

The Narcissistic Father

How a Narcissistic Dad can Affect Your Life

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“Half the harm that is done in this world is due to people who want to feel important. They don’t mean to do harm, but the harm (that they cause) does not interest them. Or they do not see it, or they justify it because they are absorbed in the endless struggle to think well of themselves”. ~ T.S. Eliot

You used to think that by the time you were in your twenties and definitely by your thirties you’d have your act together – you’d be establishing a successful career, have your own place, be in a committed and stable relationship, visit the gym enough to have the body you always wanted and your social life would be vibrant.

But, you’re nowhere near where you thought you’d be, and the tiny boxes next to the list of achievements that you’d hoped to accomplish are still unchecked.

As your confidence deflates, you look back on your own upbringing, and think about your father – Mr Self-Assured. He seemed to have it all – charm, success, popularity and he never seemed to be plagued by self-doubt, unlike you. He was the hit of the party, knew everyone and made things happen. You couldn’t get enough of him.

How Kids Experience Narcissistic Traits:

Come to think of it, did his confidence border on arrogance? Is it possible that you were raised by someone with narcissistic traits? And if so, why is it important?

We take our families for granted – it's natural that we do. Each family is a miniature sociological experiment, with its own set of unwritten rules, secrets, and nuanced behavioral patterns. We take our mom and dad for granted; like this must be what it's like for everyone. Your dad may have been narcissistic, but you just assumed that all fathers were like him.

Here are some signs that your dad had narcissistic tendencies or was an out-right narcissist.

- **Dad was self-centered and pretty vain.** He had an inflated sense of self-importance that led him to believe he was superior and entitled to only the best.
- **Dad used people for his own good.** He would take advantage of others, to the point of exploiting them when it suited him. Everybody seemed to cater to him, or at least he expected them to.
- **Dad was charismatic.** Everyone wanted to be around him and he relished admiration from others. He loved being in the spotlight and the positive reinforcement that came from being the center of attention.
- **No one had an imagination like Dad.** Grandiosity is alluring, and so were his fantasies of success, prestige, and brilliance. He would often exaggerate his achievements, and his ambitions and goals bordered on unrealistic.
- **Dad didn't take criticism well.** Nothing stung him like criticism; he often cut those people out of his life, or tried to hurt them.

- **Dad's rage was truly scary.** Some people get mad and yell a lot. Dad could hurt you with his anger. It cut to the bone.
- **Dad could be aloof and unsympathetic.** Narcissists often have a hard time experiencing empathy; they often disregard and invalidate how others feel. *Of course, he was exquisitely sensitive to what he felt, but others were of no mind.*
- **Dad wasn't around a lot.** He got a lot of gratification outside the family. Other fathers hung out with their families a lot more. Plus, he craved excitement and seemed to be more concerned by what others thought of him, rather than how his own kids felt about him.
- **Dad did what he wanted when dealing with you.** Narcissists don't step into someone else's shoes very often. *He did things with you that he enjoyed*; maybe you did as well.
- **Dad wanted you to look great to his friends and colleagues.** You were most important to him when he could brag about you; sad but true.
- **You couldn't really get what you needed from him.** Even if Dad provided on a material level, you felt deprived on a more subtle level. For example, you wanted his attention and affection, but would only get it sporadically, and only when it worked for him.

When you go through these traits, some may hit home; while others may not be relevant. Some may ring as very true; while others as less so. This is why narcissistic traits are not synonymous with a Narcissistic Personality Disorder.

The Heuristic Problem of Personality Classification:

Narcissism is not a dirty word, in fact, narcissistic traits are commonly found in most of us. There's nothing disturbed about that. The other extreme is the

Narcissistic Personality Disorder, a controversial, but often helpful label. For the record, our diagnostic categories are somewhat arbitrary and lack the veracity of harder medical diagnostic labels like a broken femur or glaucoma. These disorders are easier to document and study. Personality Disorders help us organize our thinking about an individual, but may fall far short of a truthful depiction of a whole complex person.

Sometimes it's hard to tell whether a person is narcissistic or merely has a healthy self regard. Narcissism isn't about having high self-confidence; it's a love for oneself that has morphed into a preoccupation. The term is based on Narcissus, the Greek mythological character who was so infatuated with himself, that it ultimately proved fatal.

Although it's not actually fatal, narcissism can become so pathological that it satisfies the criteria, however faulty, of a personality disorder. The fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM IV-TR) defines Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) as

“A pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts... as indicated.... by the following”:

- wanting to be admired
- having a sense of entitlement
- being exploitative
- lacking empathy
- being envious

- arrogance

Another characteristic typical of narcissists is a disregard of personal boundaries. Narcissists don't always acknowledge the need for boundaries which is coupled with their failure to realize that others do not exist merely to meet their needs. A narcissist will often treat others, especially those that are close to him, as if they are there to fulfill his needs and expectations.

Now that you have a firm grasp on what a narcissistic father may be like, let's take a look at how he might affect his kids. (We will get to narcissistic mothers another time.)

How a Narcissistic Father Can Hurt his Son or Daughter:

Narcissistic parents often damage their children. For example, they may disregard boundaries, manipulate their children by withholding affection (until they perform), and neglect to meet their children's needs because their needs come first. Because image is so important to narcissists, they may demand perfection from their children. The child of a narcissist father can, in turn, feel a pressure ramp up their talents, looks, smarts or charisma. It can cost them if they fulfill their Dad's wishes - and it can cost them if they fail. No winning here.

In general, here's how a narcissistic father can affect a daughter or son.

- ***Daughters of narcissistic fathers*** often describe feeling "unsatiated" when it comes to getting what they needed from their fathers. They never got enough and would have to compete with siblings for time with Dad. As a young child, Dad would comment on how beautiful you were. But as you grew older, he would rarely miss out on commenting on weight and attitude. You

probably carry these concerns into adulthood, even if you found success. With a Dad like this, it's never enough. With men (or women), you often feel vulnerable and worried you'll be dumped for someone else. Anxiously avoiding commitment or taking on the narcissistic role are both natural ways to keep relationships safe; it's understandable and self protective.(But, you lose.)

A daughter needs her dad's adoration; it validates her and helps her internalize her specialness. Healthy fathers give their girls that gift. You are special and deserve love, for being you.

- ***As the son of a narcissistic father*** you never feel that you can measure up. Dad was so competitive, that he even competed with you. (Or, didn't pay attention to you one way or the other.) You may have accepted defeat - you'd never outdo your dad. Or, you may have worked hard to beat Dad at his own game just to get his attention and some semblance of fatherly pride. You somehow never feel good enough even when you do succeed, you still feel empty and second rate.

Just like girls need to be adored by their fathers to feel validated, boys also need their dad to believe in them. You may even become a narcissist yourself. This way you get Dad's attention (after all imitation is the highest form of flattery); and you learn from your old man how to manipulate and use people.

So how do you survive a narcissist father?

Every narcissist is a hero and a legend in his own mind. And, so was Daddy.

- **Get into a good therapy.** You want to come to terms with dad for who he is, and how he hurt you. He' is your father after all, and you will need

to differentiate from him in order to enjoy his presence without being undermined. It's no small task.

- **His arrogance and constant need for ego stroking can be annoying.** Accept Dad for who he is. If you put him into place in your mind, he may simply end up being a lovable, but annoying father. Take the best, as long as he doesn't still have the power to hurt you.
- **Do not let Dad hurt you.** If he has a rage attack, you may decide to get in the car and leave. Limits are often a good thing. "Dad, this is not constructive."
- **Cut ties if it is too toxic or dangerous.** Some narcissistic parents have violent or abusive tendencies. It goes along with their self righteousness. You are now an adult. Take care and take caution.
- **Has your Dad affected your dating habits and choices?** Some identify with their father by becoming arrogant themselves. Others are anxious in their attachments because they could never trust Dad's undivided attention. Do you date narcissistic people yourself?
- **Keep your expectations realistic and low.** Don't expect a relationship with a narcissistic person to be based on mutuality or reciprocity. Narcissists are selfish and can't put your needs on par with their own. As an adult, you can keep these conflicts with your father at a distance; but if you date or marry a narcissist, it probably will wear you out.
- **When you want something from a narcissist, convince them that it will be to their benefit.** I am not a big fan of dishonesty, but some people with narcissistic traits can be manipulated. When you want such a person to do something for you, you need to spin it in a way so that your request seems to be to their benefit. This may work with your father and with others too.

- **Never let a narcissist determine your self-worth.** Narcissists lack empathy and the ability to validate others, so be careful about trusting them with sensitive information or sharing important achievements because they won't treat it with the respect it deserves. I have seen this backfire many times.
- **Sometimes compliance is the simplest way to deal with a narcissistic parent.** It may sound cheap, but if your father is narcissistic, you may not be interested in cutting him out of your life. He is your Dad, after all. Sometimes, it's easier, and requires less effort, to comply with most of his wishes. It may not be worth the fight. You are an adult now, and you are not under his roof anymore.
- **Alternatively, you can assert your own authority and challenge his.** Narcissists get away with their behavior because others (passively) allow them to. Sometimes, you may need to adopt an authoritative stance – and firmly impress upon him that his demeaning attitude is unacceptable. You are no longer a child, and you are not as vulnerable to his rejection or anger. Be prepared for push back. Narcissistic people HATE criticism.
- **Pity the Narcissist.** Arrogance doesn't really inspire sympathy or compassion. But at the end of the day, when you think about it, you may come to pity someone who is in constant need of compliments, attention and validation. It is freeing.

Appreciate the Healthy Adults Out There:

While it's hard to grow up unaffected by a narcissistic father, there may have been others who helped you along the way. Looking back on your life, you may identify a grandfather, a grandmother, a coach, a teacher, a therapist or a religious figure who really appreciated you. Maybe, your mother saved the day.

Take in the Good:

I hope you can find the good. There may have been some good in your narcissistic father. Embrace that, while distancing yourself from the rest. Plus, there may have been special men and women in your upbringing - internalize their good. And, there are good people to care about today - bring in this good as well.

Finally, realize the value within yourself. You don't have to be great to be good enough. That's an important healing.