

Narcissism is Not Self-love

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ABSTRACT:

To a narcissist, love is interchangeable with other emotions, such as awe, respect, admiration, attention, or even being feared (collectively known as Narcissistic Supply). Thus, to him, a projected image, which provokes these reactions in others, is both “loveable and loved”. It also feels like self-love.

KEYWORDS: Narcissism, Self-love, Psychological and physical abuse, Love

INTRODUCTION

“He/she is a narcissist”. How often have you heard this diatribe? More and more frequently recently. But, ask most people what “narcissism” means and they will equate it with unbridled self-love (Vaknin, et al. 2020).

Nothing can be further from the truth.

According to the legend of Narcissus, this Greek boy fell in love with his own reflection in a pond. In a way, this amply sums up the nature of his namesakes: narcissists (Ronningstam, et al.1996). Narcissus is not in love with *himself*. He is in love with his *reflection*.

There is a major difference between one’s True Self and reflected-self.

Loving your True Self is healthy, adaptive, and functional.

Loving your reflection (the impressions you leave on other people) has two major drawbacks:

- One depends on the existence and availability of the reflection to produce the emotion of self-love; and
- The absence of a “compass”, an “objective and realistic yardstick”, by which to judge the authenticity of the reflection. In other words, it is impossible to tell whether the reflection is true to reality – and, if so, to what extent.

He who loves only impressions and reflections is incapable of loving people, himself included.

But the narcissist does possess the in-bred desire to love and to be loved. If he cannot love himself – he must love his

reflection (Vaknin, et al. 2007). But to love his reflection – it must be loveable (Alford, et al.1988; Fairbairn, et al.1954). Thus, driven by the insatiable urge to love (which we all possess), the narcissist is preoccupied with projecting a loveable image, albeit compatible with his self-image (the way he “sees” himself) (Schwartz, et al. 1974).

To a narcissist, love is interchangeable with other emotions, such as awe, respect, admiration, attention, or even being feared (collectively known as Narcissistic Supply). Thus, to him, a projected image, which provokes these reactions in others, is both “loveable and loved”. It also feels like self-love (Ronningstam, et al. 1996).

The more successful this projected image (or series of successive images) is in generating Narcissistic Supply (NS) the more the narcissist becomes divorced from his True Self and married to the image (Marcus, et al.1975; Alexander, et al. 1997).

I am not saying that the narcissist does not have a central nucleus of a “self”. All I am saying is that he prefers his image – with which he identifies unreservedly – to his True Self. The True Self becomes serf to the Image, paralysed and subordinates (Golomb, et al. 1995).

There are two differences between healthy self-love and pathological narcissism: (a) in the ability to tell reality from fantasy, and (b) in the ability to empathise and, indeed, to fully and maturely love others (David, et al.1998). As we said, the narcissist does not love himself. It is because he has very little True Self to love. Instead, a monstrous, malignant construct – the False Self – encroaches upon his True Self and devours it.

The narcissist loves an image which he projects onto others who reflect it to the narcissist (the False Self). This process reassures the narcissist of both the objective existence of his False Self and of the boundaries of his Ego. It blurs all distinctions between reality and fantasy (Guntrip, et al. 1962).

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The False Self leads to false assumptions and to a contorted personal narrative, to a false worldview, and to a grandiose, inflated sense of being. The latter is rarely grounded in real achievements or merit. The narcissist's feeling of entitlement is all-pervasive, demanding and aggressive. It easily deteriorates into open verbal, psychological and physical abuse of others (Greenberg, et al. 1983).

Maintaining a distinction between what we really are and what we dream of becoming, knowing our limits, our advantages and faults and having a sense of true, realistic accomplishments in our life are of paramount importance in the establishment and maintenance of our self-esteem, sense of self-worth and self-confidence (Grunberger, B., et al. 1979).

Reliant as he is on outside judgement, the narcissist feels miserably inferior and dependent. He rebels against this degrading state of things by escaping into a world of make-belief, daydreaming, pretensions and delusions of grandeur. The narcissist knows little about him and finds what he knows to be unacceptable (Horowitz, et al. 1975; Kernberg, et al. 1975; Kohut, et al. 1971).

Our experience of what it is like to be human our very humanness – depends largely on our self-knowledge and on our experience of our selves. In other words: only through being himself and through experiencing his self can a human being fully appreciate the humanness of others (Ogas, et al. 2011).

The narcissist has precious little experience of his self. Instead, he lives in an invented world, of his own design, where he is a fictitious figure in a grandiose script. He, therefore, possesses no tools to enable him to cope with other human beings, share their emotions, put himself in their place (empathise) and, of course, love them – the most demanding task of inter-relating (Millon, et al. 2012).

The narcissist just does not know what it means to be human. He is a predator, rapaciously preying on others for the satisfaction of his narcissistic cravings and appetites for admiration, adoration, applause, affirmation and attention. Humans are Narcissistic Supply Sources and are (over- or de-) valued according to their contributions to this end (Lasch, et al. 1980).

Self-love is a precondition for the experience and expression of mature love (Zweig, et al. 1968). One cannot truly love someone else if one does not first love one's True Self. If we had never loved ourselves – we had never experienced unconditional love and, therefore, we do not know how to love (Helm, et al. 2015).

If we keep living in a world of fantasy – how could we notice the very real people around us who ask for our love and who deserve it? The narcissist wants to love. In his rare moments of self-awareness, he feels ego-dystonic (unhappy with his situation and with his relationships with others). This is his

predicament: he is sentenced to isolation precisely because his need of other people is so great.

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