

Multi-million-copy bestselling author of
Surrounded by Idiots

surrounded by narcissists



Or, How to Stop
Other People's Egos
Ruining Your Life

thomas erikson



surrounded by
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Or, How to Stop
Other People's Egos
Ruining Your Life

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Introduction

Love is a serious mental disease.

—PLATO

I

Love can be the most beautiful experience a human being has in their lifetime. True, genuine, requited love that's strong enough to shake the core of your being. It makes your heart race and your legs wobblier than usual. I'm talking about the kind of love where you find yourself dreamily gazing off into the horizon, brimming over with longing for the object of your desire. A love that makes you want to protect your partner from any threat that appears.

Normally, it takes two people to produce this kind of infinite, larger-than-life adulation. But sometimes it's a different story.

A few years ago, I wrote *Surrounded by Psychopaths*. Since its publication, I've had an astonishing number of people suggest to me that I should also write a book about narcissists. At first, the subject triggered no curiosity in me at all. This was mainly because of the close ties between narcissism and psychopathy; it felt difficult to add anything substantially novel or different to the subject.

As time went on, and I worked away on other projects, I began to notice a series of odd phenomena that are occurring in our society

today. These were developments that honestly made very little sense to me. I found myself discussing a bunch of rather unusual questions with a whole crowd of people who had made similar observations themselves. Phenomena we hadn't observed before were becoming increasingly common right in front of our eyes.

Meanwhile, the inquiries kept coming from various interested parties: *When are you going to write a book about narcissism?* In the end, this question was posed to me by somebody I couldn't say no to—you know who you are—and I began, somewhat unwillingly, I might add, to research the subject. After some thorough investigations into the subject of narcissism, however, it dawned on me that I had stumbled across the explanation to a whole series of peculiarities that are making their way around the world.

Narcissism, in the sense of the personality disorder defined by psychiatrists, takes its name from the character Narcissus from Greek mythology. This youth, who was famous for his beauty, was the son of the river god Cephissus. Narcissus was so incredibly handsome that anybody who saw him would immediately fall in love with him. The trouble was that he rejected everyone, including the young girl Echo—and was thus fated to fall in love with his own reflection.

In one version of the myth—there are more competing versions out there than seems entirely necessary—Narcissus simply starves to death as he sits there by the pond, gazing at his reflection. Eventually, he transformed into a white-and-yellow flower, which has since been named after him—the *Narcissus* genus of flowers includes the daffodil.

Whichever version of the myth we decide to believe, poor Narcissus was the first person ever, as far as we know, to fall victim to this powerful kind of self-love. But then again, being that he is a mythical figure, it seems likely that the problem was a familiar one even before the story was first told. Myths usually describe and explain things that people have already made note of.

We've all come across them.

The people who talk about themselves incessantly, announcing their incredible knowledge, skills, experience, and credentials to the world; who feel entitled to the best of whatever life has to offer; who feel better, more attractive, and more successful than their peers; who take selfies by the hundreds, painstakingly pore over them to single out the best one, and then fly into a violent rage if it doesn't receive as many likes as they feel it deserves. These are the people who go to great lengths to be trendy, who put great value in being seen, and who seem to be prepared to do almost anything to stand out. They get upset when the success they're expecting fails to materialize, and succumb to needy whining whenever things don't go their way.

Perhaps you're thinking to yourself that people like this are nothing new. We used to just think to ourselves, *What a jerk!* Nowadays, people hardly even raise an eyebrow at this kind of thing. It's the new normal.

Families accumulating massive debt just so they can keep up with the Joneses. Parents convincing their children that they can be anything they want because of how naturally fantastic they are. Influencers whose only real achievement is appearing in social media in trendy outfits. How long has it been this way?

School kids who feel they don't need to study because they reckon they already know everything. Grade averages dropping in our schools, despite the constant dumbing down of the grading criteria. Families being run by members who have insufficient or no real-life experience. Teenagers choosing the family's holiday destination. Mothers buying their teenagers cars that cost more than the ones they drive themselves.

University students who, rather than engaging with their ideological opponents in debate, form mobs to shout and cause enough ruckus to make sure that speakers they disapprove of won't be able to make themselves heard. Individuals who openly admit that they

would do anything—literally *anything*—in order to be successful. Successful at *what*? one wonders.

Perhaps at participating in reality shows on TV, shows that feature aspects of human anatomy and behavior that would have been incredibly shocking just a few decades ago.

What we think of as normal has taken on a very different face. The connections between the preceding descriptions and narcissism are as evident as they are disquieting. All of those descriptions include significant signs of narcissistic behavior. Sometimes, though, you need to take a few steps back to be able to detect the pattern. But as soon as you do, you see it as clear as day.

II

Psychologists are more or less in agreement: Clinical narcissism occurs in somewhere between 1 and 2 percent of the population. However, there is no absolute consensus on the subject, and different researchers quote different sets of figures. Disagreement and argument over these issues is rife in the field. But for our purposes, 1 or 2 percent will be accurate enough. You might think that doesn't sound like too many. One percent is a very small ratio. Like a tiny glitch in the system. But then again, that would mean that Sweden, my own country of residence, would be home to somewhere between one hundred thousand and two hundred thousand narcissists.

Applying the same percentage globally gives us a population of between 70 and 140 million narcissists. But there is a significant difference between the clinical term "narcissistic personality disorder," or "NPD," and what we call narcissistic *behavior*. The latter is exhibited by people who display obvious narcissistic tendencies without having received a clinical diagnosis. Later in this book, I'll be giving you a series of examples of what I have come to refer to as narcissistic culture. This is when narcissistic behaviors become increasingly

prevalent in various levels of society. One example of this would be an increased emphasis on the self. International research suggests that in Western culture *this* is exhibited by closer to 10 percent of the population, maybe even more than that. Some have even suggested 15 to 20 percent.

Just the thought of applying this percentage to the global population is enough to make me feel like I need to lie down.

If we take a look at what clinical narcissism actually is, we'll soon find that among other characteristics, these individuals tend to entertain unrealistic self-images, indulge in self-obsession, consider themselves unique, speak only about themselves, deflect all criticism and negative feedback, feel that the rules don't apply to them, and basically strive for nothing but external rewards and social recognition. "Everybody else—*everybody*—should get out of the way, because *here I come!*"

Narcissists do genuinely strive for perfection, particularly in the eyes of others. They want everybody to view and think of them as the most beautiful, most intelligent, most informed, fittest, best dressed, wealthiest, most successful, and happiest people in the entire world. However, there is an obvious problem here: That goal is both irrational and completely unattainable.

Basically, we can't expect any good to come of narcissism becoming more widespread in society. However, if we're to approach this issue in a more serious way, we'll need to figure out what's actually going on first. In addition, we have to give some thought to the practical consequences we all stand to suffer if we allow narcissism to run rampant. What I'm getting at here is that we need to be aware of *the severity of the challenge*. If you don't know which problem you're supposed to be solving, you won't even see any need for a solution.

Once, long ago, there was no such thing as an SUV. Then, one day, SUVs became a thing. Some people bought them and reaped the benefits of a

high, safe perch with a good view of traffic (at the expense of everybody else's), and enjoyed the sense of security that came from knowing that they would be quite safe if they were to collide with an ordinary car. However, anybody who wasn't driving an SUV was suddenly in greater danger, because they were now at risk of colliding with one. The most significant cost related to the creation of SUVs was paid by all the other drivers, basically.

More and more people bought SUVs. They wanted to feel safe and have that great view of the surrounding traffic, too. But what were the consequences? Fuel consumption spiked; the planet's resources were more carelessly exploited than ever; emissions increased . . . If everybody were to drive an SUV, many of the original benefits would simply be gone. It's like a trap, in a way.

Narcissism functions very similarly. The behavior of a narcissist comes at a cost to others, just like the invasion of the SUVs happened mainly at the expense of other drivers. Narcissists can maintain their sense of pride by lashing out at somebody who has somehow insulted them. Similarly, they can maintain their sense of personal fabulousness by taking credit for the achievements of their peers. They can cultivate a cool *player* image for themselves by dating countless potential mates who never even learn of one another's existence. Narcissists can go on feeling wonderful and amazing, while they make everyone around them suffer.

Some people claim that there is a limit to how many self-infatuated narcissists we can cope with, collectively. That's an interesting thought: How much narcissism can society actually tolerate? Assuming the phenomenon really is becoming more common, that is.

III

Of course, the question of how we ended up here is incredibly interesting, and it's unlikely that it can be answered simply.

Some blame the Internet and social media, while others point to the omnipresence of the message that we must all cultivate our self-esteem and be the best we can be. Social media companies were originally created by people who genuinely wanted to do good in the world and connect people to one another to help them share their lives online. Others suggest that this narcissistic strain has actually been there all along and that what has changed is simply that we now have the tools to express it.

Little mention is ever given to the fact that parents who encourage their little darlings to believe that they are princesses or world champions from the moment they are born, admittedly with the best of intentions, are inadvertently producing a sluggish armada of ego-maniacal underachievers. Later in this book, I'll be sharing examples from schools in which comparisons were made between the performances of students with varying degrees of self-esteem. The results can only be described as . . . interesting.

Imagining that you're amazing and successful before your work has even begun is one approach, of course. Admittedly, too, we don't know for sure that people aren't striving to feel successful rather than actually be successful.

What I will be reflecting on is whether we *might actually* have reached the point of diminishing returns when it comes to the benefits of egocentricity. At what point does good, healthy self-esteem turn into vanity and self-obsession and settle into a pattern of pathological egoism?

Even those who only risk developing narcissistic traits rather than becoming full-on narcissists, should take warning here. Although narcissists are invariably able to own a room, a conversation, or even an entire organization, they inevitably end up giving themselves away, eventually. The people around them start to genuinely dislike them. If the narcissist doesn't abandon their overt self-centeredness, it will eventually trigger feelings of loathing in others. This is the

very opposite of what the narcissist is actually trying to achieve, i.e., unwavering dedication.

IV

Before I move on to addressing the narcissistic culture we're seeing emerge, I'll describe and offer examples of NPD—which is a truly disturbed state.

I also have a challenge for you and everyone else: Think, very carefully, about what we as a society ought to be striving to become. What kind of people do we want to be? Who do *you* want to be? What do you want to have control your life and your personal growth? How would you like others to view you, starting today?

We could opt for the distinctively narcissistic path, which is paved with vanity, self-centeredness, superficial relationships, greed, social isolation, guilt, and chaos.

Or we could choose another path, which leads us away from all those things.

That approach is a pursuit of a far greater truth and freedom, but also the acceptance of a far-reaching sense of responsibility—for ourselves, our families, our kids, and all the people we care the most about. However, this responsibility also extends to the society in which we live.

This path is admittedly a more demanding one, but unlike the narcissist's approach, which is largely based on an illusion, it is genuine. Rather than some vain pursuit of a utopian idea of personal perfection, we can strive for a state of continuous improvement. While this is in a sense a journey with no real destination, it is at least an authentic one, which will allow you to remain truer to yourself.

However, there is one requirement: We have to allow ourselves to pause and reflect on these things. We need to slam on the brakes

here, and reflect deeply on issues that could impact us for the rest of our lives. Thinking a little less about ourselves and a little more about one another is the road to true success and happiness.

That's what this book is about.

PART I

Narcissism: A Brief Introduction

• • • •

What Is Narcissism?

We love ourselves more than other people
but care more about
their opinions than our own.

—MARCUS AURELIUS

Narcissism, like psychopathy, has always existed. It is part of the species *Homo sapiens*. Just as there are quiet and loud people, early birds and night owls, cat people and dog people, and so on, there are narcissists. Evolution has produced the phenomenon of narcissism, and there probably isn't much point in our asking why. Perhaps it's all a cruel joke that our creator came up with back at the dawn of time. "Check this out: I'm giving them an interesting challenge! Why don't I send them a human-shaped Trojan horse?"

Why not, indeed? As a species, the human race has struggled in the face of a bewildering variety of problems and disruptions. Narcissism is just one example among many.

One thing that you'll have to bear in mind when it comes to narcissism is that it isn't a disease—it's not really an aspect of mental health as such. You can't treat it with medication or learn to live with it. Narcissism is a personality disorder. It's important to realize this,

so that you can immediately lay to rest any ideas you have of curing or treating the condition. I'll touch on the methods that tend to be used, but narcissism seems to be no more curable than color blindness or the unfortunate affliction that causes some people to enjoy listening to the Rolling Stones. It is, as they say, what it is.

Wikipedia says: "Narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) or megalomania is a personality disorder characterized by a long-term pattern of exaggerated feelings of self-importance, an excessive craving for admiration, and struggles with empathy."

The Mayo Clinic offers this description of narcissistic personality disorder: ". . . a mental condition in which people have an inflated sense of their own importance, a deep need for excessive attention and admiration, troubled relationships, and a lack of empathy for others."

Just like many other diagnoses, this one is frequently used rather imprecisely in everyday conversation. Sometimes all it takes for somebody to be labeled the office narcissist is that they tend to get a little carried away when they talk about themselves. Self-centered people can certainly be irritating, and it's definitely one of the signs of narcissism, but it isn't the only one.

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF NARCISSISM

- Unrealistic, grandiose self-image
- Incredibly self-centered
- Speak only about themselves
- Feeling special and unique
- Arrogance and haughtiness
- Quick to criticize and judge others
- Highly sensitive to criticism
- Think the rules don't apply to them
- *Constant* self-promotion

- Feeling entitled to the best of everything
- Value power and fame
- Demand constant acknowledgment
- Will respond with aggression when questioned
- Deceitful and manipulative

All these separate points can be broken down into smaller components, and studying the various points in depth is worthwhile, as it can often help you find the explanation for what might otherwise have remained just a feeling. I'm sure you've met people who would be diagnosed as narcissists, even if you never knew it at the time. You've probably thought things like, *This feels odd*, or, *Why is this conversation making me uncomfortable? Is there something wrong with me?* Perhaps this description will help clear these things up for you.

In addition, if you've been incorrectly told that somebody is a narcissist, this chapter will give you the tools you need to figure it out. You'll learn to detect the patterns, even if you're not a qualified psychologist.

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT EACH CHARACTERISTIC

If we take a brief look at each characteristic, we'll soon see that they all actually fit together rather well. Some of them even overlap without being identical.

UNREALISTIC SELF-IMAGE

This is sometimes called a grandiose self-image. Having an unrealistic self-image is exactly what you'd expect: It involves having a self-image

that doesn't match up with reality. "Unrealistic" seems to be open to two different interpretations, however: Wouldn't a highly successful individual who felt like an utter failure also have an *unrealistic* self-image? All "realistic" means in this context is that it matches up well with reality, after all. In this case, though, I'm only discussing the inverse relationship: people who overestimate their achievements, so that even those who are moderate failures might see themselves as true winners.

One particular kind of narcissist (who, unlike other narcissists, actually often end up seeking help, partly because of the depressions they suffer and partly for the recognition it affords them) tends to think of themselves as failures. However, they make a point of pointing out that their failure is the direct result of their unfair treatment at the hands of the world, and that their talents would surely have set them apart from the masses if it hadn't been for that. They're usually jealous of other people and often suspect that their successes must have been achieved by nefarious means, rather than genuine talent or merit, like those of the narcissist.

Narcissists' unrealistic self-images will often hinge on their failure to acknowledge their own limitations. They take jobs they aren't qualified for and then experience genuine surprise at how challenging they find them. They get involved in discussions about subjects they know next to nothing about and then have a difficult time accepting it when their ignorance is exposed and they lose the argument.

INCREDIBLY SELF-CENTERED

Merriam-Webster's online dictionary defines self-centeredness as self-sufficiency on the one hand and being concerned solely with one's own desires, needs, or interests on the other. The former has nothing

to do with narcissism—on the contrary, narcissists tend to be utterly dependent on others for satisfying their psychological needs. Narcissists essentially think only about themselves, their own experiences, their preferences, and their needs. Other people? Well, they do exist, certainly, but mainly to be exploited by the narcissist for their own benefit.

Basically, everything else orbits the narcissist. Their view of the world is the only one that matters, and everyone else had better adjust. Anything that happens in the vicinity of a narcissist will be judged based on their own opinions. If they see an angle that might allow them to benefit from a situation, that's a positive—even if it has negative consequences for ten other people. If it's bad for the narcissist but good for one hundred others, it's a bad thing overall.

SPEAK ONLY ABOUT THEMSELVES

Any conversation will inevitably end up being about the narcissist. The topic doesn't really matter much. Nothing comes more naturally to narcissists than inserting themselves into everything. That's what interests them the most, after all. Narcissists want to be involved in every story and announce their experience of something or other. Since other people aren't too interesting, it only makes sense to change the subject to something more exciting. And if a narcissist should fail to make the particular subject of conversation about them, they will simply change the subject to make it more directly about them.

I'm sure you know the old joke:

That's enough about me. Let's talk about you. What do you think about me?

FEELING SPECIAL AND UNIQUE

Narcissists feel that they are highly unique and genuinely special. Naturally, every human being is unique in their own way, but to a narcissist, what this means is that they genuinely possess abilities that almost nobody else has. They have different, better talents than everyone else.

They look better, are smarter, or are more successful. These are individuals who think of themselves as God's gift to humanity. They consider themselves to be fully and completely fabulous, and if anybody claims otherwise there will be trouble. On top of this, people who tend towards narcissism will often imagine that people appreciate or even love them to a very great extent. They seriously believe that they are highly popular among many people—perhaps more popular than anybody else—but the truth is that they are more likely to be popular with a particular group of people and far less so in other circles.

Narcissists believe themselves to be on top of the world even when everyone else can see they aren't even close.

QUICK TO CRITICIZE AND JUDGE OTHERS

Since a narcissist is already the best at everything, and shares this fact freely with anyone they meet, they also know that everyone else is far worse at everything. They don't mind sharing this fact, either, often in a rather judgmental fashion. Since a narcissist feels entitled to think and say whatever they want to, they often do just that. And, as a result of their obvious contempt for everyone else, they can't help but put people down. Basically, putting others down makes narcissists feel better, because it makes them feel more important. Like winners—more or less.

Since narcissists tend to exhibit arrogance and haughtiness in their behavior and attitudes, there are only a few people whom they will be prepared to spend their time and attention on. The little people aren't really worthy of their attention.

A narcissist who possesses developed social skills can cause tremendous harm to unwitting victims. An example of this is the tremendous increase we've seen in hate speech online in recent years. Attacking people you don't like for some reason or another is a particular specialty of narcissists. It doesn't matter if the victim is guilty or innocent. Since narcissists are unhindered by moral laws, believe they are entitled to do what they want, and feel that putting others down somehow elevates them, they're prepared to spend huge amounts of time picking people apart. Sometimes they're basically just bullies.

HIGHLY SENSITIVE TO CRITICISM

Some people are quick to criticize because they prefer an open and frank conversation, but when it comes to narcissists, this is always a one-way street. They feel entitled to criticize and tear down others, but they are far too sensitive to be prepared to listen to what people think of them. Since they will invariably take any criticism as a sign that the world around them is failing to perceive their greatness, they will react quickly, often with forceful, sudden rage. And along with that, a thirst for vengeance.

Criticism can be interpreted in a variety of ways. On the one hand, it could be genuine criticism, that is, a negative assessment of the narcissist's performance, for example. However, it could also be a case of insufficient praise, or not cheering loud enough about how wonderful their achievements are. If what you give the narcissist fails to live up to their expectations, they can erupt at any moment.

THINK THE RULES DON'T APPLY TO THEM

The previous point frequently results in the following. Because narcissists think of themselves as incredibly special and unique, an interesting effect occurs: The rules and regulations that the rest of society has agreed on don't apply to them. It could be anything from sticking to the speed limit to taking responsibility at work. If you genuinely believe that the ordinary rules of society don't apply to you, that will set you apart. Making an effort to be nice and acting polite and welcoming are within a narcissist's repertoire, of course, but since they feel no genuine compulsion to conform to these norms, they are able to drop the pretense with surprising speed if provoked.

This is one of the reasons why other people seldom have any genuine appreciation for narcissists. They can certainly attract a coterie of admirers to orbit them, but nobody genuinely likes them. Their lack of respect for the rules makes them too unpredictable. Most people find this exhausting in the long run. Narcissists' relationships are actually much more superficial than they may realize.

CONSTANT SELF-PROMOTION

The first word, of every sentence, is "I." *"I think, I feel, I believe, I wish, I want, I demand . . ."* Because narcissists think of themselves as the best at everything, they will always emphasize their own qualities. They are also bound to inform everybody about their popularity, important acquaintances, and unrivaled network. This is a variant of the grandiose self-image, and it can produce an odd effect when a narcissist keeps emphasizing their contributions to the world. This goes beyond simply talking about yourself, too.

Narcissists might well donate money to charities—they just won't

do it unless they can somehow tell the rest of the world that they did it. The reason for this is very simple: They want to receive credit for their huge hearts. Donating one hundred dollars to Save the Children isn't enough for them; to ensure that they will receive the ovations they deserve from their imagined fans, they have to post about it on Instagram and Facebook.

Alarmingly enough, narcissists are overrepresented within the hierarchies of global charities such as Save the Children or UNICEF. They do the minimum amount of work required of them but make a point of trying to climb the rungs of the organization at the expense of colleagues who have actually dedicated their lives to charity work. Yes, this has been studied, too.

FEELING ENTITLED TO THE BEST OF EVERYTHING

Narcissists feel entitled to the best the world has to offer. This is an important drive for them, a constant striving for perfection and need to have the very best. Just like a little child imagines that they can get away with doing anything they feel like, narcissists do the same because they feel entitled to it. Claiming space, insulting or stepping on others, receiving maximal compensation for minimal effort—narcissists feel naturally entitled to all that stuff.

In addition, it's also their essential birthright to live in the most elegant house in the best neighborhood, drive the most expensive car, and wear only the finest clothes. The list goes on. Whenever a narcissist wants something, this feeling hinges on the sense that they are entitled to it. No further arguments are necessary. However illogical this may sound, it seems perfectly rational to them. And since they prefer their rewards to be instant, they won't hesitate to take a shortcut.

VALUE POWER AND FAME

Power and fame are highly valued attributes in the eyes of a narcissist. They are evidence of the narcissist's worth, which is something everybody should be acknowledging. Attention matters. Amusingly enough, narcissists don't insist that the attention they receive be positive. Negative attention is better than no attention at all. In this regard, narcissists are just like little children.

The consequence of this is that narcissists, like psychopaths, are drawn to any place in which power and attention tend to concentrate. However, problems will soon arise if people fail to acknowledge narcissists' importance. They may even exhibit signs of mild depression if they don't receive the attention they crave.

DEMAND CONSTANT ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Many people work hard and enjoy basking in the recognition they receive from the world for the successes they achieve. But that's it for them. The acceptance they've been given actually satisfies them. Not so for narcissists.

These people live for constant recognition. And since they believe themselves to be entitled to it, they are always looking to get more, too. This could be an employee who always runs errands for the boss in exchange for praise. But it could also be a boss who keeps buying the team cake in order to hear how popular they are.

Narcissists' need for recognition requires constant refilling, and this can seem incomprehensible to the people around them. How could anybody need to be told how handsome, well-dressed, skilled, successful, and popular they are—every single day?

DECEITFUL AND MANIPULATIVE

Narcissists are often highly efficient when it comes to detecting people's weaknesses. They also tend to be prepared to exploit these weaknesses to deceive and defraud their victims. Exploiting others comes naturally to them. They are often indifferent to the emotions of others, which makes them skilled at manipulating the people around them. Since they are reasonably indifferent to the danger of being exposed, they will take risks and behave with such boldness that it can often be difficult to believe that they are being deceitful.

WHAT CONCLUSIONS CAN WE DRAW SO FAR?

These are the basic features of narcissism. There are psychological tools we can use to measure these characteristics quite accurately, and I will be discussing one of these later on. If you score high enough for each area, you might actually be a narcissist in the clinical sense. However, the diagnosis can only be made by qualified experts, who specialize in this particular area. Not just any psychologist is qualified to do this, because many within the field believe that narcissism and even psychopathy are treatable conditions. They are approaching the whole problem from the wrong direction, basically.

Plenty of ordinary people exhibit distinct narcissistic traits without ever being diagnosed. There is no doubt, either, that our society promotes and rewards these kinds of behavior. I'm going to take a closer look at some of these behaviors and identify the risks involved. I'll also be looking into whether there might be any benefits to being a narcissist.