

Co-Dependence and Narcissism: What They Have in Common

Much of self-help literature portrays codependency and narcissism as polar opposites. Codependency is often associated with excess selflessness. Narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) is often linked to excess selfishness.

Many narratives depict codependent people as victims who fall prey to those with narcissistic traits. This oversimplification neglects a core truth at the heart of both codependency and narcissism: both codependents and narcissists can lack a healthy sense of self.

CODEPENDENCY AND NARCISSISM: SAME NEEDS, DIFFERENT BEHAVIORS

Narcissism and codependency are both linked to an undefined self. They often struggle to get a sense of who they truly are. People with these conditions often rely on other people to define their own identities. As such, they place a lot of importance on what others think of them.

People with NPD often develop an intense, almost exclusive focus on themselves. They may display a lack of empathy or regard for others' needs. They may only care about others' feelings in relation to themselves. Narcissistic people often need someone else to inflate their self-esteem. They may need a continuous stream of affection and admiration to feel good about themselves. Some self-help websites refer to this stream as a "narcissistic supply."

Meanwhile, people with codependency are often hyper-focused on others. They typically form an identity around serving others' needs. They may try to control another person's behavior, believing they know what is best for the person. Instead of praise, codependents often crave gratitude and a sense of "being needed."

Almost everyone wants to feel loved or important. Narcissism and codependency are two strategies to achieve that goal. However, both conditions can create an excessive reliance on others' approval.

THE COMMON ORIGINS OF CODEPENDENCY AND NARCISSISM

Both codependency and narcissism are linked to adverse childhood experiences. A 2001 study of 793 mothers and children found a threefold increase in NPD among children whose mothers were verbally

abusive. A 1999 study of 200 college students linked codependent behaviors to childhood parentification. Parentification is when a child takes on a caretaker role for their parents or siblings, often due to neglect or abuse.

People with NPD and codependency often have similar childhood experiences. They've simply adopted different ways of adapting. For example, say a pair of twins grow up neglected. One sibling may develop a low self-esteem and learn they are only "worth something" if they are useful to others. They may grow into a codependent adult who is used to sacrificing their own needs. The second sibling might develop an inflated self-esteem as a protective mechanism. The neglect makes the child feel unimportant, so as a narcissistic adult, they may crave constant validation to prove their self-worth.

The codependent and narcissistic siblings may develop very different behaviors and personalities. But in both scenarios, trauma and a fractured sense of self are at the core of the problem.

UNDERSTANDING THE DANCE OF NARCISSISM AND CODEPENDENCY

People with codependency sometimes form relationships with people who have NPD. Typically the two partners develop complementary roles to fill each other's needs. The codependent person has found a partner they can pour their self into, and the narcissistic person has found someone who puts their needs first.

Narcissism and codependency aren't always opposites. The desire to feel needed is not that different from the desire to feel important. However, this dynamic can quickly become unhealthy. The codependent person may try to live vicariously through their larger-than-life partner. When their partner doesn't show enough gratitude for their service, the codependent person may feel resentment. Meanwhile, the narcissistic person often exploits their partner's people-pleasing tendencies for their own narcissistic supply. As their ego grows, their demands may increase, until the codependent person eventually burns out.

Even if they develop an abusive relationship, neither partner may try to leave. Both people may stay in an unhealthy situation for fear of being alone. Without help, this dynamic can grow increasingly toxic.

CAN CODEPENDENCY AND NARCISSISM OVERLAP?

Narcissism and codependency aren't always opposites. The desire to feel needed is not that different from the desire to feel important. While many studies find lower rates of narcissism among people with

codependency, some have actually found higher rates of narcissism among those with codependent traits.

A person who is codependent in one situation might be narcissistic in another. For instance, a person might become codependent in their marriage, serving their spouse's every need. Yet that same person may feel an unending need for respect and praise from their children, causing them to manifest narcissistic tendencies.

In some cases, an abusive person may try to gaslight a codependent partner into believing they are narcissistic. The abuser may sabotage any show of self-confidence by calling their partner "egotistical." Typical acts of self-care, such as taking days off or spending time with friends, may be labeled "selfish." The codependent person may believe these accusations and try to fix the relationship by ignoring their own needs. A person isolated from loved ones—who might offer a more objective view—is likely to falsely believe they are a narcissist.

The fact that all people display narcissistic or codependent traits on occasion can make it even more difficult for a person to decide if they're narcissistic, codependent, or both.

CODEPENDENCY AND NARCISSISM: THERAPY CAN HELP

Codependency and narcissism can become pathological when they undermine a person's quality of life or cause the person to harm others. It may be time to seek help if you show the following signs:

- A history of relationships in which abuse has been present.
- Difficulty feeling close to others.
- Feelings of emptiness or low self-esteem.
- Feeling as if your identity depends on what others think of you.
- Feeling like others don't fully appreciate you or acknowledge your importance.
- Feeling like you are never properly thanked for all you have given up.

A therapist can help people with narcissism or codependency understand the root of their insecurities. In therapy, you can learn how to replace flawed coping mechanisms with healthier behaviors. Talking through your experiences can help you access to new ways of thinking and being.

Therapy offers compassion, not judgment. No matter where you are in your relationships or how much you have struggled in your life, the right therapist can help.

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