Rethinking Narcissism: The Bad – and Surprising Good – about Feeling Special

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The recent existent literature on narcissism has focused on its description and its consequences, or on how to save oneself from a narcissist, but none of the texts have described how to deal adequately and maintain relationships with a narcissist or what to do if you have identified yourself as a narcissist.

This book aims to fill the gap in the literature and provide a refreshing view of narcissism. It breaks the stereotype associated with narcissism and presents a radically new model for understanding the term.

Broadly, this book provides a historical view of narcissism and how its conception has changed over the years. Further, it elucidates the different types of narcissism, namely, extroverted, introverted, and communal narcissists. Extroverted narcissists are the ones who are loud, easy to spot, flaunting their possessions, and wanting to be the center of attention at each occasion. Introverted narcissists, on the other hand, although convinced of their being better than other people, fear criticism and hence shy away from people and attention. However, even though they may appear fragile and hypersensitive to observers, they are apt to jump on a slight change in your tone, or a brief glance away and may demand, What do you mean by that? or How dare you turn away? The third type of narcissists, the communal narcissists, regard themselves as nurturing, empathic, and understanding. They rave about their charity donations or their thoughtfulness to a grieving neighbor. They believe themselves to be better than the rest of humanity.

The book also throws light on how to deal with narcissists in different spheres of life. The book gives a theoretical account of narcissism and follows it up with the recent research in the field. It is rich in its coverage of the practical tips to deal with narcissists in our personal and professional life.

The book begins with the author’s personal life experiences. It is followed by the myth of Narcissus and how the concept initially emerged. The author provides interesting insights into how Kohut and Kerberg’s personal history might have affected their professional views. Kohut saw narcissism as vital to well-being throughout life. He believed healthy narcissism: genuine pride, self-worth, capacity to empathize, admire, and be admired should be acquired during childhood as it helps us develop a sturdy sense of self. Although Kernberg agreed with Kohut’s concept of healthy narcissism, he diverged from Kohut’s theory when it came to unhealthy narcissism. Kohut saw grandiose narcissism in a positive light while Kernberg termed it dangerous.

The book then elaborates on the origination of the concept. It distinguishes between healthy and unhealthy narcissism and explores its root causes by taking up the nature versus nurture debate. The variations of narcissism in relation to several socio-demographic variables like age, gender, and career have been discussed. It goes onto highlight narcissism not as a mere entity but an entire spectrum from self-denial to self-assured to self-serving narcissism. The text elucidates several real-life clinical examples of clients on the narcissism spectrum making it easier to understand. A questionnaire has been provided for readers to assess themselves and others on their position on the narcissism spectrum. The role of culture has been discussed in relation to the concept of narcissism. This is further illustrated with the help of clinical case vignettes.

The book provides excellent examples of how a person may go up and down the narcissism spectrum. It
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provides a description of warning signs to be alert to the presence of narcissists. These signs include the display of emotion phobia, playing emotional hot potato, exerting stealth control, placing people on pedestals, and fantasizing as if you’re twins.

The text provides practical ways to change the behavior of narcissists and continue living with them. This can be done via empathy prompts, reminding them the benefits of mutual respect and caring while supporting them to reach their goals, and being assertive.

The book supplies narcissists with tips to change their own behavior by identifying the source of their insecurity and sharing these feelings. As a last resort, it also describes strategies to forego relationships when change is not possible by tackling barriers to leaving, escaping self-blame, escaping the excitement trap, and ending friendships. The book has useful suggestions for parents to curb the narcissistic tendencies of their children at a young age and raise a confident, caring child by being an authoritative parent, practicing firm empathy, expressing appreciation for the child’s good behavior, modeling vulnerabilities, setting limits, and coaching the child. It also explores the role of culture on parenting styles and how it affects the development of narcissism. Finally, the text explores the role of social media in the development and sustenance of narcissists. It describes ways to recover from it by having real-life friends, being open, and finding a community with a purpose.

The book is a synthesis of theoretical, research, and practical knowledge in the field making it a concise must-read for all in the clinical field of psychology. However, considering the use of simple language and including the basics of the field makes it suitable for laymen and those struggling with narcissists in their personal and/or professional life. There are several examples of techniques to be applied which make it easier to understand and utilize in daily living. The text makes for an overall interesting read and makes the readers observe and identify narcissists in their surroundings. The book is useful for the clinician to assess and intervene with narcissists as well as psychoeducate and intervene through the informants. The text mentions several tips and strategies to help the person with narcissistic traits or personality disorder but it does not provide a session by session module to intervene with the same.

Despite the book being easy to read, it does not provide an exhaustive overview of the subject. Although the text provides practical, step-by-step suggestions, it is not a comprehensive self-treatment and cannot substitute for clinical therapy. The focus of the book remains on narcissists and hence an important area, the hurt and emotional pain suffered by their spouses or family members remained unattended.

The text makes for a useful reading material for both laymen and clinicians alike. It gives a brief but comprehensive and novel view of narcissism making it more humane and realistic. It truly makes us rethink the way in which we perceive narcissism as merely consisting of negative attitudes. It makes us empathize with the narcissist and in turn find ways to help him/her.

Overall, this book makes for good learning and presents a unique view of the concept of narcissism. Those dealing with a narcissist in real life, practitioners, researchers and students will find it to be a useful resource.

**Pragya Sharma**

Department of Psychiatry, Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar Hospital, Sector-6, Rohini, New Delhi - 110 085, India
E-mail: pragya.cp@gmail.com

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