

FREE FIRST CHAPTER

7 STEPS ON HOW TO STOP BEING A NARCISSIST

The Narcissism Personality Disorder Unveiled

How To Stop Being Toxic And Heal Narcissism So You Can Form Emotionally Healthy Relationships Free From Guilt And Toxic Empathy. Stop Lying & Gaslighting. — Chapter One. About a 30-minute read.

The ironic thing about narcissism is that it can make you ignore the signs that you are narcissistic.

You pretend nothing's wrong, but from time to time, you soberly reflect on your life situations and realize things are not going as well as they could be. I felt this way nine years ago. My mind was a jumbled mess of contradictions. I thought I had a promising career and a nice set of hobbies, but I felt hollow and empty inside. I liked to think I was well respected and liked by my peers, but barely anyone bothered to ask me to hang out, wish me a happy birthday, or check on me. I thought I knew what deep bonds and intimacy were, but I rarely had memorable social moments, like engaging in deep conversations for hours or spontaneously going on adventures with others.

When you struggle to fully acknowledge the problem you face, you need someone to take you by the hand and show you what's wrong. To turn your vague hunch about the potential existence of a problem into a clear awareness that you need to work on yourself to get better. Recognizing the problem is the first mission of this book. Yet, despite the countless people who could use this wake-up call, eight out of ten people I consulted told me there was no point in writing this book.

This is because of the stigmatizing belief that being a narcissist makes you ignorant, unchangeable, and irredeemable. I was told that my target audience would never bother to read something that acknowledged their flaws and imperfections. Even when I pointed out how I've managed to overcome my narcissism, I was told that my story is the exception but not the rule.

If people who've met a reformed narcissist are highly skeptical that positive change is possible, imagine how much more pessimistic a person who'd never heard of stories like mine would be. It's normal to see change as unlikely, especially when it comes to one of the most complex personality disorders, but this misguided belief is far from healthy. Hearing that narcissists can't reform and get better is the death of hope. If no one believes you can get better, then there's no point in trying. What's worse, implying narcissists can't change encourages denial for those who struggle with narcissistic patterns of behavior. Who'd want to go to therapy and diagnose themselves with a condition that's labeled as incurable? The more narcissism is demonized and stigmatized, the less anyone wants to carry the label. This whole process creates a self-fulfilling prophecy—the subjective belief that a narcissist can't change discourages anyone from adopting the label or trying to change. You can't change if you refuse to acknowledge there is a problem in the first place.

The first time I sought to get mental health treatment, I didn't go because I suspected myself to be a narcissist. I was depressed, struggled to socialize and build meaningful connections with others, and had a vague feeling that I wasn't living the life I wanted. My first few therapists all gave me a dismissive prescription of pills for depression, and I was tempted to accept, but a part of me wasn't satisfied with the answer. I eventually stumbled on a clinician who dug into my underlying problems and tied them to narcissistic behavior. Initially, I was in disbelief. After some time, I begrudgingly accepted my diagnosis not because I liked the label but because there were people who believed I could get better, like my therapist, my brother, and my friends at the narcissism recovery groups I found later on in my journey. Their faith in me was the sparkle that lit a blazing fire of hope inside of me.

I know not all of you are fortunate enough to have people supporting you in the same way. For this reason, this book doesn't just aim to make you aware that there's a problem but

also to give you the hope and tools you need to overcome this large obstacle. I've incorporated all the strategies I've personally used, systems and interventions I've seen in other success stories, and exercises based on principles from the most widely used therapeutic modalities. In each personal story and practical strategy throughout this book, there is a common theme—you can get better. If I could do it, you can as well. They say the first step is the hardest, but the very fact you've mustered the courage to open and read this book is one gigantic leap in the right direction. To make it easier for you, I've summarized all my knowledge into 7 steps that you can take while reading this book and once you are done.

They include the following:

1. Develop greater self-awareness and a deeper understanding of narcissism by exploring each of its key traits, characteristics, and types using the latest evidence-based approach to narcissism, which views it as a diverse and nuanced spectrum. You will also learn about the impact narcissism may have on your life and on the people around you and how your upbringing and current environment can influence narcissistic behavior.
2. Create social bonds with others, and reach out for help. You will understand why getting professional help is essential, find the right therapy modality that fits your needs, and build social networks from the ground up that can help you practice social skills, develop empathy and compassion, and learn to be more open, honest, and vulnerable in front of others.
3. Learn to set actionable, measurable, and sustainable goals that you can easily fit into your everyday schedule and routine. You will also be introduced to a simple but systematized way of selecting the most pressing and important goals to improve your mental health and develop the tools needed to keep track of your progress and development over time.
4. Understand the complex process of personal growth and continuous change. You will explore the most common obstacles that prevent personal development, action-based methods of growing as a person, and the difference between wearing a mask and being your authentic self.
5. Explore your personal value gap, which is the difference between the person you want to be and your actual behavior in everyday life. Following this introspection, you will get a simple blueprint to discover your values and how to start following them, which will help you live an authentic life without regrets.

6. Adopt healthy and productive mindset adjustments that will help you to overcome stagnation and regression during your narcissism healing journey by developing a more realistic view of growth, seeing positive change as a lifelong journey, and building resilience to bounce back from shortcomings, and obstacles.
7. Practice self-compassion exercises to overcome low self-worth, insecurity, and deeply rooted shame. By learning to comfort and soothe yourself while struggling, you will grow less reliant on constant external validation, manipulation of others, and other unsustainable and sometimes exploitative tactics.

By following those steps, you will manage to overcome your narcissistic behavior and reform yourself, which comes with lots of benefits, including a less fragile and unstable sense of self-worth, better social and communication skills, increased ability to genuinely connect with people, reduced social anxiety and chronic stress, and better ability to grow personally and professionally by learning from your mistakes and adapting to your circumstances.

However, there's a catch.

Trying to change parts of your behavior that are narcissistic will be one of the hardest things you've done in your life.

This is one of the facts that you may not want to hear, but you should. For the longest time, you've been controlled by the parts of you that feed off attention, validation, social approval, and acknowledgment. However, I know deep down there is a part of you that values the truth, even if it initially feels crushing and devastating. It's the part of you that hates when people try to downplay, sugarcoat, or beat around the bush. Your desire for brutal honesty may have been locked away for a very long time, but it's finally time to let it take the wheel while reading this book. You will need to accept this fact because going into this book expecting quick fixes and easy solutions will only leave you disappointed.

Recovering from narcissism isn't a walk in the park, so you won't find this book particularly enjoyable. I am sure that by Chapter 2, you may want a refund or may even get a physical copy just so you can personally burn it to ashes. This book is like a physical workout for

your mind, especially if the workout includes the type of cardio you hate the most. You will experience a flurry of emotions, like anger, confusion, frustration, and repulsion, but afterward, you look back with gratitude and a sense of pride that you finished it. If you wanted pleasure, you could play video games, open your social media apps, watch a movie, go out with friends, or read a book. Yet, you ended up here because you crave something deeper and more meaningful. Personal growth is one of the most noble and fulfilling ways to spend your time, but it won't be pleasant.

Even if it's hard, transforming into the best version of yourself is very much possible. You can get better, no matter if you have an official narcissism personality disorder (NPD) diagnosis, strongly suspect you may have NPD without official testing or vaguely identify with some narcissism symptoms and wish to get better. If you have the will to endure pain and discomfort in pursuit of personal growth, then you can take charge and reshape your narcissistic patterns of behavior. Let's get started if you think you have what it takes to embark on this journey.

Chapter One: The Narcissism Personality Disorder Unveiled

"What does a narcissistic person look like to you?"

This was the first question I asked during an unofficial social survey I conducted by myself. Standing on the street with a giant sign saying, "Let's talk about narcissism," I encouraged passers-by to stop and speak with me and started asking them to participate in brief interviews.

Immediately, the responses I received to that first question were worrying and consisted of many ugly words and descriptions—evil, cruel, ruthless, psychopathic, robotic, incapable of love and affection, broken beyond repair, etc. I was shocked, so I asked a second question:

"Can a narcissist change and get better?"

Only seven tentatively replied it was possible. The rest, 105, were very adamant that a narcissist couldn't change.

Almost everyone I interviewed had a highly unrealistic and pessimistic view of narcissism. This is, in part, because narcissism is one of the most misunderstood mental health disorders.

This becomes problematic because these extreme, negative outlooks on narcissism prevent people from seeking help and trying to get better. If narcissistic behavior is heavily stigmatized, the natural reaction is to hide in shame. Furthermore, when everyone tells you it's impossible to change, you give up trying or pretend there's no problem.

I have a fundamentally different opinion on narcissism compared to the average person, who is often misinformed. I firmly believe that you can reduce your narcissistic traits and manage those traits if you make the commitment to change. However, for that to happen, you need to know what you are dealing with.

This chapter will break down the latest scientific literature to explain what narcissism is without any judgment and demonization.

We will cover all the official symptoms according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), what makes narcissism unique compared to other personality disorders, how the condition forms, and common obstacles you may encounter when seeking diagnosis and treatment.

Step One: What Is Narcissism Personality Disorder?—Decoding The Mysteries Of NPD

To understand narcissism, we must first accurately define what it is.

What narcissism means in everyday conversations is very different from the official description used by clinicians. This is because mental health professionals aim to be unbiased and impartial, defining narcissism based on empirical observations rather than feelings.

The most authoritative definition of narcissism comes from the DSM-5. It's published under the American Psychiatric Association through the collaboration of psychiatrists,

neuroscientists, and other mental health experts. Definitions in the DSM-5 are formed after reviewing all available clinical data, combining the testimonies of hundreds of thousands of participants who took part in the studies. It's also regularly updated based on the latest scientific findings and breakthroughs in the field.

The clinical term used by the DSM-5 is narcissism personality disorder (NPD), which is defined as a complex personality disorder characterized by erratic, dramatic, emotionally driven, and unpredictable behavior. To get officially diagnosed, you need to show the following symptoms*:

Psychological Symptoms:

- An exaggerated sense of self-importance
- Excessive expectations of others and entitlement
- Very high need for validation, admiration, and recognition
- Regular, intense fantasies related to power, success, achievement, etc.
- Strong and rigid belief in being unique and special compared to others

Social Symptoms:

- Willingness to take advantage of others to achieve own goals and needs
- Reoccurring arrogant behavior in front of other people
- Reduced or complete lack of empathy
- Regular feelings of intense envy

You need to show a minimum of five out of the nine symptoms described here to be diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder (NPD).

The flexibility in symptom requirement removes the outdated all-or-nothing approach to diagnosis, allowing people who display narcissistic traits in different ways to get professionally diagnosed instead of being shut out. It's also inclusive of cases that represent different parts of the narcissistic spectrum, helping to personalize treatment depending on which symptoms happen most intensely frequently and cause the most challenges in everyday life.

Finally, to get diagnosed, your symptoms must also be visible across multiple contexts and periods of your life to ensure that the root cause is NPD and not external circumstances.

For example, if you are working in a very stressful and highly competitive corporate environment, you may develop mild narcissistic traits as an adaptive strategy to perform better.

For example, if everyone is willing to throw you under the bus, you learn to prioritize yourself, refuse to offer empathy to others, and may develop fantasies of success and achievement to motivate yourself to keep working hard. If you don't have NPD, those traits will not be present in your interpersonal relationships or will disappear altogether if you switch to a healthier work environment.

The Hard Path Of Diagnosing Narcissism—Common Obstacles And Challenges

The criteria and requirements for NPD are very straightforward in theory, but we all know the real world is far more messy. When I first tried to get diagnosed, the process was far from easy for two primary reasons.

First, I had the courage to seek help, but I was initially reluctant to fully open up.

A lot of narcissistic behavior, like manipulating others and disregarding their needs, feels deeply shameful to admit. So, I hid parts of myself for a long time. I also felt a primal instinct urging me to run away every time I admitted to a mistake or shortcoming for the first couple of months while doing therapy. I felt like a prisoner of war, strapped to a chair and endlessly tortured with every word that I pushed myself to admit. Even if I went into therapy each week of my own volition, the process felt like I was at war with myself.

I had to switch therapists three times before I found the one that helped me take off the mask and reveal the feelings and thoughts that I was subconsciously suppressing.

NPD is a very complex disorder that requires specialized training and a unique therapeutic approach that accounts for the heightened sensitivity and hyper-vigilance of people with

narcissism. While most people second guess their decision to seek professional help, the internal fight is even more intense when you have NPD. Only by finding a safe space where I was sure there'd be no judgment did I slowly begin to open up, and even then, it took months for my walls to come down.

If you decide to get help, you will experience the same struggle as well. It's like you have two voices in your head, each whispering in one of your ears. While admitting there may be a problem and reaching out for help is important, the real struggle will begin and intensify once you step into the office of a mental health professional.

Remember that the mental resistance you feel is perfectly normal. Even if every fiber of your being is screaming at you to run away, you have the strength to stay. Savor and reward yourself for each time you show up to a meeting and focus on making it to the next one instead of overthinking how much more you have to do and when it will end.

The second obstacle in the way was my worsening mental health as a result of my narcissistic traits. I hit rock bottom sometime before reaching out for professional help, which led to the emergence of other mental health disorders.

The first therapists I went to prescribed me medications and offered treatments for anxiety and depression. They saw only the most visible symptoms and didn't dig deep enough to find the root cause. Much of my depression and anxiety were the direct cause of my narcissistic traits that ended up alienating others and sabotaging my life. I deeply desired love, respect, and positive affirmation, but my behavior and style of communication were dysfunctional, which led to superficial relationships and falling out with many people who were very close to me for a long time.

The unfortunate thing about struggling with multiple disorders at once is that they feed off one another in vicious ways, and it's very hard to realize the negative spiral you are entering before your mental health sinks to the ground.

For example, many of my narcissistic traits led to troubles at work. I was perceived as cold, uncooperative, and too ruthless when dealing with clients and co-workers. How I was

perceived was everything to me, so my anxiety began to get worse and worse as I was overthinking every action before doing anything. I became so stuck in my head that I became even more distant and withdrawn, which was the opposite of what I was trying to achieve.

I know many people who've experienced a similar negative cycle but with depression. Narcissistic traits lead to struggles at work and in their personal life. Naturally, their motivation to do anything drops because nothing is going well despite their best efforts. Getting out of bed and maintaining proper hygiene becomes as hard as sprinting up a hill. Before long, basic maintenance was all they could do, and hobbies and healthy lifestyle habits were completely abandoned.

You'd think that the dissatisfaction with their situation would encourage them to change for the better, given that, to date, nothing has turned out well.

However, depression leaves them so empty and drained that they can only default to their habits and learned behavior, which led them to this situation in the first place. The more desperate someone becomes, the harsher their tactics to get what they want. While some coercion had always been a tool they employed with close friends and family, now they shamelessly manipulate to feel better about themselves because they feel stuck to the wall with no other choice. Depression has worn them down so much that they can only double down instead of changing who they are, which would require much more mental energy than they currently have to spare.

The Hidden Dangers Of Self-Diagnosis

Getting diagnosed was not easy. I didn't always receive the attention I needed. I got misdiagnosed twice and had to seek alternative opinions. I had to look for an expert who specializes in personality disorders only after receiving no meaningful help from my first attempts.

Yet, despite all those obstacles, seeking professional help is a far better option than falling down the rabbit hole of self-diagnosis. I almost did it myself because it felt like the path of

least resistance. It's very easy to do a free online questionnaire, listen to a TED Talk on the topic, or binge a few YouTube videos by a self-proclaimed expert. However, self-diagnosis holds multiple dangers that are not visible on the surface.

Some of those dangers are:

Inability to draw the line between personality traits and symptoms of NPD

Many online resources have an all-or-nothing approach to labeling narcissism, ringing false alarms for traits like confidence, self-assurance, and assertiveness. Motivated by sensationalism to draw in more views, many online outlets rely on overly simplistic but eye-catching portrayals of narcissism that define normal behavior as narcissistic for the sake of getting clicks. This can lead to misunderstandings and unnecessary self-labeling. Even if you display actual symptoms of NPD, mental health professionals can best draw the line between personality traits and disorder signs in a way that doesn't raise paranoia that everything you do is tied to narcissism.

Unnecessary stigmatization of narcissism

NPD exists on a spectrum because you may not have the same symptoms as someone else, or they may significantly differ in severity. Media outlets and online personalities tend to focus on the worst possible cases of narcissism at the extreme end of the spectrum, which creates a false and unrealistic view of the condition that only breeds pessimism and nihilism. If you self-diagnose as a narcissist while following online spaces, you are very likely to be bombarded with negative content about the condition. When narcissism is portrayed in the extremes, described with derogatory terms, and deemed irreversible, the result is deep shame, guilt, and hopelessness that discourages you from seeking help.

Self-diagnosis often leads to ineffective treatment options

Convincing yourself that you have NPD is not enough to change. In fact, putting a label on yourself can become an excuse to avoid becoming better instead of an explanation that creates urgency for change. Focusing too much on self-diagnosis can also create the false perception that narcissism is so deeply rooted in who you are that you can never change. Professional help can keep you accountable, encourage small steps in the right direction, and help you to create a line between your narcissistic traits and the rest of your personality. While you can self-diagnose

and then seek help, the problem is that online influencers and communities that encourage self-diagnosis very often discourage looking for help from experts. The more they distance you from traditional evidence-based treatments, the more vulnerable you become to buying a course or a product that offers “alternative” solutions, which are likely cash grabs with no scientific backing**.

For the longest time, I thought that I didn’t need professional help because no mental health expert could fully grasp what I had been going through, and they didn’t have the information I had about myself. Self-diagnosing felt like the right choice. However, I eventually realized that knowing myself was not enough to make good decisions, and I needed an outside perspective and assistance.

Self-diagnosing was easier and more convenient, but it wasn’t a productive solution. After deep but painful introspection, I realized that many of the reasons I used to convince myself to avoid professional help sounded more like excuses than sound arguments. Going to therapy made me feel like I was naked, walking into a room with all my scars and wounds visible to the world. This discomfort is most intense in the very beginning, but I can assure you it slowly gets better with time.

The Uniqueness Of Narcissism—How It Differs From Other Personality Disorders

Being clinically diagnosed with narcissism means you are labeled as someone with a “personality disorder,” but what does that even mean?

As we previously mentioned, the DSM-5 defines narcissism as a personality disorder because it leads to feelings, thoughts, and actions that significantly differ from those of other people. While standing out from the crowd isn’t always wrong, narcissism is characterized by personality traits that may end up hurting you, like increasing the risk of self-harm suicide and raising the chance of developing chronic conditions. It can also increase the risk of psychological and physical harm done to others as a result of narcissistic behavior*.

For example, placing yourself in someone else's shoes and viewing situations from a different perspective doesn't come naturally for people with NPD. This reduced empathy can impair your close relationships by giving friends and family the impression that you don't care about them. If this pattern continues, disagreements and arguments will become more common, and the people closest to you may begin to withdraw and reduce the time they spend with you.

To be more specific, NPD falls into the category of complex personality disorders, which makes diagnosis and treatment more complicated.

The disorder is considered "complex" for the following reasons:

Different External Manifestations

There is no one-size-fits-all way to describe narcissism. Some people diagnosed with NPDs are more prone to show entitlement and overt arrogance, while others more covertly display narcissistic traits by playing victims and always seeking support, validation, and admiration. The spectrum of narcissism is so large that we will dedicate an entire chapter later in the book to explore it entirely.

Different States of Self-Esteem

The internal world of narcissists can also be very different. In some people with NPD, grandiose fantasies reflect an exaggerated self-importance that's genuine. They truly consider themselves flawless, near perfect, and above others while dreaming of all the power and success they deserve. In others, entitlement and a belief in being unique may be coping mechanisms due to deeply seated insecurities. If they feel something is fundamentally wrong with them, over-compensating by giving a false sense of confidence can offer some relief.

Resistance And Setbacks In Treatment

It took me years to recognize I had a problem and even more time to do something about it. I bet just reading this book creates a nagging urge to close it and toss it aside. When you deal with narcissism, admitting you are not perfect is one of the hardest things you can do. NPD is a

complex personality disorder because many forms of treatment, like traditional therapy, don't always work since long-term cooperation can be very challenging.

Overlap With Other Mental Health Disorders

NPD has many unique aspects, but it also has considerable overlap with other mental health disorders, including borderline personality disorder (BPD), antisocial personality disorder (APD), and other conditions*.

The overlap can create additional complications because someone may initially be diagnosed with another disorder even if they have NPD. They may also have both NPD and another personality disorder, which creates unique challenges and complicates treatment.

Out of all those reasons, the overlap with other mental health disorders causes the most confusion and misunderstandings. When there are so many similarities, it can be hard to understand what makes NPD unique in comparison to other conditions.

So, let's make a quick comparison between NPD and the most common conditions that overlap:

NPD Vs. Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD)

People with NPD and BPD both deal with emotional dysregulation, which leads to intense mood swings, impulsive decisions, and an inability to control emotions. However, the main drivers of behavior can significantly differ. Those with NPD crave admiration, validation, and confirmation of their superiority to others, while people with BPD are driven by fear of rejection and abandonment. Both disorders can lead to fragile and vulnerable self-esteem, but those with NPD are more likely to use others for their benefit, while people with BPD please and accommodate to avoid rejection*.

NPD Vs. Histrionic Personality Disorder (HPD)

People with NPD and HPD both crave the attention of others but for slightly different reasons. A person with NPD seeks attention to reaffirm their self-importance and superiority, while someone with HPD craves liking, approval, and acceptance by others. They also have different

ways of getting the attention of others. Those with NPD tend to be more calculating and capable of manipulation, while people with HPD struggle with impulsivity and often rely on dramatic gestures and exaggerated emotional displays to retain attention*.

NPD Vs. Antisocial Personality Disorder (APD)

NPD and APD are also very similar because both disorders lead to a greatly reduced empathy and willingness to selfishly pursue goals through exploitation and manipulation. However, the end goal is very different. In people with APD, there is a strong desire for power and success, and there's no regard for the consequences others suffer. In contrast, those with NPD care more about the impact of their behavior on others because they are greatly concerned with their image and the way others perceive them*.

The significant overlap with other personality disorders and the hidden complexities of NPD are yet another reminder that professional help is an essential part of the recovery process. Each narcissistic trait creates a ripple effect, influencing various aspects of your life, so sitting down with a clinician is highly recommended to make sense of it all.

The Origins Of Narcissism—Genetics, The Childhood Environment, Or Something Else?

Symptoms of narcissism are most clearly observable in adulthood because a diagnosis requires the pattern of behavior to persist for a very long time without change. The first signs of the condition may become visible in childhood and puberty. This brings the question of whether developing NPD was inevitable due to genetics or whether factors in the environment were responsible for the disorder. If you are familiar with the popular debate of nature vs. nurture, the answer is likely both.

When it comes to the power of genetics, it's often unclear where we draw the line and how much influence the lottery of birth has on how you shape as a person. What if children who go on to develop NPD in adulthood end up this way because they are heavily influenced by one or two parents who have narcissistic behavior?

This is why researchers conduct studies on identical twins with a 100% overlap in genetic material and fraternal twins with only a 50% overlap. In those observational studies, if identical twins are more similar in traits associated with NPD or other personality disorders compared to fraternal twins, then genetics likely play a major role. The opposite can also be true. If both pairs of twins are equally similar in specific NPD-related traits, then the environment may play a large role in shaping their character. So, what did they find?

Multiple studies have been conducted in the past couple of decades following this formula. The first one was in 1996 in Canada by Jang and colleagues. They examined 483 pairs of twins who volunteered for the study based on a thorough questionnaire of more than 500 questions. After the data was assessed, narcissism got a 53% heritability score, which means the researchers believe genetics are responsible for more than half of NPD symptoms. There are also more broad studies that examine personality disorders that find a heritability score ranging from 33% to 59%^{**}.

So, genetics play a considerable role, but it's equally important to understand how exactly they influence a person instead of focusing solely on the exact percentage.

Genes influence the personality and temperament of a person, which can make the development of narcissistic traits more likely. For example, if a child has severely impaired impulse control, grapples with aggression, and struggles with delaying gratification, then turning to exploitation and manipulation of other people may feel like an intuitive tactic to get what they want immediately. Similarly, some people are naturally more sensitive and struggle with emotional regulation, so dismissal, rejection, and a lack of love and affection can deeply hurt them and promote narcissistic behavior as a way of protection.

Even if your genes predispose you toward narcissism, they are not entirely responsible for how you turn out to be. Your genes are like a loaded weapon, but something must happen to trigger the shot.

I realized that when I revisited my painful childhood memories. My father was the epitome of old-school masculinity—cold, harsh, and emotionally distant. Like any other child, I

craved his love and affection, but he hadn't been taught to express them. Whenever my father argued with my mom, his excuse was always that tough love would be good for me. I'd grow up tough and resilient, not soft and fragile.

Unfortunately, the opposite happened.

The lack of love affected me deeply, creating a rigid belief that something was fundamentally wrong with me. I couldn't cope with those painful feelings, so I shoved them aside. Instead, I over-compensated by elevating my sense of self-importance. If my father wouldn't like and love me, then I'd provide the much-needed validation. I had subconsciously built walls to protect myself, but beneath this fortified fortress, I was still fragile and emotionally crippled. I impulsively sought out ways to keep my ego high by ignoring criticism, finding excuses for my mistakes, and hiding parts of myself, all because I hadn't built a healthy sense of self.

My story exemplifies one way in which dysfunctional parenting styles can be the trigger and lead to narcissistic traits, but many other circumstances can contribute****.

For example, overly permissive parents who don't set boundaries, avoid any form of discipline, and leave wrong behavior without consequences can contribute to narcissistic behavior. Exploiting other people for your needs, manipulating, and disregarding social norms is always tempting as a quick way to get what you want, but it's through taught restraint and fear of consequences that we are conditioned to control ourselves. If this learning is absent altogether, then such behavior can become a common pattern.

In my story, the lack of praise was a problem, but the opposite can also be true.

Excessive praise, especially without justification, can create an unrealistic self-view, feeding into the child's belief that they are unique, special, exceptional, and superior to others. After all, narcissism is defined by an inflated sense of self-importance, entitlement, and grandiosity. When you aren't exposed to constructive criticism and shown your weaknesses and shortcomings in healthy doses, you don't have a balanced view of yourself. Even worse,

you don't know how to handle rejection and disappointment, so the natural response is to ignore and avoid anything that threatens your fragile confidence.

If you thought those were the main reasons, there are countless other examples. A child may simply mimic their parents' narcissistic behavior and adapt dysfunctional coping mechanisms, like playing the victim, manipulating other people, and withholding love and affection if certain conditions aren't met. If the growing environment is very stressful and encourages competition and success in toxic ways, then being selfish, exploitative, and antisocial is an effective strategy to get ahead, even if it fuels narcissistic traits.

The common theme around all those reasons is that they are exceptional circumstances and extreme behavior by the parents that contribute to the development of narcissistic traits.

NPD is not only a disorder but also an adaptive response. Even if it's ineffective or counterproductive in most cases, once a pattern of behavior is established, it can be very challenging to reverse course if you've spent years in your childhood exposed to an environment that pushed you toward those thoughts, feelings, and actions.

This adaptive response doesn't always have to start in childhood since there are many triggers and environments that can produce narcissistic behavior, no matter your age. More specifically, the latest meta-analysis by Orth, Krauss, and colleagues examined all the available clinical data in 2023 and found that narcissistic behavior declines slightly with age, but it tends to be highest in young adults, and NPD symptoms may spontaneously get worse if triggered by specific events**.

For example, when you enter university riddled with insecurity, self-consciousness, and social anxiety, there is a natural desire to put in an act of bravado. In an environment full of peer pressure and judgment, adopting narcissistic behavior can act as a defensive shield because you are no longer vulnerable to the negative opinions of others. Similarly, in the first few years after entering the job market, appearing competent and assertive can go a

long way if you are not sure that your qualifications on paper are enough to get you a job or land you the promotion you crave.

Falling deeper into narcissistic traits can happen even when you are more mature and self-assured after your twenties pass.

For instance, many people who become parents are taught to display authority and strength so their children listen to them. This often leads to the presumption that they are always right on anything related to their children, and no one can or should tell them otherwise. This obedience from the children comes at the cost of not being able to show shortcomings and vulnerabilities while also growing less and less capable of receiving criticism and constructive feedback, even if you are completely wrong. Since raising children takes a minimum of 18 years as a full-time job, there's a significant amount of time where this narcissistic pattern of behavior can establish itself.

Action Steps

Every action has a reason behind it. Now, I want you to examine your reason for trying to get better by buying this book in the first place. I am sure it's likely much more than some morbid curiosity over the topic.

- Are you diagnosed with NPD?
- Do you suspect you have it and are looking to do some independent research while mustering the strength to seek professional help?
- Do you feel your narcissistic traits getting worse and trying to reverse course?

No matter your circumstances, being aware of your WHY is crucial.

It represents all the reasons pushing you to be a better person. You may subconsciously desire to get better. Clarifying and exploring your reasoning will help you turn this sparkle of motivation into a fire that keeps burning no matter what happens.

Here is a very simple reflection exercise you can do to find out your WHY:

1. Pick a piece of paper, a notebook, a dedicated journal, or a digital document to write in. Choose whatever's most comfortable.
2. Answer the question: "Why do I want to change as a person?" Spend 20 minutes writing down whatever comes to mind without pressure to answer perfectly.
3. Leave the page or document altogether and go on with your day. Repeat the same exercise tomorrow and then two more times 24 hours after the last attempt.
4. Once you are done with the four 20-minute segments, you can dive deeper by reading through your writing, focusing on a particular reason, and exploring it further.
5. When you are not certain about your exact reasoning, ask yourself "why" at least 5–6 times until you get to the bottom. If you truly don't know, let this reason rest for now and try again tomorrow. When developing your chain of thought, add examples and illustrations to support your point.

By the end, you will have a clear vision of why you want to change for the better. This is crucial because we are all creatures of logic and emotion. You need to fully justify it to yourself before you can fully commit and eliminate all doubts. The more detailed and comprehensive your answer, the better you can visualize your desire, which will keep you motivated.

While seeking professional help for diagnosis and treatment is strongly recommended, there's a lot you can do independently alongside therapy.

However, for those strategies to work, you need a clear and nuanced understanding of each narcissistic type and trait, which will be the focus of the next chapters. By reaching a deeper state of introspection and connecting the dots with your own experiences, you will be better able to create a personalized action plan.

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