Essential Information

What is Narcissistic Personality Disorder?

Narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) is a term used to describe a pattern of personality traits which may include high levels of self-focus, a sense of superiority, and seeking praise and attention from others. These traits usually emerge in adolescence or early adulthood and affect most areas of life, including relationships, work, and study. All people have some level of narcissism, however NPD is a serious and recognised mental disorder. It refers to situations when narcissism begins to impair someone's ability to work or have relationships with others.

Problems with sense of self and identity

NPD involves a sense of entitlement and high levels of self-importance. These personality traits are used to protect a fragile sense of self. People with NPD may feel self-important and can come across as boastful. They can feel they are superior and special, and are often fixated by thoughts of success and brilliance. They may feel the need to outshine others and be associated with 'gifted' people. However, underlying these behaviours is often a fragile self-esteem that is very vulnerable to criticism. People with NPD tend to combat this low self-esteem by acting with a sense of grandiosity.

Problems with emotions and expressing feelings

People with NPD often display low empathy for others and can find it difficult to relate to other's emotions and experiences. They often believe other people are envious of them because they are 'special', and can act in arrogant ways. When people with NPD feel criticized, they can become very angry and aggressive. Often underlying these challenging behaviours are feelings of shame and self-criticism. These difficult emotions often lead to people with NPD withdrawing from relationships and isolating themselves.

Relationship difficulties

People with NPD can find it difficult to manage relationships with other people. Relationships may be used to provide a source of esteem to ward off feelings of inadequacy and shame. In relationships they often require constant attention and admiration and can become very self-critical when attention is not given. However they can also act in an entitled way, expecting special treatment and becoming irritated if this is not provided. This entitlement and the insensitivity to other people's emotions can result in manipulation or exploitation. For example, they may take advantage of other people if it will help themselves.

How common are these problems and why do they develop?

It is estimated that around 6.5% of the population experiences personality disorder problems, with a smaller number experiencing NPD. The exact causes of personality disorders are unknown but they are thought to involve several contributing factors:

- Biological or genetic factors inherited from family
- Inconsistent or insensitive relationships with caregivers in early childhood when self-esteem is being developed
- Ways of thinking and coping with feelings – often learnt during childhood and through experiences with other people
- Stress associated with traumatic experiences

Can it be treated?

Yes, specialist psychological treatments provided by mental health professionals have been shown to be effective in reducing symptoms and improving life quality. Support for family and partners may also be important. For treatment and support contact your local health services.