

Beyond 'selfies': An epidemic of acquired narcissism

Narcissism has an evil reputation. But is it justified? A modicum of narcissism is actually healthy. It can bolster self-confidence, assertiveness, and success in business and in the sociobiology of mating. Perhaps that's why narcissism as a trait has a survival value from an evolutionary perspective.

Taking an excessive number of "selfies" with a smartphone is probably the most common and relatively benign form of mild narcissism (and not in DSM-5, yet). Narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), with a prevalence of 1%, is on the extreme end of the narcissism continuum. It has become tainted with such an intensely negative halo that it has become a despised trait, an insult, and even a vile epithet, like a 4-letter word. But as psychiatrists and other mental health professionals, we clinically relate to patients with NPD as being afflicted with a serious neuropsychiatric disorder, not as despicable individuals. Many people outside the mental health profession abhor persons with NPD because of their gargantuan hubris, insufferable selfishness, self-aggrandizement, emotional abuse of others, and irremediable vanity. Narcissistic personality disorder deprives its sufferers of the prosocial capacity for empathy, which leads them to belittle others or treat competent individuals with disdain, never as

equals. They also seem to be incapable of experiencing shame as they inflate their self-importance and megalomania at the expense of those they degrade. They cannot tolerate any success by others because it threatens to overshadow their own exaggerated achievements. They can be mercilessly harsh towards their underlings. They are incapable of fostering warm, long-term loving relationships, where bidirectional respect is essential. Their lives often are replete with brief, broken-up relationships because they emotionally, physically, or sexually abuse their intimate partners.

Primary NPD has been shown in twin studies to be highly genetic, and more strongly heritable than 17 other personality dimensions.¹ It is also resistant to any effective psychotherapeutic, pharmacologic, or somatic treatments. This is particularly relevant given the proclivity of individuals with NPD to experience a crushing disappointment, commonly known as "narcissistic injury," following a real or imagined failure. This could lead to a painful depression or an outburst of "narcissistic rage" directed at anyone perceived as undermining them, and may even lead to violent behavior.²

Apart from heritable narcissism, there is also another form of narcissism that can develop in some individuals following life events. That hazardous condition, known as "acquired narcissism," is most often associated with achieving the coveted



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'Acquired narcissism' that comes from fame can lead celebrities to start believing they are indeed superior to the rest of us mortals

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 **CINCINNATI**

status of an exalted celebrity. At risk for this acquired personality affliction are famous actors, singers, movie directors, TV anchors, or politicians (although some politicians are natural-born narcissists, driven to seek the powers of public office), and less frequently physicians (perhaps because the practice of medicine is not done in front of spectators) or scientists (because research, no matter how momentous, rarely procures the glamour or public adulation of the entertainment industry). The ardent fans of those “celebs” shower them with such intense attention and adulation that it malignantly transforms previously “normal” individuals into narcissists who start believing they are indeed “very special” and superior to the rest of us mortals (especially as their earning power balloons into the millions after growing up with humble social or economic roots).

Social media has become a catalyst for acquired narcissism, with millions of followers on Twitter, Facebook, or YouTube. Cable TV also caters to politicians, some of whom morph into narcissists, intoxicated with their newfound eminence and stature among their partisan followers, and become genuinely convinced that they have supreme power or influence over the masses. They get carried away with their own exaggerated self-importance as oracles of the “truth,” regardless of how extreme their views may be. Celebrity, politics, social media, and cable TV have converged into a combustible mix, a crucible for acquired narcissism.

An interesting feature of acquired narcissism is “collective narcissism,” in which celebrities coalesce to consolidate their imagined superhuman attributes that go beyond the technical skills of their professions such as acting, singing, sports, or politics. Thus,

entertainers or star athletes believe they can enunciate radical statements about contemporary social, political, or environmental issues (at both ends of the debate) as though their artistic success renders them wise arbiters of the truth. What complicates matters is their delirious fans, who revere and mimic whatever their idols say (and their fashion or their tattoos), which further intensifies the grandiosity and megalomania of acquired narcissism. Celebrity triggers mindless idolatry, fueling the narcissism of individuals who are blessed (or cursed?) with runaway personal success. Neuroscientists should conduct research into how the brain is neurobiologically altered by fame, but there are many more urgent questions that demand their attention. It would be important to know if it is reversible or enduring, even as fame inevitably dims.

The pursuit of wealth and fame is widely prevalent and can be healthy if it is not all-consuming. But if achieved beyond the aspirer’s wildest dreams, he/she may reach an inflection point conducive to a pathologic degree of acquired narcissism. That’s what the French refer to as “les risques du métier” (ie, occupational hazard). I recall reading about celebrities who became enraged when a policeman “dared” to stop their car for some driving violation, confronting the officer with “Do you know who I am?” That question may be a clinical biomarker of acquired narcissism.

Interestingly, several years ago, when the American Psychiatry Association last revised the DSM—sometimes referred to as the “bible” of psychiatric nosology—it came close to dropping NPD from its listed disorders, but then reverted and kept it as one of the 275 diagnostic categories included in DSM-5.³ Had the NPD diagnosis been discarded, one

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wonders if the mythical god of narcissism would have suffered a transcendental “narcissistic injury”...



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