

Understanding Narcissism

Paul M. Floyd, M.Div., J.D. and Bruce Narramore, Ph.D.

Jim is a 43-year-old regional sales manager. When people first meet him, they find him charming, pleasant, and endearing. But as they get to know Jim better, they see another side. During planning meetings at church and work, Jim often dominates the conversation. He tells everyone his opinion, whether they want to hear it or not. And he doesn't like being challenged or out voted. Jim is hypersensitive to criticism and acts like he is someone special whom others should admire and defer to. He also has a short fuse when things don't go his way or when people keep him waiting. At restaurants, for example, Jim always expects to get the table he wants when he wants it. If he has to wait, he becomes curt and angry. People who know Jim well eventually tire of his self-centeredness and "know-it-all" attitude. Since he is so focused on himself, Jim, has difficulty being sensitive to others and has few close friends. Even when he does helpful things, he seems to be motivated more from his desire to look good or be a leader than by a real concern for the people he is helping. At home, Jim's wife and children find him difficult. He expects them to see things his way and appreciate everything he does. Jim has a hard time relating to anyone in an intimate peer way for any sustained period of time. In short, Jim is a narcissistic personality.

Narcissism Defined

Historically, the term "narcissism" comes from the Greek myth of Narcissus. In one of the more common versions of this myth, Narcissus is a physically attractive young man, who, upon seeing his own reflection in a pond, is so taken with himself that he withers away while staring at his own reflection in the water.

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Everyone has at least a little narcissism. At the relatively healthy end of the continuum are people who believe in themselves and their abilities, but don't demand special privileges nor consider themselves above the social rules or norms. They can visualize themselves as one of the best or most accomplished in their field or profession, and they may be competitive but they don't envy or begrudge others of their success. They may occasionally be shrewd in dealing with others but they don't exploit people or take unfair advantage of others to achieve their own ends. Most importantly, they possess a good awareness of their own thoughts, feelings, and needs, and they also respect others and have a genuine care and concern for them.

On the other end of the continuum, pathological narcissism is characterized by at least five of the following characteristics:

- A need for constant attention and admiration
- A sense of entitlement
- Interpersonally exploitative (i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends)

- Lack of empathy (is unwilling or unable to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others)
- Envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her
- An arrogant and haughty behavior or attitude
- A preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love
- A belief that he or she is “special” and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people

Craig, for example, was going through an emotionally conflicted divorce. He ran through lawyer after lawyer trying to get the joint custody arrangement of the children exactly like he wanted it. He raged at his ex-wife when she stood up for any alternative. He showed absolutely no concern for her and very little for the children except for the control he could gain by having joint custody. Once he got it, he repeatedly left the children with babysitters while he did his own thing. His goal was to win, not the welfare of his children.

Craig was fired from two jobs in spite of the fact that he was highly productive. He was let go because he tried to tell his supervisors how to run the companies. But as far as Craig was concerned, it was his supervisor’s problem. They lost a great employee. He didn’t consider for a moment that he might be the problem.

At one point, Craig informed his dad that he was moving in with his new girlfriend. When his dad asked why he didn’t wait until they married, Craig was incensed. “You’re not supporting me,” he shouted, as if his father should be duty-bound to feel exactly the same way Craig did about all of his decisions. Craig was oblivious to his father’s right to have a mind of his own, and when his father expressed his own beliefs, Craig felt betrayed. Craig didn’t have any boundary or differentiation between his thoughts and feelings and his dad’s. He thought his father should think and feel exactly as he did. To Craig, like many narcissists, “being loyal,” meant agreeing with him at every point!

In between a healthy degree of self-interest and pathological narcissism is a group of people who don’t fully fit the diagnostic criteria of pathological narcissism but do have a lot of leanings in that direction. They tend to be self-centered and not deeply concerned about others and may have only three or four of the criteria listed above. Among others they can include physicians, lawyers, and athletes who are overly controlling, “cocky,” proud of their accomplishments, or possibly use labels and license plates like “Top Doc,” “Super Lawyer,” or “Top Jock.”

Some very successful politicians, religious leaders and businessmen and women are rather narcissistic. They have great vision and drive to succeed, but they like things their way, eat up the admiration of their followers, exploit others to fulfill their understanding of the needs of their business, church or society, but lack deep caring for others and true humility. They may be admired from a distance or seem successful in terms of growth, numbers, outreach, and influence, but not in terms of their close relationships with others. When it comes time to give up the leadership reins, they struggle to let go since that means giving up prestige and control.

When narcissistic people are placed in positions of leadership in a church or missionary organization, both their strengths and weaknesses impact those who work with them. On the positive side are the narcissist’s vision and capacity to stir people to set new goals and

accomplish great things. They are often able to mobilize a congregation or group of people—especially if the people don't work closely with them or if they trust them implicitly because of their leadership position.

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On the negative side, narcissists need to be the focus of attention, have difficulty receiving advice and input from others, and may view members of their congregation or missionary team as people who should unquestionably accept and follow their vision.

If someone disagrees with the narcissist's vision (whether it is to build a larger church sanctuary or start a new outreach), the narcissist (and his or her loyal followers) labels the dissenters as uncooperative, lacking vision or being unspiritual and out of God's will. In their arrogance, narcissists naively assume that they know God's will and that anyone who disagrees with them is opposing God rather than simply expressing a well considered opinion. Needless to say, this is extremely discouraging to members of a team or congregation who feel ignored or minimized or pushed aside as the narcissist pushes ahead with his or her own agenda.

Other narcissistic leaders try to subtly (or sometimes not so subtly) take credit for everything positive that is happening in a church or team. They can't stand seeing anyone else getting credit or being in the lime light—unless they put them there and can share in the reflected admiration.

Many churches have been fractured or lost many fine members because of a narcissistic leader's need to have everyone under his or her control. Even very successful ministries in the congregation of a narcissist are too big a threat to be tolerated if the narcissist can't control them or take the credit.

It is estimated that less than 1 percent of individuals would be clinically diagnosed as having a narcissistic personality disorder. But when it comes to exhibiting some unhealthy narcissistic personality traits in relationships and personal living, the number is much larger. Of those diagnosed with the narcissistic personality disorder, 50 to 75 per cent are male.

Ironically, the self-centered relational style of most narcissists is apparent to almost everyone who knows them, but not to themselves. Craig, for example, was absolutely certain that his ex-wife, father, and every friend who dared to have a different opinion about his lifestyle or the welfare of his children was the problem. He "knew" he was right and everyone else was at fault. What he needed was a new wife, new parents, new friends, and a new job—not a different attitude! It usually takes a series of conflicts or failures at work or home before the narcissist considers the possibility of seeking help.

Jim, the regional sales manager who had troubles at church and home, finally sought out a counselor after repeated problems relating to various people. He asked his counselor the questions that plague many people with narcissist personalities: "Why doesn't my wife appreciate everything I do for her?" "Why can't I make lasting friendships?" "Why can't others accept and appreciate me for who I am?" and "Why do I feel isolated and lonely—even in groups?" The answers to these questions comes as we gain understanding of how and why the narcissist experiences life and thinks and feels the way he does.

The Dynamics of Narcissism

The underlying skeleton holding the narcissist's personality together is a fragile self-esteem that fears abandonment. Attempting to ward off painful fears of aloneness or shame by developing an idealized view of himself, the narcissist thinks everyone should admire him. When others don't share his unrealistic self-perception he turns on them in anger, or devalues them in order to protect his idealized view of himself.

Some individuals with narcissistic personality disorders have a difficult time adjusting to the limitations inherent in aging. Since narcissistic personality traits are a bit more accepted in the marketplace when a person is young and on the way up in his or her field, narcissists can sometimes manage reasonably well, except in intimate relationships. But as they age, the problems become clearer.

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Causes of Narcissism

What might cause someone to become so self-centered?

From earliest childhood each of us struggles to develop a realistic set of attitudes and feelings toward ourselves and others. We are born with a wonderful God-given potential to become unique individuals who can love and be loved and make our own contribution to the world. We have the potential to become the real self (or the healthy person) that God created us to be. But to grow into this kind of person we need certain childhood experiences. Our awareness of our own unique abilities and needs, for example, only develops gradually as our parents and others close to us recognize our God-given gifts and are sensitive to our God-given needs.

Good parents sense their children's emotional, spiritual and physical needs and respond helpfully. They recognize their children's unique ways of being and value those distinctives. And they allow their children to grow up and develop their own individual identities as separate people rather than trying to force them into their mold or make their children meet the parents' needs.

How well we develop our God-given self determines to a large degree whether we will become emotionally healthy individuals or suffer from narcissistic or other adjustment disorders. For some reason, the potentially narcissistic person fails to develop his true God-given self and shifts his energies into becoming the kind of person he thinks he must be in order to feel good about himself—someone that everyone will admire. Instead, of becoming the person God created him to be—with strengths and weaknesses like the rest of us, he can only feel good about himself when his false grandiose perfect self is being affirmed.

But in seeking constant admiration, the narcissist looks to everyone else to prop up his unrealistic self-image. In the process he obliterates the boundaries between himself and others. He expects others to live for him and to affirm his unrealistic self rather than be the distinct people God called him to be. He uses others rather than loves them. He does this to ward off his deep fears of abandonment, shame, sadness, and depression.

Narcissistic traits can develop from several different types of early life experiences, but they all have one thing in common. They all undermine the child's acceptance of his true, God-given self. Parents who pamper a child by always giving him his way, who neglect a child, or are so

needy or intrusive that they repeatedly force the child to meet these needs, can all lead to narcissism. Permissiveness and pampering tend to program children with undeserved feelings of entitlement or superiority. These children don't learn humility and respect for others because their parents haven't set limits and modeled mutual respect.

Consider three-year-old Caleb, for example. While shopping with his mother Becky, Caleb sees a candy he desires. Totally unaware of "adult" issues like finances, ownership or health, Caleb only knows that he wants the candy and he believes that he should have it. If Becky says no, Caleb may initially feel anger or even have a tantrum. But in time he will get over it and learn that he cannot always have his way. He will also learn to calm himself down and feel OK when things don't go the way he wants. But if Becky consistently gives in, Caleb will come to believe that he is entitled to anything he wishes.

To become emotionally mature, children need parents who enjoy them and are emotionally aware and caring but who also know how to say no. We all must learn to manage our feelings of resentment or disappointment when caregivers do not give in to our demands. We must all learn that we can't always have our own way and that we need to regard others. Psychologists call this the ability to "self-soothe." Children who become narcissistic adults never learn to do this. They can't accept their limitations or the fact that their wishes will not always be met.

Children who grow up in wealthy or influential homes but whose parents are not sufficiently emotionally nourishing can sometimes also develop the strong sense of entitlement and a lack of sensitivity to others that characterizes narcissistic personalities.

Marriage and family therapists have begun to realize that an entire family system can be narcissistic not simply one individual within the family.

For some reason (job stress, alcoholism, drug abuse, mental illness, lack of spiritual maturity, physical disability, lack of parenting skills, self-centered immaturity, etc.), the narcissistic family revolves around getting the parents' desires and needs met rather than also meeting the needs of the children. Trying to earn their parents approval or to keep their parents happy, children in these families lose touch with their own needs. They are too busy adjusting to, or taking emotional care of their parents' lacks. The biblical pattern of parents meeting their children's needs is reversed. The children are psychologically taking care of the parents. This leaves the child craving to be cared for. But since they aren't, they start seeking constant admiration or success to fill their emotional void.

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Here are some of the more common characteristics of these narcissistic families:

Indirect communication between parents and children. (Instead of "Steve, would you please take out the garbage?" It is "It would be nice if someone would take out the garbage.")

Family relational patterns that resemble triangles. (One or both of the parents speak through the children to use them as a defense to closeness.)

Unclear physical and emotional boundaries between the parents and the children. For example, “What is mine is mine and what is yours is mine, too.”

Children are not entitled to have, express, or experience feelings that are unacceptable to the parents. (For example, “We don’t hate our brother. We love our brother.”)

Mind reading. (One or both of the parents assume that everyone else in the family “should” know what he or she is thinking or feeling, without having to clearly communicate their thoughts or feelings.)

Notice that there need not be abuse or neglect for a family system to be narcissistic. Indeed, some narcissistic families look fine from the outside and, in some ways, from the inside, too. Nobody takes drugs or is an alcoholic, and nobody has a serious mental illness. Yet, with further probing, it becomes clear that the needs of the parent (or parents) were the focus of the family and the children were in some way expected to serve those needs.

Other potentially narcissistic adults have suffered parental neglect or indifference. Then they developed a compensatory false self that desires “greatness” and constant affirmations as a way of shoring up their sagging sense of self-worth. This may also be an attempt to ward off the shame or fears of abandonment that come from a lack of parental presence, attunement, sensitivity and love.

Regardless of the specific childhood experiences that give rise to narcissism, the end result is a set of unspoken or unconscious beliefs like:

“I am special and I deserve special treatment, privileges, and status.”

“I am superior to others and they should acknowledge this fact.”

“The rules apply to everyone except me. I am above the rules.”

“The only people who can truly understand me are those who share a similar status or privilege.”

“When I am criticized or don’t get my way, I feel ashamed and defective and can never measure up.”

Understanding these dynamics helps answer two questions many people have about narcissistic individuals. “Aren’t they just proud and selfish?” and “Aren’t they just being sinful?” The answer to both questions is “yes” and “no.” Narcissists are proud and they are sinful—as we all are. But they aren’t just proud and just sinful.

Simple pride and selfishness is something most of us struggle with. We can all seek our own advantage or well-being without regard for others. Although this isn’t emotionally or spiritually healthy, if we honestly face ourselves and seek forgiveness and grow through our relationships with Christ and others, we can move beyond our pride and selfishness.

Pathological narcissism is different. It is a personality style that is deeply rooted in the structure of the entire personality from the first few years of life. It cannot be overcome by simply confessing one’s sins and committing to change. Growing out of narcissism is a long, slow, difficult process that may take years.

Living or Working With a Narcissist

If you live or work with a narcissist, you know these relationships present a distinct set of challenges. Although people outside the immediate family or workplace may think the narcissist is charming, larger-than-life, or exciting you know better. The narcissist's, extreme self-focus, violation of your boundaries, and his controlling style can cause incredible frustration and despair.

Some decide the best way to deal with the narcissist is to pacify him by sacrificing a part of their "self" so that the narcissist can live out his or her fantasy life of superiority without conflicts. This is especially true for spouses of narcissists. It takes so much energy to avoid relational conflicts that the family member simply gives up trying to have a life or opinions of his or her own. Unfortunately, spouses who attempt to make peace this way can't be honest about their own thoughts, feelings, and desires because that would upset their mate. A good indication that this is happening is to ask the spouse or family member whether they feel greatly relieved or become a different person when the narcissist is not around!

"Pathological narcissism is different. It is a personality style that is deeply rooted in the structure of the entire personality from the first few years of life. There are better ways of coping than giving up oneself."

Here are some guidelines for surviving and thriving:

Remember, it is inevitable that you will periodically trigger the narcissist's feelings of shame, inadequacy, and anger. Realize that it usually is less about you and your behavior or words and more about the narcissist. Even though narcissists like to be above their failures, they are sinful and imperfect like the rest of us (Romans 3:23, Jeremiah 17:9). If anything, they are even more prone to be unaware of their own imperfections. Even a true statement kindly spoken can wound the narcissist's fragile self-esteem.

Try not to assimilate the guilt or blame that the narcissist attempts to place on you. Remember, his need to blame you comes from his own deep feelings of inadequacy and his or her inability to observe and respect your needs. You simply got caught in the crossfire. According to the Bible, although we all have responsibility to others, we must each ultimately take responsibility for our own burdens (Galatians 6:4).

If you start feeling diminished, or angry, realize that the narcissist's behavior is probably triggering those emotions. Narcissists like to use others as a kind of emotional wastebasket where they can dump their upsetting feelings. If you believe them, you will end up feeling as bad as they do. This doesn't mean you can ignore your contribution to the problem. If you are angry or critical, or overly sensitive; you need to work on your issues, too. But don't take responsibility for the narcissist's deep, long-standing problems. They were there before he met you!

Put some emotional distance between yourself and the narcissist while you sort all this out. Take time to reflect on what is going on between you and your spouse or co-worker. Fighting back doesn't help and neither does accepting blame that isn't yours. Fighting just escalates the narcissist's anger. And accepting their accusations reinforces their unhealthy style and leaves you feeling depressed, angry, or "crazy."

The alternative is to center yourself so that you calmly see what the narcissist is attempting to do without falling into the trap of believing him. Remember in many ways the narcissist is acting and feeling like a two or three-year-old on the inside. But don't tell him that! Use your understanding to be patient and sensitive while still keeping yourself centered. Don't use it as a weapon to fight back.

If you are working under a narcissistic supervisor and want to keep your job, don't challenge him directly. Support and show your appreciation as much as possible. If you decide confrontation is necessary, either approach him as a group or express your concerns (again as a group) to his superior. Since he will probably become threatened and angry, be prepared. If he could take criticism humbly he wouldn't be a narcissist!

Recognize that if you are in a relationship with a narcissist, you will not be able to change him or her—and that he or she will not change because of feelings for you. The narcissist is so lacking in deep empathy that he or she is generally unable to change unhealthy behavior, even when it's hurting others. Professional help from an experienced therapist is nearly always necessary if a narcissist is to make substantial changes.

Minimize direct confrontation with the narcissist's unhealthy behavior. Most narcissists are simply unable to receive criticism, even if it is meant constructively and spoken in a soft and respectful manner. True narcissists are not interested in truth, reality, or you when it comes to their understanding of their self. They are too busy frantically trying to manage their own unconscious fears of being worthless or abandoned to get into your emotional shoes and take an objective look at themselves.

Maintain good personal boundaries between you and the narcissist. In response to your setting a boundary, the narcissist may attempt to rewrite history or even try to convince you that what you thought (or saw) just happened didn't, and thus, there is no need for setting a boundary in the first place. Do not back down. Do check in with others to confirm your reading of the situation (Proverbs 21:11b).

Develop other wholesome friendships. Because narcissists can trigger all sorts of frustrated feelings, don't expect to have all of your needs met in a relationship with a narcissist. Develop good friends whom you enjoy and who can affirm you and help you keep perspective when things get tough. Get involved in your church or a good social or recreational group, or find other ways of developing a few good friends (I Thessalonians 5:11).

Realize that the narcissist may agree to change the dynamics of the relationship for a short time, to get you off his back," but will usually revert to what he or she considers "normal." In the end, the only healthy way to live with a narcissist is to become more of "your own person" and to create a space between you and the narcissist from which you both can live.

Develop a deep and meaningful relationship with the Lord. We all need great human friends, but centering your life on God and studying scripture (especially about your uniqueness and identity in Christ) can provide you a wonderful resource and give you meaningful outlets to use your gifts in helping others (Read Ephesians 1:3-10).

Consider getting a job if you don't already have one. You need a place and some space to have a life beyond the shadow of the narcissist.

Finally, remember that living with a narcissist is never easy. If you have trouble with any of these guidelines, you may need more personalized assistance from a competent professional counselor.

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Psychotherapy

There is good news and bad news about the effectiveness of counseling with narcissistic personalities. First, the bad news: Getting the narcissist to agree to see a therapist is usually difficult, and motivating that person to continue the counseling process to the end is even harder. This is partly due to the narcissist's vulnerable self-esteem which makes him or her inordinately sensitive to any hint of criticism from anyone, including a counselor. Moreover, narcissists have a longstanding pattern of concealing their imperfections and keeping their defects hidden. Therapy threatens to uncover those hidden imperfections.

Narcissistic personalities typically seek treatment only when their sense of specialness or invincibility is threatened through a major life crisis such as a mid-life crisis, illness, job loss, impending divorce, or depression. At times like these, the narcissist is most open to examining how his or her behavioral style harms himself and those around him.

Now for the good news. If the narcissist is willing to examine and confront his or her dysfunctional behavior patterns, counseling can be quite effective. Individual psychotherapy is generally the most effective treatment. A trained psychotherapist can gradually explore the narcissist's underlying fears of abandonment, inferiority, and shame in a safe environment.

If a narcissist comes to know Christ as his personal Savior, or has a renewed spiritual commitment as a Christian, he may take significant strides toward facing his self-centered lifestyle and the hurts beneath it. A personal relationship with God can begin to impact the self-centered, prideful person in two ways. First, the act of accepting Christ as our personal Savior is an act of humility. We must acknowledge our needs and failures in order to seek God's forgiveness and healing. Second, understands that God understands, loves and accepts him with all of his faults. If he can let this soak in and permeate his thinking he won't be so drawn to seek affirmation from others.

You should know, however, that change will take a rather long period of time for these truths to take hold in and for the narcissist to change internally. The relational patterns of the narcissistic personality were learned and reinforced over many years and are not easily dismantled and replaced, even for the Christian. The dismantling process can be quite painful for the narcissist, as well as disquieting to those around him or her. It will also probably take a very good therapist who has significant experience working with narcissistic individuals because they need a rather different type of counseling than most people.

Therapists with a lot of experience with narcissistic individuals have learned that it usually doesn't help to try to confront the narcissist's pride or arrogance directly. Since the narcissist's problems are rooted in the very early painful childhood experiences that made him extra sensitive to any hint of criticism or correction, the therapist will need to spend most of his or her time empathizing with the narcissist's feelings of woundedness and being misunderstood or

unappreciated. Only as the counselor helps the narcissistic person become comfortable with his or her underlying woundedness and need can the narcissist grow. A skilled Christian therapist will help the narcissist realize that both the therapist and God understand his feelings of shame or inferiority and how disappointed and angry he feels when others don't understand him or appreciate him. If the narcissist continues with a counselor like this, he can gradually give up his defensive pride and grow to accept himself and others as God intended him to do. If this process occurs, counseling can be radically life-changing.

Marital counseling can sometimes be a helpful adjunct to individual counseling. One aspect of successful marital therapy with a narcissistic partner is for the mate of the narcissist to be willing to also address his or her dependency issues. Very often, spouses of narcissists have very low self-esteem. They may have married a narcissist because they thought they needed someone strong and confident to compensate for their poor feelings about themselves. Unfortunately, in the intimacy of marriage, the narcissist's partner begins to realize that her husband thinks she is supposed to be an extension of him, and that he is taking advantage of her quiet, self-effacing nature. Marital therapy can help both spouses address their contributions to this and other unhealthy relational styles.

In marital therapy, the spouse of the narcissist will also need to learn to express his or her own needs and to establish better boundaries. This will challenge the narcissist's long-term, controlling patterns of relating. Issues of power and control, independence and dependence, and closeness and distance will likely surface and need to be addressed.

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Family and Group Therapy

Family and group therapy are generally not the best forms of therapy for narcissistic individuals because they so easily feel wounded and misunderstood. It usually takes an experienced therapist to come alongside the narcissist and carefully help him become aware of the painful feelings about himself that have led him to develop a narcissistic style and to become insensitive to the needs and feelings of others. In group counseling, the narcissist's self focus and defensiveness can trigger anger and direct confrontations by group members. This just evokes the narcissist's rage and defensiveness and makes it even harder for him to look at himself. Because of dynamics like this, a narcissist should probably not engage in family or group counseling until he or she has made good progress in individual counseling.

It is also generally not helpful to refer a pathological narcissist to a small support or care group which is not led by a trained therapist. In these types of unsupervised groups, the narcissist is likely to monopolize and manipulate the group until everyone quits or the group members kick the narcissist out for being arrogant, self-focused, and uncaring.

Medication

Medication alone is not suggested for a person with a narcissistic personality disorder. In conjunction with psychotherapy, however, medication is, at times, appropriate if the narcissist is struggling with intensive anxiety or depression. But the premature use of medication can mask the depression underlying the narcissists' maladaptive character style and eliminate his main

motivation for seeking therapy. Instead, the narcissist needs to become aware of his internal pain so that he can learn to face it, rather than trying to ward it off through a narcissistic way of relating to others.

For Further Reading

Among the best books for helping lay persons understand narcissism is *Why Is It Always About You? Saving Yourself From the Narcissists in Your Life*, by Sandy Hotchkiss, The Free Press, New York . 2002. The book is not written from a distinctly Christian perspective, but gives a wonderful understanding of the problems of narcissism, its causes, and very practical suggestions for living with a narcissist.

Two of the most helpful books on narcissism for professional psychotherapists are *The Narcissistic and Borderline Disorders* by James Masterson, Brunner/Mazel, Inc., New York , 1981, and *The Personality Disorders*, also by Dr. Masterson, Zeig, Tucker and Thiesen, Inc. Phoenix, Arizona, 2000.

Source:

http://lifecounsel.org/pub_floyd_understandingNarcissism.html