

A narcissist's internal environment is like a roller coaster. Fluctuations between efforts at self-enhancement spurred by aggression or fear and accompanied by detachment or dismissiveness, can shift within the course of an hour to inferiority and insecurity, accompanied by critical undermining self-judgements, negative emotions, avoidance or a sense of loss of control caused by overwhelming shame, fear and powerlessness.

Hence we see a range of confusing behaviours, for example, a social butterfly covert narcissist hides in the kitchen at a gathering they arranged.

Studies in neuroscience have identified functional characteristic and compromises in narcissists' emotion regulation, including difficulties identifying, tolerating, verbalising and processing feelings, and the effect of secondary emotions (behaviours) on their sense of control, motivation and self-esteem. Patterns of interactions with others are influenced by this compromised emotion processing and by fluctuations in self-esteem regulation.

As well as that, narcissists have difficulty identifying, understanding or processing others' feelings (studies have shown less accuracy in recognising emotional expressions in others, especially those related to fear and disgust). Here we see the narcissist frequently asking: 'Are you OK?' Hypervigilance and sensitivity, reactivity and negative feelings, especially in response to humiliation or other challenging or traumatising events, is associated with pathological narcissism.

Interestingly, studies have shown that narcissists are less prone to 'emotional contagion' (the transfer of emotional states from one person to another) which is commonly used as an advertising strategy, than those lower in narcissism.

Other people's emotions are not only difficult to process but also perceived as demands that don't serve them – an irritating mix for a narcissist (see *Empathy* higher up this page). Depending on where they are on the spectrum they can respond with aggression or emotional withdrawal. However, avoidance can also be motivating i.e. a defensive self-regulatory strategy to avoid failure, which helps protect their fragile self-esteem. Here we see the silent treatment after a boundary battle for example.

Despite being notorious for their ability to discard, narcissists are highly sensitive to rejection (which is made more painful through the fact that their behaviours incur rejection). Shifts in their experiences of interpersonal affiliations and attention – from being included, appreciated and admired to being excluded, criticised and ignored can be extremely challenging for their self-esteem.

While appearing to be unaffected by losses, separation, or experiences that would normally evoke sadness, pain and anguish, the impact of life events and changes, especially those that are sudden, unexpected or consequential, can severely rupture a narcissist's core self and self-esteem regulatory pattern; their aggression is turned towards themselves leading to loss of functioning, drastic impulsivity, violence or suicidal threats and acts.

While it may be the case that in that moment they feel suicidal, in my experience suicidality and narcissism is complex and varied – threatening suicide can also be used as a manipulation to keep a partner close, or as a way to gain supply however heinous the method, for example from young dependent children – the narcissist (often those co-morbid with borderline personality disorder) threatens to end their life by crashing the car with them in it, or leaves the children alone in the house telling them they will never

return. Narcissists will decide who with, when and where they can get away with bad behaviour.