

The Cult of the Narcissist

By: Dr. Sam Vaknin

The narcissist is the guru at the center of a cult. Like other gurus, he demands complete obedience from his flock: his spouse, his offspring, other family members, friends and colleagues. He feels entitled to adulation and special treatment by his followers. He punishes the wayward and the straying lambs. He enforces discipline, adherence to his teachings, and common goals. The less accomplished he is in reality – the more stringent his mastery and the more pervasive the brainwashing.

The – often involuntary – members of the narcissist’s mini-cult inhabit a twilight zone of his own construction. He imposes on them a shared psychosis, replete with persecutory delusions, “enemies”, mythical narratives, and apocalyptic scenarios if he is flouted.

The narcissist’s control is based on ambiguity, unpredictability, fuzziness, and ambient abuse. His ever-shifting whims exclusively define right versus wrong, desirable and unwanted, what is to be pursued and what to be avoided. He alone determines the rights and obligations of his disciples and alters them at will.

The narcissist is a micro-manager. He exerts control over the minutest details and behaviors. He punishes severely and abuses withholders of information and those who fail to conform to his wishes and goals.

The narcissist does not respect the boundaries and privacy of his reluctant adherents. He ignores their wishes and treats them as objects or instruments of gratification. He seeks to control both situations and people compulsively.

He strongly disapproves of others’ personal autonomy and independence. Even innocuous activities, such as meeting a friend or visiting one’s family require his permission. Gradually, he isolates his nearest and dearest until they are fully dependent on him emotionally, sexually, financially, and socially.

He acts in a patronizing and condescending manner and criticizes often. He alternates between emphasizing the minutest faults (devalues) and exaggerating the

talents, traits and skills (idealizes) of the members of his cult. He is wildly unrealistic in his expectations – which legitimizes his subsequent abusive conduct. The narcissist claims to be infallible, superior, talented, skillful, omnipotent, and omniscient. He often lies and confabulates to support these unfounded claims. Within his cult, he expects awe, admiration, adulation, and constant attention commensurate with his outlandish stories and assertions. He reinterprets reality to fit his fantasies.

His thinking is dogmatic, rigid, and doctrinaire. He does not countenance free thought, pluralism, or free speech and doesn't brook criticism and disagreement. He demands – and often gets – complete trust and the relegation to his capable hands of all decision-making.

He forced the participants in his cult to be hostile to critics, the authorities, institutions, his personal enemies, or the media – if they try to uncover his actions and reveal the truth. He closely monitors and censors information from the outside, exposing his captive audience only to selective data and analyses.

The narcissist's cult is “missionary” and “imperialistic”. He is always on the lookout for new recruits – his spouse's friends, his daughter's girlfriends, his neighbors, and new colleagues at work. He immediately attempts to “convert” them to his “creed” – to convince them how wonderful and admirable he is. In other words, he tries to render them Sources of Narcissistic Supply.

Often, his behavior on these “recruiting missions” is different to his conduct within the “cult”. In the first phases on wooing new admirers and proselytizing to potential “conscripts” – the narcissist is attentive, compassionate, empathic, flexible, self-effacing, and helpful. At home, among the “veterans” he is tyrannical, demanding, willful, opinionated, aggressive and exploitive.

As the leader of his congregation, the narcissist feels entitled to special amenities and benefits not accorded the “rank and file”. He expects to be waited on hand and foot, to make free use of everyone's money and dispose of their assets liberally, and to be cynically exempt from the rules that he himself established (if such violation is pleasurable or gainful).

In extreme cases, the narcissist feels above the law – any kind of law. This grandiose and haughty conviction leads to criminal acts, incestuous or polygamous relationships, and recurrent friction with the authorities.

Hence the narcissist's panicky and sometimes violent reactions to "dropouts" from his cult. There's a lot going on that the narcissist wants kept under wraps. Moreover, the narcissist stabilizes his fluctuating sense of self-worth by deriving Narcissistic Supply from his victims. Abandonment threatens the narcissist's precariously balanced personality.

Add to that the narcissist's paranoid and schizoid tendencies, his lack of introspective self-awareness, and his stunted sense of humor (lack of self-deprecation) and the risks to the grudging members of his cult are clear.

The narcissist sees enemies and conspiracies everywhere. He often casts himself as the heroic victim (martyr) of dark and stupendous forces. In every deviation from his tenets he espies malevolent and ominous subversion. He, therefore, is bent on disempowering his devotees. By any and all means.

The narcissist is dangerous.