

Self-esteem and emotion regulation

Narcissists' self-esteem is variable and vulnerable and they attempt to internally regulate through gaining supply. This makes them quite dependent on the world, which fosters their deep sense of shame. Here we see behaviours such as acting out, dominating and devaluing others in order to seek that supply. Other ways to manage emotion include taking risks, competitiveness and perfectionism.

Their 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.

Mentalisation is the ability to read, access, and reflect on mental states in oneself and other people. Research shows that people with narcissism can suffer from extreme difficulties mentalising themselves and others, leading to instability in their mood, interpersonal relationships, and sense of self.

Studies in neuroscience have identified functional differences in narcissists' emotion regulation, including difficulties identifying, tolerating, verbalising and processing their feelings, and the effect of secondary emotions (behaviours) on their sense of control, motivation and self-esteem. Patterns of interactions with other people are affected by the narcissist's 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). Hypervigilance and sensitivity, reactivity and negative feelings, especially in response to humiliation or other challenging or traumatising events, is associated with pathological 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. A recent study showed that people up higher up the narcissistic spectrum feel an acute sense of exclusion, of otherness and differentness.

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 deadly suicidal 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.

Those with NPD have vulnerable low explicit self-esteem (conscious evaluation of the self) and high implicit (autonomic/unconscious) self-esteem. The co-occurrence or 'collision' between the two causes the high symptom severity seen in the full-blown disorder.