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Why It's So Hard to Live With Narcissists

A new study highlights the pressure they can put on their partners. Published on July 12, 2014 by Susan Krauss Whitbourne, Ph.D. in Fulfillment at Any Age

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We know that the personality traits associated with narcissism can make life for their partners extremely difficult. People high in narcissism can be entitled, demanding, and egocentric. They're also likely to shirk their duties, believing that everyday chores are beneath their dignity. Lacking empathy for others, they don't really want to hear anyone's point of view other than their own. Constantly requiring admiration, they place strain on those near and dear to them—you can never give a narcissist enough attention or praise.

And you can add a desire for perfectionism to the list of problems involved in living with a narcissist. Not just any type of perfectionism, though—the need to hold you to a set of ideal standards. In research conducted by Canadian psychologist Simon Sherry and colleagues (2014), a sample of almost 1,000 undergraduates rated themselves on narcissism and several forms of perfectionism. Two-thirds of the sample were female, and about half were of Asian descent, considerations you may take into account in interpreting the study's findings. It's also important to note that the study focused not on people with narcissistic personality disorder, but on more "normal" levels of narcissism that don't meet clinical levels.

Nevertheless, the research has a number of interesting implications.

To measure narcissism, Sherry and his team used the well-regarded Narcissism Personality Inventory, a 40-item test that presents respondents with a series of choices between two options. For example, a person high in narcissism would agree with the statement, "I am an extraordinary person," but disagree with the opposite statement, "I am much like everybody else."

The authors expected that people high in narcissistic personality traits would also need to feel that they were perfect, and, by extension, that people close to them should be perfect too. One is reminded of the line from "Wicked" in which the self-centered characters, Galinda and Fiyero, tell each other, "You're perfect, you're perfect, so we're perfect together."

Fueling the narcissist's desire toward perfectionism in others, according to Sherry and his team, is the theory that narcissists never completely overcome the idealized way young children view their parents. Like the



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mirror they so often stare into, people high in narcissism use these idealized images "to reflect their grandiose image back on the self" (p. 52). At a cognitive level, people high in narcissism view the world from the standpoint of their strong sense of entitlement, and their belief that they, and those close to them, need to be perfect. This combination of deep-seated relationships with parents, and distorted thought processes that maintain their entitlement and grandiosity, creates a perfect storm in which the narcissist can become an unbearable romantic partner.

If you've been with someone like this, you should be able to relate to the study's premises. A narcissistic partner constantly scrutinizes you for your flaws, particularly those that might be visible to others. If your hair is out of place, you've got something stuck in your teeth, or you're wearing the "wrong" clothes for the occasion, you can expect to be chastised, if not pushed to fix it. It's nice to have someone on the lookout for an obvious grooming faux pas, but it can be irritating, if not demeaning, to have your appearance constantly monitored and corrected.

Sherry and his research collaborators investigated several facets of perfectionism, using these questions:

1. Self-oriented perfectionism: "When I am working on something, I cannot relax until it's perfect."
2. Other-oriented perfectionism: "If I ask someone to do something, I expect it to be done flawlessly."
3. Socially-prescribed perfectionism: "People expect nothing less than perfection from me."
4. Perfectionistic self-presentation (3 different types): "I always try to present a picture of perfection"; "Admitting failure to others is the worst thing to do"; "It would be awful if I made a fool of myself to others."
5. Perfectionistic cognitions (thoughts): "I should be perfect."

The study was correlational, meaning that you can't say what caused what. However, the authors ruled out several important factors to the main relationships they were focusing on, including gender and ethnic origins. Their analyses led them to conclude that only two of the perfectionism scales ended up being important. For both men and women, *other-oriented perfectionism* and *perfectionistic self-promotion* ("I always try to present a picture of perfection") were most highly related to narcissism scores.

The study suggests that, regardless of gender, perfectionism regarding others is intimately linked to narcissistic personality traits. Narcissists appear less interested in *being* perfect than in *seeming* perfect to the outside world. If you spend much time with a person high in narcissism, you can expect to have a great deal of that person's attention focused on outward appearances. In fact, on the scale measuring how concerned participants actually were about being imperfect, narcissists tended to receive lower scores. Again, to the narcissist, it's all about appearances.

Not only can you expect your narcissistic friends, lovers, and family members to want you to be perfect, but you can anticipate that they'll externalize their own feelings of weakness by laying them onto you. If your partner is concerned that he or she looks tired, stressed, or messy, these concerns will translate into criticisms of how unkempt and fatigued you look. That narcissists are always trying to look (though not necessarily be) perfect means that they have to pump up their own egos by glorifying their own appearance, abilities, and achievements to others. They'll take credit for accomplishments they haven't earned, and become preoccupied with putting on a show that will impress everyone else.

Interestingly, some cultural differences emerged. Non-Canadian Asians in the study were less narcissistic than the Asian-Canadians, suggesting that people from more collective cultures may be less likely to want to feel unique. It was also noteworthy that there were no gender differences—the study found that women who show narcissistic tendencies about

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themselves are just as likely as narcissistic men to expect to have perfect partners at their side.

The bottom line: If you feel like the narcissistic shoe fits you, you may want to look at the way you treat the people to whom you're closest. Rather than seeing them as an extension of yourself, recognize that the rest of the world does *not*. The way you are regarded by others should be a reflection of your *own* behavior, not that of your partner. Conversely, if you're the target of the hypercritical eye of a narcissistic partner, recognize that their constant objections come from a place of weakness within them.

Understanding how narcissism and other-oriented perfectionism are related has practical value. Both people high in this quality and their partners can perhaps learn to become more accepting of their own and each other's flaws. It's this acceptance that can contribute to the health and vitality of a relationship, and of each partner in it.

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Reference

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