

Narcissism in Relationships



Ekho, a beautiful fairy who disregards anyone who loves her, one day sees a handsome hunter called Narkissos. Ekho immediately falls in love with this young hunter; since Hera had punished her and muted her voice, she can only repeat the last words of people and she cannot call out Narkissos. When one day Narkissos is walking through the forest, he hears a voice and he calls out: "Is anyone there?" Ekho repeats the last word of Narkissos: "There, there." Since Narkissos does not reciprocate Ekho's love, Ekho, day by day, starts to melt and dies. Her remaining bones become echos in the rocks. Gods want to punish Narkissos. One day, when Narkissos is hunting, he feels very thirsty and arrives to the side of a river. When he leans to drink water and sees his reflection, he is impressed by his own beauty. He becomes astonished, unable to get up. He falls in love with himself. Day by day, just by looking at himself, he starts to melt just like Ekho did. He ruins his life by falling under the spell of his own image. When he dies, he becomes the flower Narcissus.



The word 'Narcissism' stems from Narkissos in ancient Greek Mythology and basically refers to the state of loving his/her self. To some extent, narcissism is necessary for a human being to continue one's life and also for one's mental health. In other words, a certain presence of narcissism is essential for a sustainable self-esteem. However, high levels of narcissism affect one's life in a negative way.

According to American Psychiatric Association (2000); grandiosity, expectation of special treatment, exaggeration of talents and personal characteristics, demands of attention and admiration, exploitation and depreciation of others and lack of empathy are characterized as narcissism.

Reflections of narcissism in relationships

Even though, people with narcissistic features seem to be extremely confident about themselves, virtually we observe that they form unstable relationships lacking depth. These people are not interested in others' thoughts and requests and they lack empathy. When they cannot reach their own desires they may collapse as in the story of Narkissos. Their selfishness, egocentrism and inflated self-worth induce argumentative and contrary attitudes in relationships. They believe in themselves in an extreme way and they cannot tolerate any negative criticism. Although they seem confident, they have a very fragile self-esteem. Receiving feedback is a very delicate issue for them. For instance, in group studies they generally hold an inflated perception about their positive contributions for the group and they do not see the positive contributions of other members. They do not accept any negative feedback or they react with anger and they load all negative outcomes to other members of the group. They show off in order to impress others.

When it comes to close relationships, they establish quite shallow and temporary relationships. They have difficulties in attachment and maintaining loyalty in relationships. In romantic relationships, at first they generally idealize the other by inflating their value. This inflated value ends in a very short time. They obtain a more realistic view about their partners, which renders them insignificant and suddenly unwanted. The possible underlying reason for that is, people with narcissistic features find establishing actual closeness and loyalty as risky and threatening. Since they cannot bear the anxiety of intimacy, either they idealize or devalue their partners. In romantic relationships, they may show various playful attitudes and unfaithfulness because these people see the world as a competitive game.

It is very hard for a narcissist to perceive that other people are real people who have their own existence and subjectivity. Instead of this, they perceive others as an image or an object in their own minds and they manipulate the relationships with others in accordance with their own needs. In other words, this situation ends up with violating others' rights and abusing others. In order to keep their self-esteem high, they disapprove, denigrate, depreciate, wear out, anticipate unrealistic expectations and discourage others--these are examples of abusive behavior.

Reasons of Narcissism

In fact, people who have narcissistic features are lonely. From the day we are born, the first human interaction is with our primary caregivers, more likely with our mothers. The quality of this early period relationship has significance on the way that a person forms relationships throughout his/her life. In order to have an ability to form a relationship that includes empathy, maturity and feeling of trust, at first we need to mention a healthy interaction between parent and baby. If a child is raised in an environment where s/he is not seen as distinct and unique, and rejected, his/her needs are overlooked and deprived; then foundations of narcissism are laid out due to disappointment and uncertainty.

For these people, making an intimate relationship triggers the fear of being exploited and abused by others. They see the outside world as dangerous and unsafe; they need to take their precautions and they attack others. In a level of narcissism that can be considered as a personality disorder, one's desires for appreciation and recognition are very intense and it is very hard to keep these needs in an optimum level. They have grandiose attitudes and these attitudes reveal itself mostly in interpersonal relationships through dominating the relationship and being opposite. When their needs are not met, they feel vulnerable. Thus, they behave aggressively, they exploit others and they never behave modestly.

How can we approach to this kind of relationships?

Actually, we may like the work of people who have narcissistic features but we may also be uncomfortable with their arrogance. Initially, it is crucial to evaluate whether your relationship is harmful or not. Identifying the problem in the relationship could be a start to transform the things that are not seems to be right. However, sometimes even we are aware of things that seem to be not right, you may feel like there is no change in the relationship and you may feel that you continue to suffer. In such circumstances, finding your inner strength at some point and letting go of the relationship may make you feel better

We already mentioned about the features of people who are predominantly narcissistic. Being able to see these features in a relationship may help to identify the problem. In such relationships, you may feel like you are cared and valued till the relationship is established.

Yet, later on you will start to see sharp changes of the roles.

What can you experience and feel in such relationships?

- We notice that they take too little responsibility. When a problem occurs, they never see themselves as the source of the problem and they pass on the responsibility to other. This may frequently make you feel guilty in such relationships.
- During an argument, they may not show any of their feelings. At this point, showing your emotions may put you in a “guilty” position. Your partner might make you feel like a weak person since you show your emotions. In fact this must be seen as a type of “psychological exploitation”.
- You may start to feel that your energy drains away. Most probably, this is the energy that you constantly waste to sustain and revive the relationship. This is because during the relationship it is you who make all the arrangements, nearly it is you who make all the apologies and it is you who make an effort to change the things that seemed wrong. Also, your certain requests about the relationship may be felt, as "you want too much". This might make you feel guilty and consume your energy.
- You may have a tendency blame yourself and you may feel like your actions are wrong. Because of these feelings, you may have a perception that the "problem is related to you". As a result, you start to see that your self-esteem gradually decreases. You may be left alone with feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness. As a result, you might feel as insignificant.

What can you do?

- *You should realize that the problem does not always arise from you.*
 - Almost in no relationship one side is always right and the other is always wrong. You need to understand that the feeling of guilt does not arise from you; rather this feeling is projected on you by the other. When you think long and hard on the feeling of guilt, certainly, you will start to see that there are mistakes that other person needs to accept.

- *As in every relationship, you need to set and preserve your boundaries.*
 - You need to discover your own boundaries and define them. You need to distinguish whether how much of these emotions are related to you and related to other person. “What are your desires and needs in this relationship? How much of them are satisfied? What are you doing about the things that you don’t like about the relationship? Do you feel your own space within the relationship? ” These are important questions to be asked. Being able to define your own boundaries will reduce feelings of guilt and increase your self-esteem; also it will protect you emotionally.
- *If you feel that the structure of your relationship is not changing and you are still getting hurt, gradually you might try to distance yourself from the relationship, both emotionally and physically.*
 - By trying to distance yourself physically, you can avoid people who make you feel that way.
 - In order to try to distance yourself emotionally, first you could ask yourself why these relationships appeals to you. You could ask yourself that which need of yours is related with these kinds of relationships. Generally, people who have this disposition may idealize the other. For this reason, they may evoke a need for approval. In relationships, support and approval are essential and they are natural needs. However, do not forget that, in such relationships generally you cannot feel that your needs are satisfied. You should remind yourself that you are going after a person who you feel will never approve you with needs of being approved, seen and understood.
- *Being able to build your own boundaries and distance yourself when it is necessary is also partly related to increasing capacity of being alone in life (Winnicott, 1965).*
 - Being alone (being able to be with yourself) might evoke anxiety for some or might be enjoyable for others. If this situation provokes anxiety, it is crucial to understand this anxiety. Being able to cope with this anxiety may make you freer in your relationships. "When you are alone with yourself, what sort of things you like to do? What makes you

happy when you are alone with yourself?" Starting to ask these questions will take you to a process of self-exploration. Also, this self-exploration process will lead you to relationships that you feel better about in the long term.

- At this point, it might be a good thing to find relationships and friendships that you feel supported and that give room for your emotions. Your damaged self-esteem caused by your previous relationship might be repaired.

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