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Don’t Feed the Narcissists!

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Who were Narcissus and Echo?

In Greek mythology, Narcissus was a young hunter who was so handsome that everyone who saw him fell in love with him, but he cared nothing for any of them. One of those who fell in love with him was a nymph (water spirit) named Echo. She pined away for Narcissus until there was nothing left of her but her voice, and all she could do was repeat what others had just said. Nemesis (the spirit of divine vengeance) punished Narcissus by luring him to a pool, where he saw his own reflection. There, he either drowned (trying to embrace himself) or starved to death, unable to tear himself away from his own reflection. His remains became the flower (narcissus, daffodil) that bears his name. This story teaches us to avoid being like Echo or Narcissus:

- Never devote yourself to someone who cannot love you back.
- Those who love only themselves deserve divine punishment.

What is narcissism?

Modern psychologists began using the term *narcissist* to refer to people who love themselves too much. A related concept is megalomania: an exaggerated sense of power, importance, and self-obsession. In his Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle warned us that moral virtues are found at the mean between deficiency and excess. Your self-esteem can be too high or too low. Ideally, it should be accurate. However, Aristotle warned that those who refuse to embrace their *megalopsychia* (magnanimity or greatness of soul) are cowards. Being aware of your high IQ is not narcissism. However, insisting that you are right when you are wrong can be a symptom of narcissism.

What are character and personality?

Character and personality can be seen as the persistent patterns in how someone relates to the world and to others. The ancient Greeks felt that one’s personality resulted from the temperament (mixture) of the four humors, which were fluids made up of particles of the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. Four of the main characters in A. A. Milne’s Winnie-the-Pooh stories were based on this concept.

- Winnie-the-Pooh is **phlegmatic** (phlegm: cold and wet). He is calm and slow but sometimes insightful.
- Rabbit is **choleric** (yellow bile: hot and dry). He is quick to anger.
- Tigger is **sanguine** (blood: hot and wet). He is cheerful and energetic.
- Eeyore is **melancholic** (black bile: cold and dry). He is clinically depressed.

The Winnie-the-Pooh stories emphasize that it is okay to have different temperaments, but that the excesses sometimes need to be managed. (Tigger needs to learn to restrain himself, and Eeyore needs to be cheered up by his friends.)

What is a mental disorder?

A mental illness could be any problem in the realm of cognition (perceptions and thoughts), emotion (feelings), or action (behavior). However, to be a mental disorder, the problem must cause distress or disability (or harm to others) and it must be abnormal (i.e., different from what the psychiatrist would expect, given your circumstances). A norm is an accepted standard. (Homosexuality is no longer considered a mental illness because

accepted that it is not harmful for the patient or for others.) A mental disorder can involve abnormalities in all three domains (cognition, emotion, action). However, mental disorders are generally categorized according to which abnormalities are most obvious:

- **Psychoses**—the most obvious problem is cognitive (abnormal perceptions and thoughts), but the person may also have emotional and behavior problems.
- **Mood disorders**—the most obvious problem is emotional, but the person may also have cognitive and behavior problems.
- **Personality disorders**—the most obvious problem is behavioral, but the person may also have cognitive and emotional problems.

What are the personality disorders?

The American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) defines 10 personality disorders that fall into three “clusters” (categories)

Cluster A (cognitive problems are more obvious):

- **Paranoid personality disorder** (a longstanding pattern of irrationally distrustful behavior)
- **Schizoid personality disorder** (seemingly emotionless people who avoid social engagement)
- **Schizotypal personality disorder** (mild delusions and odd inappropriate behavior; may be a mild form of schizophrenia)

Cluster B (behavioral problems are more obvious):

- **Borderline personality disorder:** These people regard others as either angels or devils (but this opinion can change in an instant). People with this disorder have an infantile level of emotional self-regulation. Like infants, they are terrified of abandonment. They have a high risk of dying of suicide.
- **Histrionic personality disorder:** These people see others as an audience. Histrionic people seek to solve problems by attracting the attention (and pity) of higher-ranking people. (This can be a rational and effective coping mechanism for girls and young women.)
- **Narcissistic personality disorder:** Narcissists view others as underlings. People with this disorder want the power, property, and prestige that go along with a high social rank. They want other people to submit to them (i.e., to provide “narcissistic supply”). They can react with “narcissistic rage” to any perceived threat to their dominance.
- **Antisocial personality disorder:** Sociopaths regard others as objects. Some of these people seem normal (they wear the “mask of sanity”) until they do something shocking.

Cluster C (emotional problems [anxiety] are more obvious):

- **Avoidant personality disorder:** A diagnosis given to shy people who are overly sensitive to rejection.
- **Dependent personality disorder:** An overdependence on others to meet one’s emotional needs
- **Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder:** An attempt to manage anxiety through obsessive order and control.

What causes mental disorders?

The DSM mainly focuses on disorders with no clear cause. A condition with a clear biological cause would be reclassified as a medical disorder. The biopsychosocial model means that three different kinds of causes (analogous to hardware or software problems or user error) can contribute to a mental disorder:

- **Biological**—the physical phenomena that can interfere with the development and functioning of the body, including the brain.
- **Social**—the social environment, including psychologically traumatic interactions with others.
- **Psychological**: the person’s own coping mechanisms.

How should mental disorders be treated?

The treatment should depend on the nature of the problem. People with a medical problem may need medication. Psychotherapy is the logical choice for dealing with a problem whose cause is psychological, but counseling can also help people learn to cope with a physical problem. To solve social problems may require law enforcement.

Narcissism and contempt

There are 7 basic human emotions that cause someone to have a specific facial expression.

- **Joy**: the emotion that gives you a smile that reaches your eyes.
- **Surprise**: the sudden, momentary reaction to the unexpected.
- **Fear**: the emotion that you feel when you think that your body or feelings might get hurt.
- **Sadness**: the emotion that you feel when you have lost something or someone that you wanted.
- **Anger**: the feeling that someone or something is preventing you from getting what you want.
- **Disgust**: the response to rotten food or rotten treatment.
- **Contempt**: the feeling that goes along with being in a superior social position (see the image at the bottom right of this page).

If someone flashes a contempt expression at you, it could mean that you did not rise to meet their expectations. But some narcissists wear a contempt smirk as their habitual expression.

Overcoming your own narcissism

To Roman Catholics, narcissism corresponds to the most serious capital sin: *superbia* (foolish pride). Capitus means head, as in the headwaters of a river. A capital sin is a form of self-worship that leads to the death of grace in a person. Thus, the capital sins are called deadly sins. Each deadly sin has its opposite in a heavenly virtue. To overcome your narcissism, avoid the capital sins and practice the heavenly virtues:

Capital sin	Heavenly virtue
Pride (<i>superbia</i>) means putting oneself above others.	Humility (<i>humilitas</i>) is an accurate sense of your place in the social order
Wrath (<i>ira</i>) is uncontrolled or misdirected anger	Patience (<i>patientia</i>) means controlling anger and finding good solutions to problems
Envy (<i>invidia</i>) is wanting what someone else has	Kindness (<i>humanitas</i>) means wanting good for others
Gluttony (<i>gula</i>) means consuming more than is good for you, or more than your fair share	Temperance (<i>temperantia</i>) means consuming only a fair and healthy amount
Lust (<i>luxuria</i>) means any intense desire, not just desire for sex	Chastity (<i>castitas</i>) means that one’s desires are “chastised” (disciplined)
Avarice (<i>avaritia</i>) is greed for wealth, status, or power	Charity (<i>caritas</i>) is altruistic love (including sharing)
Sloth (<i>acedia</i>) means laziness and carelessness	Diligence (<i>diligentia</i>) means carefulness and persistence at work.

Don’t breed narcissists!

A personality disorder is a delay or failure of emotional development. Narcissists are adult toddlers. They feel that the world should revolve around them. They throw tantrums when they don’t get their way. Narcissists are ambitious people but lack the skills to earn the power, property, and prestige they so desperately crave. Rather than trying to build your child’s self-esteem at all costs, help your child learn to become someone who can earn power, property, and prestige honestly.

Don’t feed the narcissists!

The best kind of relationship to have with a narcissist is none at all. The second-best kind is distant. Avoid narcissistic bosses. Narcissistic middle managers can destroy their companies by attacking the people who are smarter and more capable than they are. The worst kind of relationship to have with a narcissist is co-dependent. Narcissists love to collect admirers who will reassure them of their superiority. People with dependent personality disorder are particularly likely to become enthralled by a narcissist. But this co-dependent relationship is bad for both parties: it reinforces the narcissist’s narcissism and the dependent person’s dependency. However, these relationships often end abruptly when the narcissist dumps their minion for someone more useful or more compliant. In the meantime, if you must tangle with a narcissist, remember Al-Anon’s four C’s:

- You did not **cause** the narcissist’s narcissism.
- You cannot **cure** the narcissist’s narcissism.
- You cannot **control** the narcissist’s bad behavior
- But you need not **contribute** to their narcissism

Laurie Endicott Thomas is a member of Northern New Jersey Mensa. She is the author of several books, including:

Don’t Feed the Narcissists! The Mythology and Science of Mental Health.

This book shows that Ovid’s Metamorphosis, Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, the Roman Catholic catechism, and the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual all teach us surprisingly similar lessons about the dangers of foolish pride.

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Contempt is the emotion that people have when they feel superior to somebody else. It produces a lop-sided smile. Narcissists make this expression a lot!

