

Introduction

In his epic poem *The Metamorphoses*, the Roman poet Ovid tells the story of Narcissus, an ancient hero who fell in love with his own image reflected in a pool of water. He became so enamored with this perfect copy of his every nuance and movement, that he could not hear the repeated declarations of love from the nymph, Echo. When Echo asked him to join her in an intimate relationship, he said he would rather die than for her to have him, emphasizing his aversion to commitment. The clinical and empirical literatures indicate that modern narcissists experience the same aversion to intimacy and commitment in romantic relationships that the mythical Narcissus experienced. In this poster presentation, we review the literature related to narcissism in the context of romantic relationships.

The Investment Model of Commitment

The investment model of commitment can be used to conceptualize narcissism in romantic relationships.

The model predicts **commitment** from three elements:

- 1) **Satisfaction** - relationship rewards minus costs in comparison to the individual's expectations in the relationship
- 2) **Investments** - shared friendships, shared resources, children, memories, time, etc.
- 3) **Alternatives** - the desirability of perceived options that the individual has outside of the relationship

Narcissism and Romantic Relationships

Lack Empathy and Desire for Intimacy

- ✦ Show little concern or empathy for their partners and are willing to exploit them
- ✦ Exhibit a low desire for intimacy and have shallow relationships
- ✦ Exploiteness/Entitlement (E/E) is inversely related to empathy (E/E refers to having a manipulative relationship style)
- ✦ Empathy-narcissism trait is an important predictor of ethical behavior
- ✦ Highly correlated with disagreeableness and unresponsiveness to social pressures, as well as anxiety and neuroticism
- ✦ Empathy was highly correlated with emotional intelligence, altruism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness. Empathetic people have a desire to approach others (i.e., "move towards people"), whereas narcissists are characterized by a general aloofness from others.

Selfish and Self-serving

- ✦ Lack affection, display self-enhancing goals
- ✦ Are selfish, self-serving, and have an elevated self-focus
- ✦ Willing to denigrate partners to enhance their self-esteem
- ✦ Emphasize game-playing and pragmatic concerns, deemphasize selflessness
- ✦ Have a need for power and autonomy in relationships

Sensitive to Criticism

- ✦ Sensitivity to criticism, anxiety, fear of being hurt, defensive reactions
- ✦ Denigrate people who provide undesirable feedback
- ✦ Use the self-serving bias (i.e., take personal credit for success and blame external forces for their failures), often accompanied by anger, to defend against undesirable feedback
- ✦ Put themselves on exhibitionistic display and try to impress others in order to receive attention and admiration
- ✦ Seek admiration from partners and other people

Narcissism and Investment Model Factors

- ✦ Lower relationship satisfaction because they perceive themselves as more intelligent and attractive than other people
- ✦ If they believe they are superior to their partner, they are less likely to be satisfied with them
- ✦ Because narcissists are selfish, self-centered, have an elevated self-focus, and engage in less selfless love, they may be less likely to invest in their romantic relationships
- ✦ Because narcissists have a high need for power and success, resort to a game-playing love style, are sensation seekers, and prefer partners who are not seeking a caring or emotionally close relationship, tend to perceive of many relationship alternatives
- ✦ Their unrealistically high levels of self-confidence and positive conceptions of self, may lead them to the false perception of having many potential alternative partners; tend to chronically pay attention to, flirt with, and seek alternative partners
- ✦ High narcissism is associated with low relationship commitment

Narcissists' Self-destructive Relationship Style

Narcissists have a self-destructive relationship style. They are constantly looking for a better partner, and take a pragmatic approach to relationships. They seek self-enhancing, high status partners, who will not pressure them for intimacy and commitment. These partners are ideal if they provide the narcissist with attention, affection, and admiration. Throughout the relationship, the narcissist lacks empathy for their partner and employs a game-playing love style to manipulate them into fulfilling their self-esteem needs. Once the attention and admiration from their current partner begins to fade, the narcissist's idealization of their partner also fades. Satisfaction decreases dramatically in a short period of time. At this point, the narcissist resorts to neurotic tantrums, excessive defense mechanisms, and even denigrating their partner before others in order to enhance their self-image. Throughout this process, the narcissist is on exhibitionistic display to gain the attention and admiration of others in an attempt to find a "better deal." The narcissist will stay involved with a profitable relationship (e.g., one in which the rewards outweigh the costs) but still need the freedom and power to explore other options. A narcissist feels little remorse about seeking alternatives because they care little about the emotional well-being of their partner. It is easy to see how a narcissist's approach to romantic relationships is the very antithesis to commitment.

Reversing the Self-destructive Cycle

- ✦ **Humility:** Humble people evaluate themselves accurately, without defensiveness. Humility requires understanding that we would not be here if it were not for others helping us and supporting us. We learn to see the connections and commonalities we have with others, and stop seeing ourselves as "special." Humble people are surrounded by friends and family who encourage them to see themselves accurately. This support may come from religions that emphasize humility.
- ✦ **Self-compassion:** Develops from an understanding that one cannot always be, or always get, what one wants. When this reality is denied, stress and frustration lead to self-criticism. When this reality is embraced, while being sympathetic and kind toward oneself, then greater emotional equanimity will lead to a decreased need for defensive mechanisms, such as the ones that are active in the narcissistic personality. Self-compassionate people experience less anger, more happiness and positive emotions, less self-consciousness, fewer uncontrollable thoughts about themselves, and approach criticism more constructively. Self-compassion can be learned through a range of practices (see www.self-compassion.org). One way that self-compassion can be learned is through the traditional Buddhist practice of mindfulness, the awareness of the present moment—thoughts, feelings, physical experience—without judgment. Mindfulness may be strengthened through regular meditation.