

NARCISSISM: RECOGNIZING & MANAGING THE BEHAVIORS

GOALS

1. Recognize the key traits and characteristics of narcissistic personality disorder (NPD).
2. Understand how NPD can disrupt personal relationships and organizational success.
3. Identify leadership behaviors that may reduce the personal and organizational impact of NPD.

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

A leader's harmful NPD-related behaviors can impair self-awareness, judgment, and the ability to respond effectively. Likewise, employees who display NPD-related behaviors may go unnoticed while still negatively affecting daily interactions. Throughout an organization, these behaviors can undermine employee confidence and overall performance.

When NPD-related behaviors are persistent or left unaddressed by leaders, they can negatively affect:

- An individual's self-esteem, trust, and sense of safety
- Organizational communication, morale, and collaboration
- Overall organizational success

Recognizing NPD-related behaviors helps leaders respond quickly, appropriately, and consistently.

WARNING SIGNS OF NPD

Some NPD-related behaviors, such as confidence, ambition, and self-assurance, can be healthy when expressed in moderation. These traits are positive when guided by empathy, accountability, respect, and appropriate judgment. However, they can become concerning or harmful when they are extreme, persistent, or used inappropriately.

Research estimates that about 5% of the population meets the psychological criteria for NPD, with rates of approximately 7.7% among males and 4.8% among females.

Early Warning Signs

NPD is generally understood as a persistent pattern of behavior that often becomes evident by early adulthood. Common signs include:

1. Persistent need for admiration
2. Difficulty showing empathy
3. Strong sense of entitlement

COMMON CATEGORIES OF NPD-RELATED BEHAVIOR

Grandiose: Displays an inflated sense of importance or superiority. Examples may include taking credit for others' work, dismissing others' feelings, avoiding responsibility, or dominating conversations. This behavior is often visible, attention-seeking, and outwardly confident.

Vulnerable: May seem withdrawn, anxious, or defensive and often show low self-esteem, distrust, hostility, or dissatisfaction in relationships.

Covert: Shows fragile self-worth, self-consciousness, sensitivity to criticism, and subtle efforts to seek validation or influence others.

Communal: Seeks admiration through helpfulness, service, or moral superiority. Although this behavior may appear caring, it is often motivated by a need for praise, recognition, or validation.

Narcissism vs. Egocentrism

Narcissism and egocentrism can look similar, but they are distinct. Egocentric individuals may struggle to understand another person's perspective, while narcissistic individuals may understand it but choose not to value it or respond with empathy.

DIAGNOSING NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY DISORDER (NPD)

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: 5th Edition (DSM-5) classifies NPD as a Cluster B personality disorder. Diagnosis typically requires a persistent pattern that includes five or more of the following traits:

Grandiosity: An exaggerated sense of importance or superiority that exceeds actual accomplishments.

Fantasies: Preoccupation with unlimited success, power, beauty, brilliance, or ideal love.

Belief in being “special”: A belief that they are unique and should associate primarily with high-status people, groups, or institutions.

Need for admiration: A strong desire for excessive attention, praise, or validation.

Exploitation: Using others to meet personal needs, goals, or desires.

Lack of empathy: Difficulty recognizing, understanding, or responding to the needs and emotions of others.

Envy: Envy of others or a belief that others are envious of them.

Arrogance: Superior, dismissive, or arrogant attitudes and behaviors.

WORKING WITH SOMEONE WHO SHOWS NPD-RELATED BEHAVIORS

When working with someone who displays NPD-related behaviors, research often recommends limiting direct engagement, when possible, particularly with individuals who insist on having the last word. This approach is sometimes called avoidance behavior. In organizational settings, however, leaders usually need strategies that go beyond avoidance.

Depending on the severity of the behavior, direct confrontation can make the situation worse unless the leader has a clear plan for direct confrontation or managing unacceptable behavior. In the workplace, this often includes firm employee behavioral expectations and responsibilities/standards that are clearly defined, reviewed frequently, signed, and dated by each/all employee(s). These expectations and responsibilities are often included in a documented job description. Also, acceptable leadership skills include appropriate personal leadership guidance, support, and on-going recommendations that encourage employment success and maintenance of appropriate organizational standards.

When NPD-related behaviors occur in a family, avoidance may not be practical. In these cases, firm behavioral limits and consistent consequences for recognized NPD behaviors may help reduce undesirable behaviors.

“Grey rocking” is a strategy that involves giving/showing little or no emotional reaction to manipulative or disruptive NPD-related behaviors, much like remaining as unresponsive as a grey rock. When a behavior is unacceptable and a reaction to the untoward

behavior may encourage more disruption, a planned non-response to the exhibition of NPD behavior(s) can help prevent escalation and limit the attempt at manipulation.

The *prevention* of intrusive NPD behaviors clearly supports a plan/job description and the need for a documented personal understanding of expected/required behavior(s). Also, there should be *rewards* for compliance with job expectations and *consequences* for noncompliance with job expectations. Such planned and expected organizational leadership behaviors will encourage and promote organizational success.

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Resource: DSM-5

Science of Psychology