

THE NARCISSIST YOU KNOW

DEFENDING YOURSELF AGAINST
EXTREME NARCISSISTS IN AN
ALL-ABOUT-ME-AGE

By Maria V. Luna

It was the best of times. It was the worst of times. As we all know by now, we are living in an age of narcissism so pervasive that it has skewed our value systems and integrity. But what is the root of such profound self-centeredness? How can we spot a narcissist—and would it be the very person staring back from our mirror? Dr. Joseph Burgo, author of *The Narcissist You Know: Defending Yourself Against Extreme Narcissists in an All-About-Me Age* helps us navigate these rough yet reflective waters.

When would you say “The Golden Age of Narcissism” began and how would you describe it?

It's been coming on slowly, ever since the aging of The Greatest Generation (in Tom Brokaw's words) and the rise of the Boomers, when authenticity and self-fulfillment began to displace the ideals of service and self-sacrifice. Our cultural worship of celebrity has also made humility seem obsolete: in a world where attention-seeking celebrities are the ultimate “winners,” a modest, self-effacing person might easily be viewed as a “loser.” The advent of social media has intensified the trend by providing a platform where we can all appear to be minor celebrities, winners within our own small universe where most of what we post, text, or tweet aims to make us look good and elicit admiration.

How would I know if I'm a narcissist?

Last year, a study out of Ohio State University and Gettysburg College found that a simple test with one single question helped to identify narcissists, nearly as accurately as a much longer

test commonly used for the same purpose. Here's the question: “To what extent do you agree with the statement: ‘I am a narcissist?’” Narcissism was defined as “egotistical, self-focused and vain.” People who strongly agreed with that statement scored high on the narcissism scale from the longer format test.

So, in other words, if you think you're a narcissist, then you probably are.

What is the difference between “healthy self-regard” and “pathological narcissism”?

We're all social animals, and healthy self-regard depends to some degree on earning the respect of people who matter to us, but the pathological narcissist builds himself up at the expense of others. Driven to prove himself a winner, this person needs other people (those losers) over whom he can triumph—he feeds off the envy and admiration of other people he manipulates. Healthy self-regard leaves room for other people to feel good about themselves, as well. Pathological narcissists need to stand at the pinnacle, looking down upon everyone else.



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If you put a check mark next to more than one item in several groups, you're probably dealing with an Extreme Narcissist. If many of the items in most of the categories seem to apply, the person likely meets the diagnostic criteria for Narcissistic Personality Disorder.

A. Empathy and Emotions

- Feels uncomfortable with his or her emotional life
- Lacks interest in you and your feelings
- Criticizes you for feeling “too much” or for “overreacting”
- When angry or upset, often denies feeling that way
- Feels envious or imagines other people to be envious of him or her
- Goes on the attack when hurt or frustrated; explodes with rage
- Lacks insight into the way his or her behavior affects others

Would you say shame is the root cause of narcissism?

Yes, I would, although my views on shame differ slightly from the way people usually think about it. Largely due to the influence of John Bradshaw's book, *Healing the Shame that Binds You*, most people think of shame as the result of toxic messages received from parents and other significant people during childhood. While I agree, I also believe there is another profound type of shame – core shame, I call it – that takes root in the earliest months and years of childhood as a result of severe neglect or emotional dysfunction in the family. When attachment between mother and infant fails, it often leaves behind an internal sense of defect, inferiority, or ugliness in the child. To ward off or escape from this excruciating sense of being damaged, the growing child constructs an idealized false self, a kind of shell identity felt to be synonymous with the self. The shame at the person's core is largely unconscious, although he is highly sensitive to and ever on guard against anything that might stir it up.

You offer a list of varying degrees of narcissism. Which is the most difficult

type of narcissist to deal with? The Vindictive Narcissist is by far the most dangerous type because for these people, it isn't enough to look good at your expense or to make you feel bad about yourself. They want to destroy you. Highly sensitive to the smallest slight, Vindictive Narcissists will take offense where none was intended, experience it as a grave insult, and then proceed to retaliate in kind. Vindictive Narcissists want to destroy your reputation. They want you to lose your job. They want to alienate you from all your friends, making you into an outcast loser. One of the worst possible nightmares I can imagine is to be involved in a divorce with a Vindictive Narcissist.

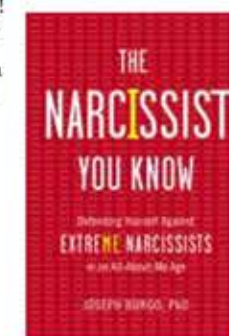
We love Jennifer López over here. Would you categorize her as a seductive narcissist? What about—um, let's say Bernie Sanders. Would he be considered a self-righteous narcissist?

Although I do discuss celebrities in each of the profile chapters of my book, I usually don't feel comfortable doing so unless I've done my background research. I don't know a lot about Jennifer López, but she strikes me as no more narcissistic than your usual celebrity diva. As far as I know, she hasn't seduced people in the ruthless way that Madonna has done, for example. A number of her relationships have gone bad and she seems to have been genuinely heartbroken about them.

As for Bernie Sanders, he comes across as self-righteous, even smug at times, but that doesn't necessarily make him a narcissist. He seems to be genuinely passionate about what he believes in and has been remarkably consistent in his positions over a lengthy career, unlike Donald Trump who appears to say whatever he believes will garner him attention.

What is a sure-fire way to deal with any type of narcissist?

The most consistent piece of advice I give throughout my book is this: GET AS FAR AWAY AS POSSIBLE! Don't delude yourself you can ever change a narcissist. If you can't avoid the person, always bear in mind that shame is at issue and DO NOTHING TO STIMULATE IT.



- B. Self-Image and Social Comparison**
 - Preoccupied with the way he or she is viewed by others
 - Arrogant, vain, and haughty; exaggerates accomplishments
 - Makes obvious plays for attention or admiration
 - Hypercompetitive and ambitious
 - Easily slighted; tends to misinterpret innocent remarks as put-downs
 - Makes contemptuous remarks about other people behind their backs
 - Ridicules you and makes you feel bad about yourself
- C. Impulsivity**
 - Lacks self-control; spends beyond his or her means
 - Overeats, drinks too much, or abuses drugs
 - Tends to be a workaholic
 - Initiates grand projects but can't follow through
 - Falls quickly in and out of idealized romantic love
 - Makes important life decisions with little forethought
 - Is unfaithful in marriage or committed relationships
- D. Interpersonal Relationships**
 - Is self-absorbed, controlling, and exploitative
 - Can be seductive and manipulative
 - Tends to be overly jealous and possessive
 - Dominates conversation and frequently interrupts others
 - Is suspicious of other people's motives, always imagining the worst
 - Demands uncritical allegiance
 - Bullies others to get his or her way
- E. Moral Code and Personal Responsibility**
 - Lies or distorts the truth for personal gain
 - Blames others or makes excuses for his or her mistakes
 - Plays the victim; uses guilt to manipulate you
 - Engages in illegal or unethical behavior
 - Feels entitled to have what he or she wants
 - Comes across as self-righteous and bulletproof during arguments