Narcissism: A Fixed Element of the Human Condition

The word narcissism derives from the Greek mythological character Narcissus who was admired for his beauty. Narcissus discovers a body of water and after seeing his reflection in the water, he spends much of his life admiring his beauty. The modern term narcissism has now become one of the personality disorders Narcissistic Personality Disorder and it is characterized by an incessant need for self-adulation, self-absorption, grandiosity, sense of entitlement and having little empathy and concern for others. If not given special attention, these individuals become unhappy and their relationships suffer. A narcissist expects to be given special attention and he/she claims to have unlimited success while exaggerating their many impressive accomplishments to reveal their financial prosperity. There is a tendency to devalue others and be manipulative and exploitative. If they don’t receive excessive attention, they can become angry, impatient and difficulty interacting with others.

The tendency for people to be self-important, seek constant attention and talk about their unlimited success seems to be a fixed part of our human condition. Certain individuals enjoy standing above others to experience self-aggrandizement. The desire to command center stage wherever I am invites attention and adulation from others. Human beings need to be experienced as worthy by others and this generates optimal levels of self-esteem. Self-enhancing strategies are healthy maneuvers to reveal our competencies to others. However, there may be a tendency to exaggerate our talents and abilities to a fault. We have a fundamental need to also do social comparisons, some of which are downward comparisons so we can feel personally and culturally superior to others. Interestingly, studying self-enhancing strategies universally or cross culturally reveals that it is more common in western, individualistic cultures because our self-esteem is more vulnerable to attack when observing others more successful than us.

Acknowledging one has self-worth is healthy and adaptive. One needs to know he/she is a valued human being for the good they bring to the world. Ideally, others say you matter to the world because they see you acting in altruistic ways; you are thoughtful, kind, empathic and selfless. These are soul traits we admire in just, decent and good people. One can succeed in life by not chasing materialism and displaying their positional goods to gain attention. Not all os us are competitive, trying to outsmart and outgain others to show our financial acumen and be admired.

The rise in narcissism can be attributed to internet, media and celebrity circles. It pervades the fabric of our society and can be toxic to our relationships. It has distanced us from commitments to family, friends and communities because we’ve become more self-indulgent, selfish and self-absorbed with our appearance and outlandish objects. We are fascinated with reality shows depicting celebrities in their outlandish lifestyles. Some immerse themselves in these shows and these people show their narcissistic traits. Our perceptions can be influenced by watching tv reality stars live abundantly; multimillion dollar homes, lavish cars and flying around in their private jets surrounded by their personal aids attending to their needs. Aside from reality tv, lyrics in songs and materialism, sex, money and drug use. Social media allows people to display their riches living in high society. People don’t post on facebook who their favorite authors are or the ten most influential books they’ve read in their life. Some people post they took a shower after running a 5k, and a moment later a friend posts they just ran a marathon and are taking a shower. If you want to truly impress someone to gain attention, outdo the 5k runner and marathoner by posting you just crossed the finish line at Ironman and are taking a well deserved shower.

One then asks if narcissism is a modern epidemic? Perhaps too much emphasis has been placed on individual striving for success, competitiveness, fame and power. Is America the most narcissistic country in the world? It is and estimates are that 1 in 200 Americans would meet criteria for narcissistic personality disorder. We read stories in print media, social media and

television about celebrities, athletes and politicians purchasing 40 million dollar homes, exotic cars, yachts and islands.

So what contributes to people desperately needing to impress others? Perhaps it is attributed to our historical pursuit of individualism; the belief that each individual must carve out their piece of the goods in society while being self-reliant, independent, pursuing their own goals and valuing the needs of the self over collective, societal needs. Individualism inherently drives competition and the expectation of a rewards for strong efforts made. We have shifted from a concern for the greater good of the community to an obsession with the self; an identity cut off from the collective whole.

Honoring our individual liberty and expression of our unique individuality however shouldn’t necessarily produce a self-absorbed, immodest and self-entitled individual desiring constant adulation. The narcissist has a powerful need to be seen with their positional goods which conveys their unlimited success in life. The more we honor these individuals, the more self-centered a society we become. The essential features of narcissism include a lack of empathy, grandiosity, a sustained sense of entitlement and an endless desire for admiration.

However, our analysis of the origins of the narcissistic individual reveals that they suffer from a fragile self-esteem and their inflated sense of self-importance, excessive need for attention and admiration results from an unconscious strategy to repress pain and shame from not having their basic needs met at some developmental stage in early childhood.