

Narcissistic perfectionists hurt those around them, says Dalhousie team

'There are accumulated negative circumstances of facing the ... lofty demands of a narcissistic perfectionist'

By Jerry West, [CBC News](#) Posted: Apr 14, 2016 11:34 AM AT Last Updated: Apr 14, 2016 11:42 AM AT

Narcissists can be difficult to deal with, and perfectionists even more so.

Imagine what it would be like to be forced to work with, or even be married to, a narcissistic perfectionist.

"It is our working hypothesis ... that proximity to a narcissistic perfectionist is hurtful, it damages you," said Simon Sherry, a clinical psychologist and director of Dalhousie University's personality research team.

The research Sherry and his team have done over the past year or so marks the first time anyone has gathered empirical evidence on the relationship between narcissism and perfectionism.

The research team defines a narcissistic perfectionist as someone who is grandiose, has a high sense of entitlement and holds unrealistic expectations of those around them.

"If you find yourself in an involuntary relationship with a narcissistic perfectionist [like working for one] where you may not be able to leave because of economic circumstances, or married to one — these are not relationships that one can easily exit — then there are accumulated negative circumstances of facing the grandiose and lofty demands of a narcissistic perfectionist on a day-to-day basis," Sherry said.

The Steve Jobs example

Sherry said a prime example of a narcissistic perfectionist is Apple co-founder Steve Jobs.

"If you look at biographies, there is a clear pattern in Jobs's interpersonal functioning that I think distinguishes him as a narcissistic perfectionist," said Sherry.

"He's grandiose, he has a great sense of self-importance. He's entitled, he believes he is owed special treatment. And in particular for Steve Jobs, he is someone who demands perfection of other people, and he is relentlessly critical of those around him."

However, Sherry points out it is possible to have very high standards for other people, and still be warm and supportive.

"In fact, it's possible to argue that that's the recipe for the ideal parent," he said.

Nature and nurture effects

Personality is defined as the series of traits that make you unique. Between 40 and 50 per cent of traits have genetic roots that are passed down from parents, but are shaped by your environment when you are young. Some are encouraged, and they develop, while others are discouraged. By about age 30, they are inextricably part of who you are.

That can be seen in the Steve Jobs example and the stories of him when he was young.

"He had that personality when he was in his garage making that first computer," said Sherry.

"His father was looking over his shoulder, telling him that not only should his electronic devices look and be perfect on the outside, they needed to be perfect on the inside. So even though the public would never see inside, he wanted the arrangements of the various boards to be perfect."

The inherited tendencies and the encouragement of them are both obvious from that story, said Sherry.

"It takes a lot of coaching to raise a narcissistic perfectionist, and Jobs had the right sort of tutelage from his father."

You can run into narcissistic perfectionists on a daily basis, said Sherry. In fact, the personality team's work is driven by people he has met in his practice as a clinical psychologist.

Help for narcissistic perfectionists

Narcissistic perfectionists don't often willingly seek help, as they believe they are perfect. But they may go for therapy if the world knocks them down a peg and deflates their grandiosity, said Sherry.

For every high-achieving Steve Jobs, there are hundreds who don't have the CV to back up their claims of greatness.

"They may not have received a promotion at work; they may have gotten into difficulty with an employer," he said.

Still, it's far more common for those who have been in repeated contact with a narcissistic perfectionist to seek therapy because their lives have been damaged by the relationship.

The prospects for treatment of a narcissistic perfectionist are pretty bleak, said Sherry, not just because they are unlikely to seek help, but because so little is known about how to treat either narcissism or perfectionism, let alone when they overlap.

Sherry hopes his research can create better tools for assessing the condition, "and ultimately, better interventions, to help these individuals."

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