

Are you in an intimate relationship with someone who has an overly inflated self-esteem? They're never wrong, they expect others to read their mind, and they put everyone else down?

"Why Is It Always

Loving a Self-Absorbed Person

by Nina W. Brown, Ed.D

You may be in a relationship with a self-absorbed person, and this is producing distress for you. You probably try hard to make the relationship meaningful and rewarding for both of you, but something is not working. A self-absorbed person has several of the following behaviors and attitudes that are troublesome for the relationship. As a general guideline, if your partner has ten or more of the following, they may be a self-absorbed person.

- Overly inflated self-esteem
- Arrogant, prideful and overbearing
- Scornful of others
- Assumes excessive rights/ and privileges
- Shallow emotions - has appropriate words, but not the feelings
- Lack of empathy - does not tune in to or understand other's feelings
- Inappropriate or no sense of humor
- Attention seeking
- Admiration seeking
- Ignores or does not respect other's boundaries
- Exploits and/or manipulates others
- Expects others to read his/her mind
- Overly sensitive to perceived criticism or blame
- Impulsive and reckless

- Expects or demands undue respect
- Can never be wrong or make errors
- Takes unearned credit
- Envious of others
- Status seeking

Your Usual Feelings

Your feelings about yourself are another indicator that you may be in a relationship with a self-absorbed person. Do you experience several of the following on a regular basis?

- Worthlessness
- Incompetent
- Inadequacy
- Anger
- Ineffectualness
- Loneliness
- Devaluation
- Abandonment
- Impotency
- Depression
- Rejection
- Despair
- Uneasiness
- Hopelessness
- Helplessness
- Hurt
- Boredom
- Resentment
- Frustration
- Not good enough
- Deadening emotions

If you experience ten or more of these, on a regular basis, and you have identified some troubling behaviors from your partner, then you are most likely in a relationship with a self-absorbed person. Just to confirm your findings, you may want to talk to other

friends and family who know your partner, and see if they also see your partner exhibit these kinds of behaviors and attitudes. If they do not validate your perceptions, then there may be another reason for your feelings.

Phases of a Relationship with a Self-Absorbed Person

Phase 1: There is mutual attraction, connection, happiness, and a strong desire to become closer. You feel appreciated, admired, and understood.

Phase 2: Efforts are made to please you; there are intense feelings, attention and flattery; and there appears to be commitment to the relationship.

Phase 3: This phase merges gradually. There is less attention, and more critical comments, blame and devaluing of you as a person. You experience many instances where he/she is not empathic with you. These are interspersed with behaviors from phases 1 and 2.

Phase 4: Your efforts to recapture the feelings and connections in phases 1 and 2 do not work. You become discouraged, infuriated, depressed, and/or possibly self-critical.

If you have read this far, you are probably in phase 3 or 4. You are likely troubled about the relationship, and stay upset much of the time. You may still see his/her attraction towards you. You probably have tried to change him/her, and even yourself, to no avail. You don't know which way to turn. You long for your relationship to return to stage 1, and you probably work hard to make it happen, but nothing seems to get back to those feelings.

In contrast, there is healthy adult narcissism. As adults, we have successfully outgrown our childlike attitudes and behaviors. Adults with healthy and age appropriate narcissism have the following behaviors and attitudes:

- ✓ Creativity
- ✓ Wisdom
- ✓ Empathy
- ✓ An appropriate sense of humor
- ✓ A wide range and depth of emotional experiencing and expression
- ✓ Meaning and purpose for their lives
- ✓ An ability

both of you, and thinking that you are not trying hard enough places all of the effort on you.

False Belief: I am so inadequate in so many ways.

How realistic is this belief? Everyone has some inadequacies, but also have many competencies. Are you more focused on inadequacies than competencies? If so, then the self-absorbed person can easily trigger your guilt and shame, which keeps you thinking that it is your inadequacies that are producing the relationship problems.

False Belief: If I were better or perfect, he/she would love me.

Becoming a better person, or even striving for perfection can be admirable goals. However, love is not demanding of perfection, and if you think you have to be perfect, you are buying into a fantasy that will not be realized.

False Belief: I am responsible for what he/she feels.

Everyone is responsible for his/her own feelings, and you cannot make or cause another person's feelings. Feelings arise from within the individual. If you feel responsible, it's probably because you are working hard to keep him/her feeling good. That kind of work never pays off.

False Belief: I need to try harder to please him/her.

This may be true sometimes, but if you are not getting anything in return, the belief that you have the major responsibility for pleasing someone works against your best interests.

False Belief: He/she wouldn't get so upset if I could anticipate his/her needs better.

Even if you spent all of your time, and gave all of your attention, and were able to read minds, you still would not be able to prevent the upset. Further, as an adult he/she should be able to take care of his/her own needs, and to ask for what they want or need. Babies and toddlers
continued next page

About You?"

The Self-Absorbed Person

A self-absorbed person does not have an age-appropriate level of development of the self. Many of their behaviors and attitudes are more like those of an infant, child and teen, instead of an adult. For example, they can have the attitude and expectation that you will read their mind and give them what they want without their having to ask for it. This is similar to what children expect.

Another example of childlike behavior is their continual focus on their concerns, and little attention for your needs and concerns. You may even encounter incidences of their "narcissistic rage" where they become so super angry that no amount of reasoning, logic, explanation or anything appeases them. When this rage occurs, you are essentially trying to deal with a "pissed off" baby. And, if you've ever tried to pacify a baby, you know how futile it is.

One of the most difficult things to accept about self-absorbed people is that they don't know they are self-absorbed. They cannot see or recognize their undeveloped and troubling attitudes and behaviors. Usually, everyone else can see that they are self-absorbed, but that fact remains blissfully blind to them. And, no amount of telling, confronting, cajoling, or anything else will make self-absorbed people see their undeveloped self.

to initiate and maintain meaningful and satisfying relationships.



False Beliefs

You may have some false beliefs that keep you trying things that don't work, which then leads to you feeling frustrated, upset and stuck in a hopeless cycle. Read the following and see if any of these false beliefs described fit you.

False Belief: I must not be trying hard enough.

There may be other things you can do, but the relationship demands effort from

can expect us to read their minds and know what they need, but adults should use their words to get their needs met.

Thoughts That Keep You Stuck

You may experience any or all of the following thoughts about your partner, which are really fantasies, wishes and dreams. There are no definitive answers to these "why" questions, but continually asking yourself these questions will not allow you to grow, develop, or make choices. Read the following and see how your fantasies are keeping you stuck.

- ✓ Why can't my partner change?
- ✓ Why doesn't my partner see what their comments and criticisms do to me?
- ✓ Why is my partner so suspicious of everything I do and say?
- ✓ Why can't my partner be more sensitive to my feelings?
- ✓ Why is my partner so critical and blaming?
- ✓ Why does my partner say and do things to erode my self-esteem or self-confidence?
- ✓ Why doesn't my partner care as much as I do?

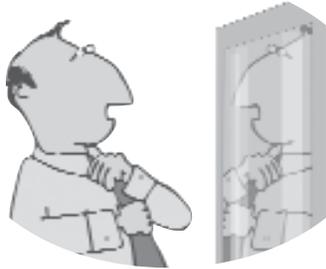
More Constructive Thoughts, Feelings, Behaviors and Attitudes

Rather than staying stuck in misery, blaming yourself or the other person, and operating from the perspective of your false beliefs and thoughts, you can adopt more constructive thoughts, feelings, behaviors and attitudes. All of the following would be helpful.

- ✓ Accept the person as he/she is.
- ✓ Give up fantasies and the need to change him/her. It is unlikely to happen.
- ✓ Take responsibility for your thoughts, feelings, behaviors and attitudes, and

give him/her the responsibility for his/her thoughts.

- ✓ Build and fortify your psychological boundaries and reduce your emotional susceptibility. (see Establishing Healthy Boundaries in this issue of Going Bonkers).
- ✓ Develop your healthy adult narcissism and reduce your undeveloped narcissism. (You too probably have some that you cannot see).



Changes You Can Make

There are some changes you can make that can help you cope more effectively.

Move from: Expecting understanding or empathy from him/her

To: Realizing that he/she cannot be empathetic

Move from: Wanting him/her to change

To: Accepting him/her as is

Move from: Getting upset at negative, devaluing comments

To: Using self-affirming thoughts

Move from: Trying to read his/her mind

To: Doing what is reasonable to meet his/her needs

Move from: Becoming defensive

To: Accepting his/her statements as personal opinions, that are not necessarily valid

Move from: Responding to blame and criticism

To: Responding with non-committal answers, like "I'll think about that"

Move from: Feeling inadequate

To: Focusing on your positive attributes, abilities, and competencies

Final Thoughts

Remind yourself to do the following as protective and coping strategies.

- ✓ Do not confront.
- ✓ Give up your fantasies.
- ✓ Don't continue to try to change the person.
- ✓ Work to develop your own healthy adult narcissism.
- ✓ Use self-affirmations such as the following:
 - * I am capable and competent.
 - * I do some things well.
 - * I strive for excellence and can be accepting of my mistakes.
 - * I am responsible for my feelings, and I can let other adults be responsible for their feelings.
 - * I have many positive characteristics.

While it would be wonderful (probably your fantasy) for your partner to seek professional help to overcome their self-absorbed behavior and attitudes, it's not likely to happen. Remember self-absorbed people don't recognize they have a problem. Work on your feelings with someone outside the relationship, preferably in a confidential relationship, such as with a therapist or a trusted confidential advisor. 

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