

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Narcissism

Susan was excited when she found out that she was going to be serving with Steve! He had spoken in her church, and the missions committee was so impressed that they took a share in his support. He had described how he had planted 5 churches almost single handedly. When she joined the agency, the people at headquarters also told her what a great leader he was and how fortunate she was to be serving with him.

However, after a few weeks of service, she found that he was not at all like that with the missionaries. He liked to be praised, but he disliked hearing others praised. He was very nice to visitors but very critical of missionaries when visitors were not there. He exaggerated what he had done and belittled what others had done. He was very difficult to live with. The missionaries would have reported what he was like, but they thought no one would believe them. He had some symptoms of narcissism.

What is narcissism?

Narcissists are people who have an exaggerated sense of their own importance, a deep need for attention and admiration, troubled relationships, and a lack of empathy for others. They can appear incredibly nice and talented in one situation but monopolize conversations and belittle people in another. The term comes from Greek mythology in which Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection in the water and could not leave it.

Here is list of some characteristics.

- Expect special favors

- React with rage or contempt
- Take advantage of others
- Require constant excessive admiration
- Are unable to recognize how people feel
- Have a grandiose sense of self-importance and exaggerate achievements expecting to be recognized as superior
- Have fantasies of unlimited success, power, or brilliance
- Require much admiration
- Take advantage of others to achieve their own ends
- Are envious of others and believe others are envious of them
- Do not recognize or identify with the feelings or needs of others
- Show arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes

Of course, no one will have all of these symptoms, and some narcissists may have additional ones that are not listed but show their self-centeredness. Just because a person has a few of these traits does not mean that he or she has a disorder. Often these traits are not noticed by many people other than those who live with them.

In addition to these traits, narcissists also have another side that is more public in which they are personable, efficient, charming, and the life of the party. They can be gracious, humorous, and fun to be around. These characteristics appear early in relationships, and may last a long time when people do not get well acquainted. However, people who live with narcissists know their dark side.

Is narcissism in the Bible?

A good example of a narcissist in the Bible is Haman in Esther chapters 3-7. Here are some traits Haman displayed.

- He was enraged when Mordecai would not bow to him or honor him (3:5).
 - He looked for a way to destroy not only Mordecai but all the Jews (3:6).
 - He boasted about his wealth, his sons, and the King honoring him above all other nobles and officials (5:11).
 - He pointed out that he was the only one Queen Esther had invited to her banquet with the king—and she invited him for the next day as well (5:12).
 - None of these facts gave him satisfaction when he saw Mordecai at the King’s gate (5:13).
 - At the suggestion of his friends, he had a gallows built on which he could hang Mordecai before dinner the next day (5:14).
 - When Haman arrived to ask the king about hanging Mordecai, the king asked Haman what to do to honor someone. Haman assumed he would be the one honored, so he suggested a royal robe and horse belonging to the king and honoring that person on the streets (6:4-6).
- Many narcissists rise to positions of leadership as Haman did. King Xerxes honored Haman, elevated him, and gave him a seat of honor higher than any of the other nobles. All the royal officials at the king’s gate knelt down and honored Haman (Esther 3: 1-2).

Likewise, narcissistic missionaries may rise to positions of leadership. Those missionaries may be very successful at raising funds, completing projects, teaching Bible, and speaking on behalf of the agency. However, missionaries who live with narcissistic missionaries may become disillusioned, resign, and leave mission work. The narcissist will not accept the blame for the attrition, but may blame headquarters for

sending poor missionaries to the field. The “successful” (narcissistic) missionary may then be promoted to field leadership, area leadership, or position in the agency headquarters. This may be good if other leaders find out what he or she is like.

What should I do?

A good place to begin is with Esther, an adult third culture kid who gave us a good example in chapters 4 and 5.

- She noticed that Mordecai was distressed and found out why (4:1-9).
- Although very reluctant, she finally committed herself to accept his advice (4:9-13).
- She recruited a large group to fast about the situation (4:14).
- She then she invited Haman for a meal with her and her husband (5:1-5).

Noticing when others are disturbed, asking about it, accepting good advice, getting people to fast and pray, and inviting the narcissist to a meal are good starts. Here are some other suggestions.

- Remembering that narcissists believe they are “perfect” and always right, try to maintain a soft voice when talking with them. Raising your voice may lead to arguments.
- Watch their body language for warnings.
- Remember that they are very unlikely to change.
- Protect your own independence.
- Remember that narcissists who walk off in a rage are likely to return with criticisms or questions.
- If they try to change your opinion and you refuse, they may be angry.

What should I not do?

What Esther did not do?

- She did not press the issue, but she invited Haman to another meal the next day (5:6-8).
- Even then she did not confront Haman or even tell the king. They were just having a drink before eating when the king asked Esther what she wanted (Esther 7:102).
- Still she did not ask for Haman's life but said that if she had found favor with the King and if it pleased him, she asked for her life and the lives of her people (Esther 7:3).
- Then she provided information the King did not have.

Even though she and her people were in grave danger, she did not violate the customs of her host culture. Here are some other things that are best avoided.

- Do not expect narcissists to take any interest in you unless they want something from you.
- Do not expect narcissists to ever apologize. They are never wrong.
- Do not expect narcissists to understand jokes, but do tell them for others anyway.
- Do not expect narcissists to clean up after you, but they will want you to do so after them.
- Do not expect narcissists to give up their time for you, but they will demand much of yours.
- Do not expect narcissists to remember events from their childhoods.
- Do not ever say to narcissists to "please have a heart." That will probably make things even worse.
- Expressing affection toward narcissists may lead to a negative response.

- Don't adopt the narcissist's habits of criticizing others.

How can I live with a narcissist?

- The best help for that is at https://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Living_With_a_Narcissist. This brief booklet is written by several people who actually live with one, so it is things they have found useful. Here are some samples of what they recommend.
- Take care of your self-esteem
- Accept that there are some things that only God can change
- Protect or regain some of your independence
- Remind members of your family that you really love them. That helps heal family rifts often created by narcissists.
- Learn to understand the narcissist
- Learn to identify and record the danger signs, such as controlling behavior, verbal abuse, isolation from family and friends, and excessive control of family finances.

Will narcissists ever change?

The narcissistic personality is one of the personality disorders which are stable, long-lasting, and can be traced back to adolescence or early adulthood. They are very unlikely to change even with therapy. Narcissists do not believe that anything is wrong with them, so why should they change? After all, they are superior in many ways in that they are intelligent, successful, and envied by many others.

Those who live with narcissists are the ones who suffer the most, and the most help can come by helping them learn to live with them and pray for all involved.

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