



The Object of My Affection Is in My Reflection: Coping with Narcissists

By Rokelle Lerner

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Does your boss constantly blame you for things you didn't do? Do you isolate yourself from friends and family to avoid conflict at home? Do you feel anxious when you see a certain 'friend's' name on your cell phone? If you answered yes to any of these questions, you most likely have a narcissist in your life. *The Object of My Affection Is in My Reflection* will help you understand the complexities of this disorder and arm you with the coping mechanisms to navigate through this type of relationship.

Narcissists suffer from a personality disorder that began in the early stages of childhood. They are stuck in an early development stage where there is tremendous self-interest, excessive self-absorption, and extreme entitlement. Their behavior is a consequence of early childhood abandonment and abuse. Rokelle Lerner specializes in working with narcissists and the people they impact. Her astounding results in improving the quality of life for those that live or work with narcissists has been recognized by therapists across the country. She explains why narcissists do the things they do and how you can protect yourself from their intimidation and manipulations. Lerner shows you how to:

- * Spot a narcissist at work and in your personal life
- * Set appropriate boundaries to avoid further conflict
- * Avoid antagonizing a narcissist at work or at home

Narcissists are disarming, manipulative, and mesmerizing by nature. *The Object of My Affection is in My Reflection* will help you see through their charm so you can recharge your spirit, redefine your purpose, and regain your life.



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- Rank: #165400 in eBooks
- Published on: 2010-01-01
- Released on: 2010-01-01
- Format: Kindle eBook



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Editorial Review

About the Author

Rokelle Lerner is a pioneer in the development cutting-edge treatment for children and adult children of alcoholics and a renowned author and lecturer in the field of addiction and relationship issues. She has trained counselors, psychologists, teachers and social workers throughout the world in healing the family from the ravages of addiction. She is the senior clinical advisor to Crossroads Recovery Center in Antigua and is currently the facilitator of Spring Workshops in London, UK. She is the author of *Daily Affirmations for Adult Children of Alcoholics* and *Affirmations for the Inner Child*, and she has received numerous awards for her work, including the National Association for Children of Alcoholic's Lifetime Achievement Award and *Esquire* magazine's "Top 100 Women in the US Who are Changing the Nation." She has appeared on *Oprah*, *Good Morning America* and *20/20*. Her articles and interviews have been featured in the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *TIME*, *People Magazine* and *Parents Magazine*.

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When you're in relationship with a narcissist, you relinquish your identity and your soul to them. Their seduction is similar to a razor-sharp stiletto being waved in your face: it's so mesmerizing, you won't know you're bleeding to death until it's too late. But it's not your blood that a narcissist wants?it's your emotional energy and your individuality.

A true narcissist has no qualms about taking your money, your love, your admiration, your body, or your soul to satisfy their unquenchable hunger. And just as vampires cringe when they're in the presence of crosses or holy water, narcissists recoil at ordinary adult experiences such as boredom, uncertainty, accountability, and, most of all, having to give as well as receive. (Bernstein, 2002)

Narcissists use whatever institution is available to achieve their goal of draining your emotional energy and individuality?the office of the church, parental authority, a political party, or even a Little League team. Seduction is so easy when you're in command. They use whatever tool is at their disposal to captivate you, own you, and then devour you. And, when you're under their spell, you obey without question and gradually begin to join the procession of the living dead.

Until you really get to know narcissists, you may think that they're some of the most charming, compelling people you've ever met. They're fun to be around at parties, are engaging conversationalists, tell amusing stories, and give their opinion on everything in the world. They are charming, that is, until you get to know them; that's when you're at risk of becoming one of their victims. They need you, and they crave what you can give them. They're spoiled and wounded children, desperately in need of someone to be in awe of them.

The aim of narcissists is to possess you. You are required to be their unquestioning worshiper and to never criticize or disagree with them. If they do something wrong, you must approve; if they detest someone, you must detest them as well. Your identity ceases to exist and you become a mere reflection of their image. You become a clone with no clue about what you're really thinking or feeling because you are under their spell. If you become involved with a narcissist?because you are related to them or you are a friend, a business partner, or a lover?you will suffer. And it will likely take years before you know why. (McDonnell, 2007) Narcissists are actors playing a part. They are expert liars and, even worse, they believe their own lies.

Practiced in dishonesty, they can't tell the difference between their own version of the truth and a falsehood. Narcissists lie to themselves first, and then systematically and often deliberately torture others with their lies. They may take the past and re-arrange it to make themselves look good. They rarely, if ever, admit fault and they never say they're sorry.

The narcissist has been depicted in art, drama, and literature for centuries. When we look closely at our own culture, we see that many of our fairy tales, novels, and films are replete with stories that revolve around narcissistic men and women. The term 'narcissism' is derived from the ancient Roman poet Ovid's myth of Narcissus and Echo. This story provides us with a better understanding of the inner torment of narcissists and the inevitable suffering of those who attempt to have relationships with them.

The Myth of Narcissus and Echo

Zeus, the king of the Olympians, was known for his many love affairs. The young and beautiful nymph Echo would distract his wife, Hera, with long and entertaining stories while Zeus took advantage of the moment to pleasure himself with other water nymphs. When Hera discovered this trickery she punished Echo by taking away her voice?except to repeat ('echo') another's words.

Narcissus was a handsome young man who was greatly desired by the water nymphs. Echo was completely enamored of Narcissus and professed her love for him. He cruelly rejected her and, in her shame and grief, she faded away until all that remained was her echoing voice, still declaring her love. The nymphs were very angry and desired revenge. They petitioned the gods, who arranged for Narcissus to fall in love with his own reflection in a pond. Narcissus did indeed fall in love with his image and kept trying to embrace it, only to have it disappear every time. He was unable to leave his reflection, even though he received no response from it. He pined away and died, leaving a flower in his place.

This myth describes the tragic outcome of trying to entice a narcissist to pay attention to you, to be close to you, and to treat you with respect. But Echo had lost her voice and could only repeat what Narcissus was saying to her. Like so many men and women in narcissistic relationships, she lost her spirit, disowned her needs, and surrendered her life in pursuit of this beautiful young man.

It's difficult for those in relationships with narcissists to remember that these men and women are utterly obsessed with their own reflections. And just as Narcissus would not reach into the water to take a drink because he would have shattered his own image into thousands of pieces, true narcissists cannot afford the luxury of showing their humanness or exposing their needs.

Being human plagues narcissists. To show vulnerability shatters their image and leaves them with a raw shame that's so intolerable they often react with the rage of a wounded animal. They know that people love them, but in the end it means nothing. As one narcissistic addict wrote after studying this myth: 'I hear echoes outside of me from those who love and care for me. But I don't hear their love; only echoes of what I want, what I need, and what I can never have.'

There are many interpretations of Ovid's myth, but one that particularly makes sense to me is a Jungian explanation. Analysts say that Narcissus's fall was one of necessity. Although he spent his days pining over his reflection, it wasn't until he actually 'fell into himself' and drowned that he could be at peace.

Here's a more modern-day fable.

Desperate Housewives is one of the most popular dramas on television. One character in the show is Bree, a young woman who turns entitlement into an art form. She is a gorgeous and cunning woman living in a suburban gossip mill, and she revels in her beauty and sexual exploits. In order to get what she wants, she lies, steals, and even murders with very little conscience. In elegant, expensive clothing, she is the consummate homemaker and bares her soul to anyone who will listen. She obsesses about her mangled love life. When asked the question, 'Why are your problems so much bigger than everyone else's?' she answers, 'Because they're mine!' We all know people like this; in fact, our culture is so narcissistic that it would seem that Narcissus or Bree is the boy or girl next door.

Another example of modern-day narcissism is reality television, which millions of Americans watch religiously. We can sit in the comfort of our living rooms and watch, as people do, everything from the banal to the obscene. Clearly this is a 'Big Brother' society, defined not by George Orwell's vision in his novel Nineteen Eighty-Four, but by a contemporary television program showcasing voyeurism, self-indulgence, and egotism.

Even though Narcissus and Bree are fictional characters, both have qualities that can be used to describe destructive narcissists:

- Indifference to the needs or concerns of others.
- Strongly self-focused and self-absorbed.
- Lacking remorse.
- Emotionally shallow.
- Cannot relate to others in a meaningful way.
- Have overpowering needs for admiration and attention.
- Viewing themselves as unique and special.
- Are grandiose, arrogant, haughty, and contemptuous.
- Belief that they can only be understood by other special or high-status people or institutions.
- Extreme jealousy of others or belief that others are jealous of them.

Pathological narcissism is described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV) as 'narcissistic personality disorder.' It's defined as 'A pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy that begins by early adulthood and presents in a variety of contexts.'

Although this definition is helpful in some ways, it is incomplete. Grandiosity, the need for admiration, and lack of empathy could describe many people, from the annoying teenager next door to the political despot committing atrocities. Since the term narcissism is used so frequently, it's important to examine the difference between a narcissistic personality disorder and a personality with narcissistic traits. Although an individual with the traits of a narcissist can be extremely distressing, their prognosis is much more optimistic. Pathological narcissism is much more destructive and insidious. Without this differentiation, we are in danger of underestimating the relational damage and pain that occur in the wake of the men and women who have this disorder.

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