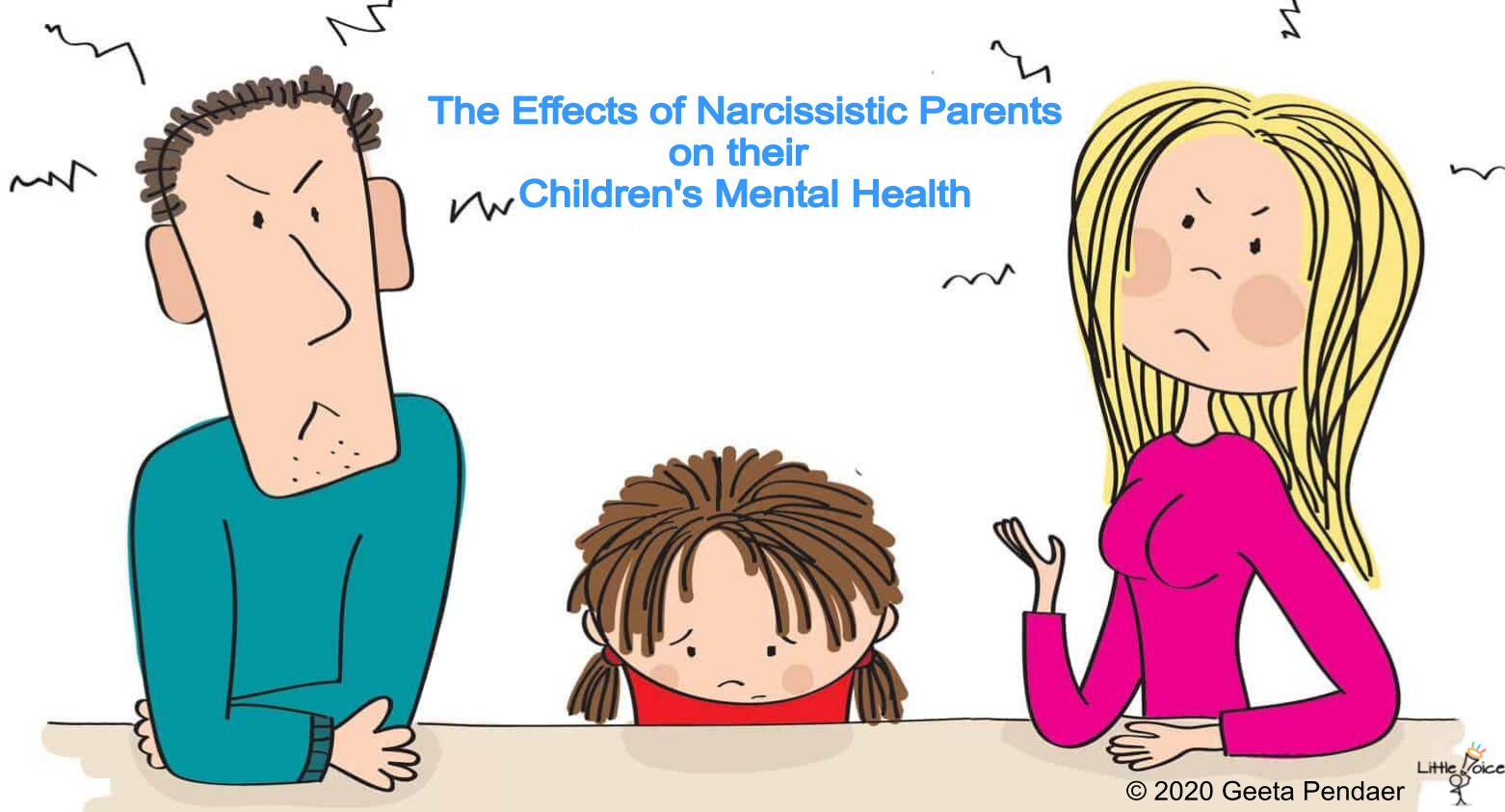


The Effects of Narcissistic Parents on their Children's Mental Health



While

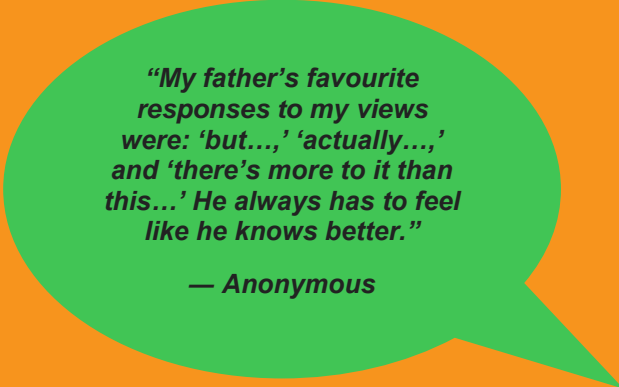
Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) only affects around 5% of the general population, most people show narcissistic traits throughout their lifetime. However, just because someone exhibits characteristics of a disorder does not mean they have severe enough symptoms to warrant a diagnosis.

NPD is an actual mental illness that causes an over-inflated sense of self-importance and can disrupt every aspect of a person's life. It requires ongoing treatment, usually in the form of long-term therapy and medications.

The common symptoms of NPD include the following behaviours:

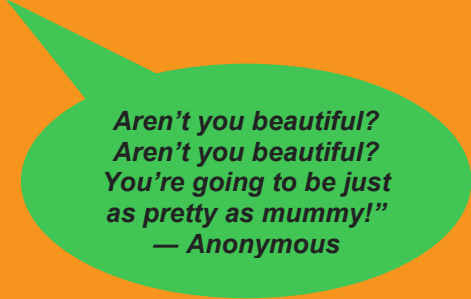
- having an inflated sense of self-importance and entitlement
- needing constant admiration and praise
- expecting special treatment due to perceived superiority
- exaggerating achievements and talents
- reacting negatively to criticism
- being preoccupied with fantasies about power, success, and beauty
- taking advantage of others
- having an inability or unwillingness to recognize the needs and feelings of other people
- behaving in an arrogant manner

These harmful family dynamics can cause mental illness in children that sometimes remain hidden until adulthood. Below, we will go over how narcissistic parents influence their children in ways they sometimes don't even realize.



“My father’s favourite responses to my views were: ‘but...,’ ‘actually...,’ and ‘there’s more to it than this...’ He always has to feel like he knows better.”

— Anonymous



***Aren’t you beautiful?
Aren’t you beautiful?
You’re going to be just as pretty as mummy!”***

— Anonymous

A narcissistic parent can be defined as someone who lives through, is possessive of, and/or engages in marginalizing competition with the offspring. Typically, the narcissistic parent perceives the independence of a child (including adult children) as a threat and coerces the offspring to exist in the parent's shadow, with unreasonable expectations. In a narcissistic parenting relationship, the child is rarely loved just for being herself or himself.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the subject of narcissistic parenting and its impact on offspring. It's important to distinguish certain parent-centric tendencies from chronic narcissistic parenting. Many parents want to show off their children, have high expectations, may be firm at times (such as when a child is behaving destructively), and desire their offspring to make them proud. None of these traits alone constitute pathological narcissism. What distinguishes the narcissistic parent is a pervasive tendency to deny the offspring, even as an adult, a sense of independent self-hood. The offspring exists merely to serve the selfish needs and machinations of the parent(s).

While some parents may exhibit a few of the following traits at one time or another, which might not be a major issue, a pathologically narcissistic parent tends to dwell habitually in several of the following personas, while remaining largely unaware of (or unconcerned with) how these behaviours affect one's offspring.

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Here's how narcissistic parenting can impact children in ways parents may not understand:

1.

May cause NPD in children

While having NPD yourself does not necessarily guarantee your children will develop the disorder, it does increase their chances.

However, as we said above, not everyone who displays characteristics of narcissism has a full-blown disease. Parents who have some of the traits may influence their children to mimic them, and they may end up having NPD themselves. Not surprisingly, parents who tend to "overvalue" their children may cause them to develop narcissistic traits.

A study from researchers at Ohio State University and the University of Amsterdam in Holland found that praising children too often resulted in higher scores of narcissism. For example, parents telling children that they're "more special than other kids" may lead them to have an inflated sense of self-worth. Children should have good confidence, but too much will lead to arrogance.

2.

Could lead to low self-esteem

Narcissistic parenting can also cause children to lean toward the opposite end of the spectrum and have low self-worth. Narcissists love to make everything about themselves, and children may grow up feeling that they have to tiptoe around their parents to please them. They may not feel comfortable sharing their needs with parents who are preoccupied with their self-image and desires. Therefore, the child grows up feeling neglected and without a voice.

3.

Narcissistic parenting can make it hard for children to connect with others.

Parents who are narcissists can make children withdraw from social connections and events. They may have a hard time reaching out to others because they haven't had examples of healthy relationships in their life. Children need a safe, welcoming environment to develop social skills and maintain bonds with people. Children raised by narcissists may grow up feeling like they have to protect themselves from others, viewing them as a threat.

4.

May lead to feelings of isolation or rejection.

Narcissistic parenting can cause children to feel rejected by their peers. They may not feel good enough in comparison to other children their age because of early experiences of neglect at home. Children may feel emotionally deprived and not seem interested in getting to know other kids in their class.

5. They may feel inferior.

Narcissists have an overinflated sense of self-worth, so a child raised by parents who display symptoms of NPD will feel invisible in comparison. If parents make everything about themselves and don't nurture their children, they will grow up feeling as though they have to work twice as hard to impress people.

They may become perfectionists and people-pleasers in order to fit in or gain the approval of different social groups. This feeling may carry into adulthood, as well.

6. Children who've been affected by narcissistic parenting could have a fear of abandonment.

If children have been neglected emotionally from a young age, they may develop an intense fear of abandonment. This stems from not getting the attention or affection they needed as a child, and they may become co-dependent in relationships as a result. Because the child was raised to believe they don't matter, they will latch onto others they perceive as wounded to feel self-worth.

7. May suffer in jobs and at school.

Being raised by narcissists may cause children to underachieve in the work or school environment. Their parents may have either overly criticized them or given them too much praise, causing the child to underperform. If they have no self-esteem, they will feel that they don't have the skills to complete tasks; however, if parents have overvalued them, they may feel they don't have to do much to receive praise.

8.

Children may have trouble speaking up.

Narcissistic parenting can result in children not knowing when to speak up for themselves. They may become doormats for others because of low self-worth and poor boundaries. They may do whatever it takes to fit in, and possibly end up hanging with the wrong crowd just to have friends. Children raised by narcissists may not feel they can defend themselves because they don't want to cause any drama or tension.

9.

Being raised by narcissists could increase the risk of developing a mental illness.

Studies show that children raised by narcissists have a higher risk of developing some type of mental illness, though not necessarily narcissistic. Because narcissistic parenting may cause children to live in a constant state of anxiety due to unstable relationships, this can result in long-term psychological damage. Children may experience the following types of mental illness:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- OCD
- CPTSD or PTSD
- Personality disorders such as NPD or BPD
- Bipolar disorder

10.

They may not feel worthy of love or respect.

Being raised by a narcissist may cause children to seek out relationships that mimic their childhood. In other words, they may choose someone who feels familiar to them and repeat the unhealthy patterns laid out by their parents. Because they were not shown unconditional love, children of

narcissists may choose relationships with someone emotionally unavailable or overly critical because they feel “safe.”

11.

Narcissistic parenting can cause children to have poor boundaries.

These children often fail to learn how to set boundaries. Their parents condition them to bend over backward to please their parents, so they are likely to repeat this behaviour in other relationships. They may put others’ needs above their own in order to feel a sense of self-worth.

12.

May increase risk of substance abuse in children

Studies have shown that when parents have a mental illness, children have an increased risk of developing substance use disorder later in life. Children may not have healthy coping mechanisms for their emotions, so they look to substances such as drugs and alcohol to ease their suffering. Narcissistic parenting may make children feel they have no healthy outlet for their feelings, and this makes children vulnerable to getting involved in dangerous lifestyle habits.

13.

Could lead to problems with relationships

Because children raised by narcissists feel as though they have to walk on eggshells around their parents, they may carry this behaviour into their adult relationships. They may have problems getting close to people and feel that they can’t trust others. Children with narcissistic parents may view others as threatening. Thus, they seek to protect themselves from further harm by opting out of friendships or relationships.

14.

Children of narcissists may feel they need constant attention.

Some children may withdraw from others while others show the opposite behaviour, looking for constant validation and attention. Narcissists make themselves the centre of attention, so children may respond by copying this behaviour in order to feel seen and heard. These kids act out simply a survival skill in the chaos of their home environment. Therefore, they see nothing wrong with their behaviour.

15.

Increases impulsiveness and anger or hostility

Children of narcissists may have trouble regulating their emotions, so they may engage in dangerous behaviours or become aggressive. They have a difficult time listening to others' needs or emotions and may become angry quite easily. These children come from a chaotic environment. Thus, they may seek out very stimulating activities such as reckless driving, gambling, drug use, heavy drinking, or compulsive shopping.

16.

Uses/Lives Through One's Child

Most parents want their children to succeed. Some narcissistic parents, however, set expectations not for the benefit of the child, but for the fulfilment of their own selfish needs and dreams. Instead of raising a child whose own thoughts, emotions, and goals are nurtured and valued, the offspring becomes a mere extension of the parent's personal wishes, with the child's individuality diminished.

"My mum used to love dolling me up in cute dresses, even though I was a tomboy by nature. I think she felt that when I received compliments for my appearance, she looked good in reflection. It boosted her self-worth."

— Anonymous

17.

Marginalization

Some narcissistic parents are threatened by their offspring's potential, promise, and success, as they challenge the parent's self-esteem. Consequently, a narcissistic mother or father might make a concerted effort to put the child down, so the parent remains superior. Examples of this type of competitive marginalization includes nit-picking, unreasonable judgment and criticisms, unfavourable comparisons, invalidation of positive attitudes and emotions, and rejection of success and accomplishments.

The common themes through these put downs are: "There's always something wrong with you," and "You'll never be good enough." By lowering the offspring's confidence, the narcissistic parent gets to boost her or his own insecure self-worth.

"I pleaded with my mother on the phone for the lab fee of my college science class. She finally agreed to pay, but only after saying that it was a waste of money on me." — Anonymous

18.

Grandiosity & Superiority

Many narcissistic parents have a falsely inflated self-image, with a conceited sense about who they are and what they do. Often, individuals around the narcissist are not treated as human beings, but merely tools (objects) to be used for personal gain. Some children of narcissistic parents are objectified in the same manner, while others are taught to possess the same, false superiority complex: "We're better than they are." This sense of grandiose entitlement, however, is almost exclusively based on superficial, egotistical, and material trappings, attained at the expense of one's humanity, conscientiousness, and relatedness. One becomes more "superior" by being less human.

19.

Superficial Image

Closely related to grandiosity, many narcissistic parents love to show others how “special” they are. They enjoy publicly parading what they consider their superior dispositions, be it material possessions, physical appearance, projects and accomplishments, background and membership, contacts in high places, and/or trophy spouse and offspring. They go out of their way to seek ego-boosting attention and flattery.

For some narcissistic parents, social networking is a wonderland where they regularly advertise how wonderful and envy-worthy their lives are. The underlying messages may be: “I am/my life is so special and interesting,” and “Look at ME – I have what you don’t have!”

“What my mother displays in public and how she really is are very different.”

— Anonymous

20.

Manipulation

Common examples of narcissistic parenting manipulation include:

- Guilt trip: “I’ve done everything for you and you’re so ungrateful.”
- Blaming: “It’s your fault that I’m not happy.”
- Shaming: “Your poor performance is an embarrassment to the family.”
- Negative comparison: “Why can’t you be as good as your brother?”
- Unreasonable pressure: “You WILL perform at your best to make me proud.”
- Manipulative reward and punishment: “If you don’t pursue the University I chose for you, I will cut off my support.”
- Emotional coercion: “You’re not a good daughter/son unless you measure up to my expectations.”

A common theme running through these forms of manipulation is that love is given as a conditional reward, rather than the natural expression of healthy parenting. On the other hand, the withholding of love is used as threat and punishment.

21.

Inflexible and Touchy

Certain narcissistic parents are highly rigid when it comes to the expected behaviours of their children. They regulate their offspring on minor details and can become upset when there's deviation. Some narcissistic parents are also touchy and easily triggered. Reasons for irritation towards an offspring can vary greatly, from the child's lack of attention and obedience, to perceived faults and shortcomings, to being in the presence of the parent at the wrong time, et cetera.

One reason for the parent's inflexibility and touchiness is the desire to control the child. The narcissist responds negatively and disproportionately when she or he sees that the offspring will not always be pulled by the strings.

"I hate it when you put groceries on the checkout counter that way. I told you before I HATE it!" — Mother to daughter at supermarket

22.

Lack of Empathy

One of the most common manifestations of a narcissistic father or mother is the inability to be mindful of the child's own thoughts and feelings and validate them as real and important. Only what the parent thinks and feels matters.

Children under this type of parental influence over time may respond with one of three survival instincts: They may Fight back and stand-up for themselves. They may Flight and distance from their parent(s). Some may begin to Freeze and substitute their invalidated real self with a false persona (playing a role), thus adopting traits of narcissism themselves.

23.

Dependency/Co-dependency

Some narcissistic parents expect their children to take care of them for the rest of their lives. This type of dependency can be emotional, physical, and/or financial. While there is nothing inherently wrong with taking care of older parents – it’s an admirable trait – the narcissistic parent typically manipulates an offspring into making unreasonable sacrifices, with little regard for the offspring’s own priorities and needs.

“My mom (a single parent in her late 30’s) expects me to support her financially on an on-going basis. She says that she can’t live without me.” — Anonymous college student

Some narcissistic parents may also manoeuvre their adult children into co-dependency. The definition of a co-dependent relationship as one where “one person’s help supports (enables) the other’s underachievement, irresponsibility, immaturity, addiction, procrastination, or poor mental or physical health.”

24.

Jealousy & Possessiveness

Since a narcissistic mother or father often hopes that the child will permanently dwell under the parent’s influence, she or he may become extremely jealous at any signs of the child’s growing maturity and independence. Any perceived act of individuation and separation, from choosing one’s own academic and career path, to making friends not approved by the parent, to spending time on one’s own priorities, are interpreted negatively and personally (“Why are you doing this to ME?”).

In particular, the appearance of a romantic partner in the adult offspring’s life may be viewed as a major threat, and frequently responded to with rejection, criticism, and/or competition. In the eyes of some narcissistic parents, no romantic partner is

ever good enough for their offspring, and no interloper can ever challenge them for dominance of their child.

“How dare that woman take my son away from me. Who does she think she is?” — Anonymous

25.

Neglect

In some situations, a narcissistic parent may choose to focus primarily on her or his self-absorbing interests, which to the narcissist are more exciting than child-raising. These activities may provide the narcissist the stimulation, validation, and self-importance she or he craves, be it career obsession, social flamboyance, or personal adventures and hobbies. The child is left either to the other parent, or on his or her own.

“My husband’s an absent father. He’s always off doing something fun for himself, which he prefers to spending time with our child. He’s an extremely selfish person.” — Anonymous

Final thoughts on how narcissistic parenting affects children

This childhood trauma can impact children well into adulthood. Indeed, sometimes these children grow up to require years of therapy or medication. Narcissism can cause severe trauma for family members and result in long-lasting psychological damage. While the parents may not recognize their harmful behaviour, it’s still their responsibility to create a loving, safe environment for their children.