

Why Is It Always About You?

Julia was so glad that her husband phoned. He was away on business. It was 11pm and she was in bed exhausted. It felt nice that he had thought to call her. She had been through an unusually difficult day. After a full, busy, stressful day at work, she rushed home to pick her son up from day care, got supper ready, sitter arrived and then hurried downtown to her night course to write the final exam for which she had been studying for weeks. He talked about his sore squash injured shoulder, at length about his work, and then about what a brilliant presentation he had delivered that day and how everyone had congratulated him on it. She wondered whether he remembered about her exam. The more he went on about himself, the more deflated she began to feel. She began to realize that he had not called to ask her about her day at all. As he was ready to end the conversation, he said: "Can you pick up my shirts from the cleaners, as I won't have any time tomorrow."

They are everywhere. They could be your boss at work, a friend, a parent or maybe your spouse. People who are so self-centred that they seem to have no concern for others. They seem to be only interested in you as long as you are useful to them. They act as if their needs are far more important than anyone else's. For some reason, they cannot see the big picture: the forest for the trees. Their expectations can be almost childlike and when their wishes are not fulfilled by others, they can become outraged.

We all know people who are controlling, egotistical, and seem incapable of the give and take of healthy relationships. In her book *Why is it Always About You? The seven deadly sins of narcissism*, Sandy Hotchkiss describes how people come to have these shortcomings, how others get drawn into their orbit and how one can cope or break free.

Hotchkiss describes how a narcissist* has not developed a realistic sense of self and an internalized system of values. As a consequence he or she may not be able to value or recognize the existence of other people's feelings. Empathy and compassion are lacking. So despite the presentation of being larger than life and often very charming, he or she is delayed in emotional and moral development. Relationships are not a reciprocal give and take.

Strategies for Coping with a Narcissist.

1. Know Yourself

The narcissist engages us by our own vulnerabilities of unfinished business with a narcissistic parent. The more you understand yourself and are at peace with yourself as it related to that parent, the better you will be at avoid the same trap.

2. Embrace Reality

The narcissist avoids shame by promoting fantasies that sustain their grandiosity. He/she needs accomplices to admire, do their bidding and meet their needs. If your own self esteem is a little shaky, you may get caught up in the seductive allure of the inflation. Look for reality or empirical truth.

3. Set Boundaries

A person with a narcissistic style will stop by unannounced, open your personal mail, take money or a personal item without asking, if in a position of power flirt inappropriately, watch your comings and goings inappropriately or ask too personal questions. Ordinary assertive techniques do not always work. Enlisting others to help you might help. Practice the presentation. A firm non-angry matter of fact approach is best. Be prepared for the shame response which will be anger. Maintain the boundary once established as it and other aspects of the relationship will be tested.

4. Cultivate Reciprocal Relationships

Sometimes avoiding a narcissist altogether is impossible. It helps to limit involvement by surrounding yourself with healthier people who are more capable of give and take relationships. Reciprocal relationships are ones where each person feels like his/her contributions and benefits are in balance, there is flexibility of roles of giver and taker, each feels valued, boundaries are respected and no one "keeps score".

*When referring in this article to a "narcissist", please remember that this is a description of a personality type or style. It is not a diagnosis, disease, disorder or condition. There is a little narcissism in all of us. The degree of narcissism is related to self esteem. We need to have compassion for people with this style because they are generally unhappy people. However, it is up to the narcissistic individual to seek professional help for him/herself.