way of affective component compared to, say, "normal" eating disorders. ^

Narcissists are **very disappointing as gift-givers**. This is not a trivial consideration in personal relationships. I've seen narcissistic people sweetly solicit someone's preferences ("Go ahead — tell me

what you really want”), make a show of paying attention to the answer (“Don’t you think I’m nice?”), and then deliver something other than what was asked for — and feel abused and unappreciated when someone else gets gratitude for fulfilling the very request that the narcissist evoked in the first place. I’ve seen this happen often, where narcissists will go out of their way to stir up other people’s expectations and then go out of their way to disappoint those expectations. It seems like a lot of pointless work to me.

First, narcissists lack empathy, so they don’t know what you want or like and, evidently, they don’t care either; second, they think their opinions are better and more important than anyone else’s, so they’ll give you what they think you ought to want, regardless of what you may have said when asked what you wanted for your birthday; third, they’re stingy and will give as gifts stuff that’s just lying around their house, such as possessions that they no longer have any use for, or — in really choice instances — return to you something that was yours in the first place. In fact, as a practical matter, the surest way NOT to get what you want from a narcissist is to ask for it; your chances are better if you just keep quiet, because every now and then the narcissist will hit on the right thing by random accident. ^

It’s very hard to have a simple, uncomplicated good time with a narcissist. Except for odd spells of heady euphoria unrelated to anything **you** can see, their affective range is mediocre-fake-normal to hell-on-Earth. They will sometimes lie low and be quiet, actually passive and dependent — this is as good as it gets with narcissists. They are incapable of loving conduct towards anyone or anything, so they do not have the capacity for simple pleasure, beyond the satisfaction of bodily needs. There is only one way to please a narcissist (and it won’t please you): that is to indulge their every whim, cater to their tiniest impulses, bend to their views on every little thing. There’s only one way to get decent treatment from narcissists: keep your distance. They can be pretty nice, even charming, **flirtatious, and seductive**, to strangers, and will flatter you shamelessly if they want something from you. When you attempt to get close to them in a normal way, they feel you are putting emotional pressure on them and they withdraw because you’re too demanding. They can be positively fawning and solicitous as long as they’re afraid of you, which is not most people’s idea of a real fun relationship.

I always have the problem that I get fed up and stay away from THEM long enough to forget **exactly** what the trouble was, then they come around again, and every narcissist I’ve known actually was quite lovable about half the time so I try it again. A clue: Run for cover when they start acting normal, maybe expressing a becoming self-doubt or even acknowledging some little fault of their own, such as saying they now realize that they haven’t treated you right or that they took advantage of you before. They’re just softening you up for something **really** nasty. These people are geniuses of “Come closer so I can slap you.” Except that’s not the way they think about it, **if** they think about it — no, they’re thinking, “Well, maybe you do really care about me, and, if you really care about me, then maybe you’ll *help* me with this,” only by “help” they mean do the whole thing, take total responsibility for it, including protecting and defending them and cleaning up the mess they’ve already made of it (which they will neglect to fill you in on because they haven’t really been paying attention, have they, so how would they know??). They will not have considered for one second how much of your time it will take, how much trouble it may get you into in their behalf, that they will owe you BIG for this — no, you’re just going to do it all out of the goodness of your heart, which they are delighted to exploit yet again, and your virtue will be its own reward: it’s **supposed** to just tickle you pink to be offered this generous opportunity of showing how much you love them and/or how lucky you are to be the servant of such a luminous personage. No lie — they think other people do stuff for the same reason they do: to show off, to perform for an audience. That’s one of the reasons they make outrageous demands, put you on the spot and create scenes in public: they’re being **generous** — they’re trying to share the spotlight with you by giving you the chance to show off how absolutely stunningly devoted-to-them you are. It means that they love you; that’s why they’re hurt and bewildered when you angrily reject this invitation. ^

Appearances are all there is with narcissists — and their self-hatred knows no bounds. The most dramatic example I can think of is from [John Cheever’s journals](#). Throughout his life he had pursued

surreptitious homosexual activities, being transiently infatuated with young men who reminded him of himself in his youth, while also living in a superficially settled way as a married family man, a respected writer with an enviable suburban life, breeding pedigreed dogs and serving on the vestry of the Episcopal church. When his secret life (going to New York City for a few days every now and then to pick up sailors and other beautiful boys for brief flings) came to scandalous light, his family sought to reassure him by telling him that they'd known about his homosexual activities for years. Now, a normal person would be ashamed and embarrassed but also relieved and grateful that scandal, not to mention chronic emotional and marital infidelity, had not caused his wife and children to reject and abandon him — but not the narcissist! Oh, no, Cheever was enraged that they would ever have thought such a thing of him — if they really loved him, they'd have bought his artificial “country squire” persona: they would have seen him as he wished to be seen: they would have believed his lies without question or doubt.

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Narcissists don't volunteer the usual personal information about themselves, so they may seem **secretive or perhaps unusually reserved or very jealous of their privacy**. All these things are true, but with the special narcissistic twist that, first, their real life isn't interesting to them so it doesn't occur to them that it would be interesting to anyone else and, second, since they have not yet been transfigured into the Star of the Universe, they're ashamed of their real life. They feel that their jobs, their friends and families, their homes and possessions aren't good enough for them, they deserve better. ^

Narcissists not only don't recognize the feelings and autonomy of others, **they don't recognize their own feelings as their own**. Their feelings are sort of like the weather, atmospheric, acts of God. The narcissistic think that everyone's having the same feeling as they are. This means that usually their own pain means nothing to them beyond the physical discomfort — it has no affective component. When they do get some painful affect, they think that God is punishing them — they think that their trivial errors are worth God's specific attention to their punishment. If you try to straighten them out, by telling them that your feelings are different, beware: their idea of sharing their feelings is to do or say something that makes you feel the way they're feeling and, as they make a point of not sharing anything desirable, you can expect something really nasty. The sad fact seems to be that narcissists feel just as bad about themselves as they make others feel about them. ^

Narcissists are noted for their **negative, pessimistic, cynical, or gloomy** outlook on life. Sarcasm seems to be a narcissistic specialty, not to mention spite. Lacking love and pleasure, they don't have a good reason for anything they do and they think everyone else is just like them, except they're honest and the rest of us are hypocrites. Nothing real is ever perfect enough to satisfy them, so are they are constantly complaining and criticizing — to the point of verbal abuse and insult. ^

Narcissists are **impulsive**. They undo themselves by behavior that seems oddly stupid for people as intelligent as they are. Somehow, they don't consider the probable consequences of their actions. It's not clear to me whether they just expect to get away with doing anything they feel like at the moment or whether this impulsiveness is essentially a cognitive shortcoming deriving from the static psychic state with its distorted perception of time. ^

Narcissists **hate to live alone**. Their inner resources are skimpy, static, and sterile, nothing interesting or attractive going on in their hearts and minds, so they don't want to be stuck with themselves. All they have inside is the image of perfection that, being mere mortals like the rest of us, they will inevitably fall short of attaining.

From - <http://www.halcyon.com/jmashmun/npd/howto.html>