

2006

Narcissism

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Recommended Citation

Bufford, Rodger K., "Narcissism" (2006). *Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology*. 306.
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NARCISSISM

Narcissism takes its name from the legendary figure Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection in a woodland pool and pined away in unrequited love, and has come to refer to self-love. It involves a vain and grandiose self-centredness, and auto-eroticism, *hedonism, vanity, exhibitionism and arrogant ingratitude are commonly considered to be elements. The late twentieth century has been characterized as the age of narcissism because of its hedonistic self-centred focus.

Developmentally, object-relational theorists such as Klein and Mahler describe the first few months of postnatal development as characterized by primary narcissism. According to their theory, 'good enough' mothering helps the infant to bridge the initially split-off perceptions of 'good self, bad self' and 'good other, bad other' into more realistic whole objects or experiences that acknowledge the complexity of self and other as both good and bad. In this way they allow room for the glorious image of God in each of us to exist in tension with our fallenness and sin.

Narcissism is a feature of many mental disorders, and all humans exhibit some narcissism although socialization curbs it to some degree, but in its full form narcissism is thought of as a personality disorder. The addition of narcissistic personality disorder to the diagnostic system in 1980 reflects the growing interest in this condition. Statistically, it is difficult to distinguish narcissistic personality disorder from other personality disorders, but the most distinctive features include vanity, exhibitionism and a heightened sense of self-importance.

The word 'narcissism' does not appear in the Bible, and is seldom found in Christian theology, but the idea is present nonetheless. Jesus' two great commands are to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. These commands directly confront narcissism by calling us to its opposite. Loving ourselves is taken as a given here. It is neither repudiated nor encouraged.

Rather, our attitudes towards God and others are called to be in balance with our attitudes towards ourselves. This theme is echoed in the epistles (e.g. Rom. 12:3, 16; Gal. 6:3–5).

We are warned that in the last days people will become lovers of themselves rather than lovers of God. Pride, a synonym for narcissism, has long been considered one of the seven deadly sins. The Bible repeatedly warns against pride (e.g. Prov. 16:18; Jas 4:6) and to a lesser degree arrogance (Prov. 8:13; Jer. 48:26). Christians are called to esteem others more highly than themselves (Phil. 2:3–4) and to serve others in love (Gal. 5:13). Thus, Christians are warned to avoid narcissism and called to manifest its opposite.

Efforts to treat this personality disorder have generally been unpromising. Dialectical behaviour therapy, developed by Marsha Linehan in 1993 for the treatment of borderline personality disorder has shown some promise. Elements of DBT include developing awareness of thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, and behaviours, building distress tolerance, learning how to regulate emotion, learning self-management and gaining interpersonal effectiveness. Recently it has been extended to other personality disorders including narcissistic personality disorder with some evidence that it may be effective.

A couple of additional strategies may hold promise. The first is empathy training. It has been proposed that as we understand our own pain – rejection, loneliness, physical injury and so on – we can gain insight into others' experiences of pain and become less self-centred. Secondly, Kirwan proposed that an important therapeutic strategy is encouraging acts of service to others. Paradoxically, serving others is not so much something we do for God as something God does for us – as we engage in service for others we are transformed, becoming more like God. In part it combats our inherent narcissism. Thirdly, Scripture calls upon us to be transformed by renewing our minds (Rom. 12:2) and bringing every thought captive in obedience to Christ (2 Cor. 5:10). Memorizing and meditating on verses such as Phil. 2:3–13 ('consider others better than yourselves') and using constructive self-talk may help transform self-centred attitudes. Thus a variety of cognitive-behavioural strategies can be employed to combat narcissism if the individual is motivated to change her life.

Bibliography

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NATIVE AMERICAN RELIGION, see
PAGAN AND INDIGENOUS RELIGION