

by Frances Coventry

A close-up photograph of a man with a beard and a brown hat, looking upwards and to the right. He is holding a glass of beer. His hand is raised to his face, with a ring on his finger. The image is framed by a white circular border.

**WHY'S IT ALWAYS
ABOUT YOU?**
(Living with a narcissist)

A CONVERSATION WITH DAVID SANDERS



Once upon a time, in Greek mythology, there lived a very handsome young man. His name was Narcissus, and many women fell in love with him. But he was so infatuated with himself that he turned them all down – including the nymph, Echo, whom he callously rejected.

In an act of divine punishment, he was shown a reflection of himself in a pool, and immediately fell in love with his own image. But every time he tried to touch the face he saw in this vision, it broke up on the shimmering surface of the water. In despair, he eventually stopped eating, lost his beautiful looks, faded away and died.

The goddess Aphrodite finally took pity on him, making a flower grow in his place on the banks of the pool ...

So there you have it: the origin of the term 'narcissism'.

Evidently we haven't learned a lot, because – according to Auckland counsellor, David Sanders – 'me-ism' or self-absorption is still alive and kicking. So, to get the heads-up on narcissism, we asked David to give us the low-down on this complex issue...

GRAPEVINE: What's the problem with narcissism? Is it really so bad to have a high opinion of ourselves?

DAVID: Well, it's important to have a healthy respect for ourselves. But the key here is: *not at the expense of others*. You see, what I'd call 'normal' behaviour is when we're able to build each other up without continually defending ourselves and feeling wounded. However, it's not normal to become so totally self-absorbed that it's all about "*me, me, me!*"

When that happens, we start using people, isolating them and controlling them. And, as a result, we end up sabotaging the very thing we want in life – which is good relationships.

Narcissism (noun)

1. self-admiration – excessive self-centredness and self-worship
2. a personality disorder – characterised by the patient's overestimation of his or her own appearance and abilities.

GRAPEVINE: So how can you tell if you're dealing with a narcissist?

DAVID: Your classic '*me-ists*' can't help showing off their feelings of superiority. They're so totally absorbed in their own grandeur that they'll often put people down ... even in front of others.

They have this exaggerated idea about themselves (based on fantasy) – and the

only way they can maintain the illusion is to tell lies about their achievements. They may even gloat about their humility!

To be fair, some narcissists are intelligent, high-performing people. But the core issue is that they feed on themselves. They need others to tell them how awesome they are, and they lack empathy towards those around them – because the only feelings they register are their own.

GRAPEVINE: Imagine working for one! What's a narcissistic boss like?

DAVID: Well, it'll become clear very early on that your job is to make him or her look good. You can guarantee you'll be shamelessly exploited – and if you don't come up to expectations, it'll be entirely your fault!

That TV show *'The Office'* is the perfect example of full-blown narcissism ...

GRAPEVINE: For those who're still wondering, are there other clues that reveal the narcissists among us?

DAVID: Sure. They often need your total attention and affection at all times – and if they don't get it they may become paranoid. But sometimes, although it seems just the opposite, they may actually loathe themselves – and then project that loathing onto others just to feel good.

In between all this, of course, they'll constantly brag about their achievements and their beautiful bodies! And if you don't recognise what they're up to, they'll run you ragged!

GRAPEVINE: It almost sounds like they're addicted to themselves! Can this behaviour open the door for other forms of addiction?

DAVID: Well, a narcissist is always looking for an ideal world – a world where he or she has no limits and where every relationship

is completely satisfying. They can't deal with normal disappointments, so drugs, alcohol and gambling – and frequent use of pornography or prostitutes – may bring temporary feelings of well-being and relief from their shame and fear of failure.

But let's be clear: not all addicts are narcissists ... and not all narcissists have these addictions.

GRAPEVINE: It's starting to sound like, while all seems great on the outside, inside there's a huge struggle going on?

DAVID: Yeah, for sure. I've found that completely self-centred people are often quite frightened underneath. They can be very shy or hurt people, desperately needing to believe in themselves. And they may be terribly afraid that someone will discover they're not what they presume to be – that, in fact, *they're not lovely at all*.

Diagnosing narcissism correctly is not always easy, because some of these behaviours are found in other personality disorders as well. But an obvious clue is that someone is getting a kick out of putting others down and manipulating them for their own benefit.

GRAPEVINE: These days we've got a whole society based on how we look, what we do, and how we perform. Is there more *'me-ism'* around now than a generation or two ago?

DAVID: Firstly, let me reiterate that everyone needs a healthy ego. It's okay to feel good and to look after yourself – and it's healthy to feel comfortable in your own skin. But we need a value-system that tells us we're worth a lot *for who we are* – rather than just what we look like.

During Freud's generation, back in the early 1900s, psychiatrists discovered that



people had a whole bunch of conflicted issues in their life, as a result of the morals and ethics their parents had placed on them. But after World War II it changed. Suddenly, society became very ‘me’ orientated. People weren’t grappling with the same moral and ethical issues anymore. There was a growing sense of entitlement and self-inflated ego – *without* a strong moral centre.

And, today, we’re living with parents who’ve reinforced these things in their children.

You see it in TV shows like *‘Desperate Housewives’*. Western society has pushed this to the extreme. In the absence of religious values that were more prominent a few generations ago, we no longer have boundaries about what we can achieve at the cost of someone else.

GRAPEVINE: So narcissism starts in the family?

DAVID: Well, when a child is very young he thinks he’s the centre of the world! And his parents need to help him realise that, while it’s okay to feel good about himself, he *also* has to relate to others.

What happens in an extremely narcissistic family is that parents either reinforce the ‘me’ trait, and the child becomes incredibly self-inflated – or the parents fail to convey to the child that he’s valuable. So the child either reverts to living out that inflated ego – or he becomes desperately angry and self-protective at all costs.

So yes, narcissism definitely starts at home.

GRAPEVINE: Where does the media fit into all this? Does it have a case to answer?

DAVID: The media often reinforces narcissistic behaviour. Television and magazines tell us that a successful life is

gained by looking and acting in certain ways. Every shop you walk into endorses your right to look beautiful. Nowhere are we told, *"This may be as good as it gets!"*

And, to some extent, even our education system shares some of the blame – by highlighting a child's giftedness while failing to balance it with the child's character. Children's rights have become so powerful that they believe they're all-important – a law unto themselves – and who can stop them?

GRAPEVINE: So what can parents do to balance the scales?

DAVID: Well, one of the most important things we parents can teach our children is that they're not the be-all-and-end-all of life. They have responsibilities to their family and to the community at large – and it's not "all-about-me."

As a parent, I have to be on guard about what television and society are teaching my children. I'm continually trying to reinforce the fact that, *"Yes, you're awesome – but there's a fine line between being awesome and being a selfish pig!"* We need to teach our children how to put boundaries around their own selfishness, respect authority, and relate well to each other.

GRAPEVINE: Going back to adults now – can a narcissist help it? Or is it a case of *"that's just who I am"*?

DAVID: Look, the truth is that adult narcissists are very difficult to deal with in counselling – that's if you can get them to turn up at all! The success rate is relatively low because they actually don't think they have a problem. And if a counsellor confronts them on it, they'll invariably have a go at the counsellor!

However, as time goes by, they often

lose their status and their looks. Their fantasies about how great they are become rather jaded. Their performance drops, so they can't brag about being 'numero uno' any more. And they often end up being grumpy old men or critical old women.

Because their success in the past was often achieved at the expense of others, they begin to lose their friends. So, as they get older, they can get quite lonely and depressed.

GRAPEVINE: That sounds rather gloomy. So does all this finally make them wise up to themselves?

DAVID: Not necessarily. They avoid failure like the plague, and are terrified of being confronted and exposed: *"I'm a nobody and a fake."* That pain may make them seek counselling, but to actually face up to the fact that their whole life has been a lie ... for some people that's catastrophic.

For children, however, the hope is a lot brighter – especially if parents recognises the 'me-me-me' signs in those first 10 years. They can challenge their children, and teach them the importance of empathy and having a life outside of themselves.

It also helps to accept the fact that children will suffer – and that's not necessarily because you're a bad parent! It's good to teach kids that failure is not always a negative experience – it can make you wiser and stronger.

GRAPEVINE: Who's more likely to suffer from narcissism – men or women?

DAVID: It's more prevalent in men – and I suppose that goes back to our core natures. Women like to feel secure, special and safe – so a woman's top issue



is how to engage in relationships. She'll naturally have more empathy and she'll want to connect intimately.

A man doesn't even go there! His top issue is respect, and everything he needs to achieve it. Which is why narcissism hits males more often than females.

You see, boys are desperately trying to discover how they can feel good about themselves, and how to measure up as a man. But, unless a girl has been emotionally abused, she generally won't hook into that, because it'll compromise her need for relationships.

GRAPEVINE: If a woman does go down the narcissism track, what will the results be?

DAVID: Well, remember, narcissists are huge attention-seekers. Women tend to use the things that they identify closely with – such as their children, their figures and their sexuality – to gain attention. For men it's more about power, wealth, work and achievements – and, unlike women, they may consider children a hindrance to their glorification. But because women are the primary caregivers, they may see their children as an extension of themselves – which can put huge pressure on a child to always perform and affirm their mum.

A woman may also have children because of an idealised view of herself as a nurturer – or perhaps she hopes that they'll 'complete' her. Her 'perfect' child, in this case, is there to make her feel special and inspire others to admire her.

GRAPEVINE: And her effect on the husband?

DAVID: For a man, loving a narcissistic woman is hard work. He'll spend his days adoring her, looking after her, constantly

proving that he can be trusted and will never leave her. But, unless he's got what she wants, he'll probably lose her. It may be against her religion to divorce, but she'll somehow find a way to get out of the relationship – and in the process, make him to blame for the breakdown.

Meanwhile, she's probably got her eye on her next catch – whether it's a business deal, a new spouse, or a way to silence her enemies. She's often well-educated and full of self-confidence. She'll use the 'right men' to get what she's after. And she may move from one to four husbands without a backward glance or an honest awareness of the damage she's done.

GRAPEVINE: Ouch! She sounds like someone to avoid! Is it always that 'dire' being married to a narcissist?

DAVID: No. For some people it's wonderful! For example, if they need to feel important, that relationship may bring some kudos. Many narcissists are high-ranking people in society – you'll find them in all sorts of professions: medicine, politics, even religion! – and riding on their coattails can be very exciting.

Some people marry narcissists because they've always been told how useless they are ... and, as a result, they have this craving to build someone up. And as long as they fulfil the role of the adoring admirer, they'll have some success. The bottom line is, they *both* need their egos stroked – so one tells the other how awesome their body is, and the other how great their intellect is!

GRAPEVINE: Okay. What should you do if you've accidentally married a narcissist?

DAVID: Generally, there's not a lot you *can* do. You have to learn to grab the good things that come your way – the odd titbits



of gratitude or encouragement. You'll need to keep all conversations short-and-sweet or you'll end up being blamed when your partner feels threatened. If there's a problem in the marriage, your partner won't take any responsibility – you'll be the problem, always! Unfortunately, sorry is a rare word for a narcissist ...

You should also ensure that you don't need an emotional-boost from your partner, because it ain't going to happen. At first, this person may be very charming – but then, suddenly, your emotional tank is being constantly sucked dry. Arguing won't work, so you need to voice your concerns in short spurts – and then not engage, because you can't win. Try to find

a way to feel good about yourself *outside* of your partner's feelings – and turn a blind eye to the barbs and cuts that come your way.

You need a thick skin, that's for sure!

GRAPEVINE: Does it help talking to friends or family?

DAVID: Actually, sometimes telling your friends or family can bring *more* problems – especially if your partner finds out. Because even though at home you might be treated like a dog, many people will think your partner's amazing. So an uninvolved professional is often your best option for support.

GRAPEVINE: If you choose to confront your narcissistic partner – “I don't want to live with this anymore!” – what's the response likely to be?

DAVID: Well, it's not going to be pretty! Narcissists are, by nature, very defensive – and often quite explosive. They can become highly indignant, and will often turn on their mate. For a man, the abuse may not be physical – because that won't make him look good. But even if it means losing everything, including his image as a good husband and father, it will be difficult for him to get the message.

Generally, if he's smart enough and he sees it coming, he'll find a way to step out of the relationship and demonise his wife. Or he'll isolate himself by saying his job has to take him away on important business. His reaction will depend on how it's going to affect his self-esteem, and what he's going to lose. If he thinks he can rescue things, he'll turn on the charm for a while – but then, as the threat of divorce lessens, the manipulation returns.

It's like living on an emotional roller-coaster ...

GRAPEVINE: Now, some of our readers might be sitting there thinking, “*Oh my goodness! I’ve got to get out of my marriage!*” Is it really that hopeless?

DAVID: Firstly, let me say that you must be careful, because you may be dealing with other problems. As I mentioned earlier, professional support is your best option – and the key is: don’t try this diagnosis at home!

Look, the bottom-line is this. If you’re going to stay in this relationship – maybe because he offers things that are important to you (like overseas trips or status) – what boundaries do you need to put up?

You’ll need to shield yourself from the put-downs you’re fed from your partner. A good shield has the words engraved on it, “*This need not damage me – this is who I’m living with.*”

And you’ll need to realise that not everyone in the world will see your partner as you do.

GRAPEVINE: What are the issues for someone who, say, has grown up with a narcissistic father?

DAVID: Okay, let me give you an example. A man comes to me for help because his relationship with his wife is in desperate trouble. We explore his upbringing, and discover that he’s confused about his role as a male because his self-esteem’s been completely wiped out. He loved his dad and wanted to connect with him, but he could never handle his father’s self-centredness. So connecting was dangerous.

I teach him to set boundaries for himself emotionally, and show him that the power of life-and-death is not dictated by his father. His ability to have value is not controlled by the circumstances of his

day or even his wife’s opinion. He learns to say to himself, “*I dictate to the day – the day doesn’t dictate to me!*”

I also teach him to view his father as someone who’s not well. The moment he can ‘de-hero’ his father he’s then able to say, “*When my father relates negatively to me, it’s because he’s unwell, and I don’t have to take that on board.*”

It’s about externalising the situation rather than internalising it. That way the negativity loses its power.

GRAPEVINE: And this changed his marriage?

DAVID: Yeah, absolutely! He was now able to make huge progress in the way he related to his wife. Before that, he’d react powerfully every time she suggested something was wrong – because, to him, it echoed his father’s disapproval and made him feel he wasn’t respected.

GRAPEVINE: And if one of our kids is struggling with a narcissistic parent?

DAVID: Well, if a daughter, for example, is not getting any affirmation from her father, it’s good to put her around healthy male mentors. I encourage mothers to get their daughter in with friends who’ve got really safe, healthy families – where, hopefully, she can learn a different set of values.

As for boys, they might go out fishing or hunting with a mate and his father, or just muck around with positive male figures that, again, are proven and safe.

I know this is not always easy. But a mother might start a friendship with a healthy family and haul the kids along – in the hope that they form relationships that tide them over. I’ve had grown-up women tell me that their lifesaver was a girlfriend’s dad who loved them for who they were. Their eyes were opened to the

IS IT ALL ABOUT YOU?

To see if you're a narcissist or not, score each statement in this Grapevine Test from 1-to-5:
1 = strongly disagree 2 = disagree 3 = neutral 4 = agree 5 = strongly agree

SCORE-SHEET:

- [] I'm very concerned about what others think of me.
- [] I'm easily bored, and enjoy being the centre of attention.
- [] I think I'm attractive to the opposite sex.
- [] I call or text my friends when we haven't spoken for a while.
- [] People are always coming to me with their problems.
- [] I'm more important than most people I know.
- [] I find that other people's remarks can be hurtful.
- [] I don't like being on my own for long.
- [] People often don't appreciate me.
- [] It seems like I'm always sorting out people's problems for them.

TOTAL YOUR SCORES:

If your score is between 24 and 34 you're normal – don't panic!

If your score is 35 or more you're probably narcissistic – time for some changes?

If your score is 23 or less you may be lacking in self-confidence – and that's an entirely different topic!



fact that their own dad was not well – but that they could feel valued elsewhere.

GRAPEVINE: Okay, David. Any final pearls of wisdom you'd like to leave us with?

DAVID: I believe that if we can get healthy, emotionally, we're less likely to enter into abusive relationships – and we're also less likely to hurt others.

Most of us cope with the knowledge that our upbringings weren't perfect, and we function quite well. And 'okay' is really all we should expect to be! We don't have to be the best or the brightest or the most beautiful.

Another thing: don't place your value or self-esteem in someone else's hands.

When you do that, you can no longer control your emotional life because you're fearful of what others might do.

We need to teach our children that they're valued – and that value isn't based on other people's opinions or how they perform.

And, just to finish off ... my experience has shown me that narcissists are usually frightened, hurt people whose sense of value has been tampered with along the way. In the end, we all have choices ... we don't have to let narcissism rule. ❁

DO YOU WANT TO TALK WITH DAVID SANDERS?
CHECK OUT WWW.THELIGHTHOUSE.ORG.NZ –
OR PHONE 0508 544 482.
