

Exploring the Relationship between ADHD and Narcissism

**Eleanor Payson, LMSW, ACSW, LMFT
and**

**Arthur Robin, Ph.D. , Prof. Advisor, Eastern Oakland
County CHADD**

March 6, 2023

Finding our answers...

Over thirty years as a couple's therapist - three examples of couples come to mind

First - a man in the "average" healthy range, but whose undiagnosed ADD caused him to present as "self-absorbed," in other words overlapped with some narcissistic behaviors.

Second - a man whose ADHD was combined with some narcissistic traits but not the more severe manifestation of narcissistic personality disorder – NPD

Third – a man whose ADHD was combined with more severe narcissistic traits that may have landed in the narcissistic personality disorder end of the continuum, which we will discuss later.

Example A – After some months, certain chronic patterns were threatening the ability for the couple to move forward. These were the husband's chronic lateness to the sessions and forgetting and not following through on the homework. Exploring these patterns surfaced his need for an ADD evaluation, resulting in his diagnosis, and not insignificantly, his relief upon realizing the nature of some of his challenges in life. A bonus was his discovery that he had a rather high IQ.

Finding our answers cont'd...

Example B - After a longer period in therapy, the husband, a successful lawyer, was demonstrating many of the traits, which we will discuss shortly, of narcissism in addition to the ADHD issues of: impulsivity, distractibility, difficulty with follow through, time management, etc. He was also at times aggressively defensive, had shallow empathy for his wife's distress, and a tendency to be manipulative in turning the tables and blaming his wife. However, he also had concern for the impact of his issues and a genuine desire to change and improve the quality of his marriage. Eventually, his ADHD became more apparent to him, and he too went to be evaluated, treated, and was willing to look at the impact of his patterns with more empathy for his wife.

Example C – The male partner of this couple also demonstrated significant issues with ADHD, however he was even more reluctant to consider the possibility of having ADHD, and he was wary that even if he did have it, it had not contributed to the issues in his marriage that he saw as almost exclusively as his wife's problem. His stance was that he was very happy in the marriage, therefore, because his wife was unhappy the issues were primarily down to her. Ultimately, he did acknowledge his ADHD issues, but continued to minimize and deny that they had any significant bearing on his life or his marriage.

We will return to these case examples at a later point with regards to Dr. Robin's findings as we explore...

- *How ADD/ADHD and narcissistic behaviors can overlap.*
- *The importance of recognizing healthy versus unhealthy degrees of narcissism that may be present.*

First – Let's define terms!

For the sake of simplicity and clarity ***the word narcissism is essentially a neutral term that refers to self-esteem.*** In other words, healthy narcissism refers to healthy self-esteem. Unhealthy narcissism refers to a whole continuum of issues -deficiencies with self-esteem as well as self-protective behaviors (defenses) and compensatory behaviors. These issues range from healthy to neurotic to personality disordered. The following slide will offer a graph of this continuum.

Again, for the sake of simplicity and clarity, a general definition of the term ***narcissistic personality disorder means – a deeply ingrained maladaptive (developmental and behavioral) set of patterns that are set by the age of early adulthood (18 yrs.) are challenging to change, and often regarded as fixed.***

Dr. Arthur Robin's research

NPD in brief profile

(excerpts from *The Wizard of Oz and Other Narcissists* by E. Payson)

It is important to reiterate that because the NPD individual was required to develop self-protection adaptations (defense structures) at such an early age, these defense structures subsequently become part and parcel of the narcissist's core identity and sense of self. In turn, NPD individuals often remain unable to recognize that the deeper nature of their problems resides within themselves.

The following are two lists that indicate the NPD person's *underlying limitations* and *behaviors that are extreme* and out of balance with others.

Limited or no ability to:

- Self-reflect and take ownership of a problem
- Tolerate anything perceived as a criticism, oversight, or dismissal
- Recognize others as separate selves – free agents with free will that deserves respect
- Feel genuine, deep and sustained empathy for others
- Recognize the needs of others
- Negotiate anger – periodic loss of control of anger, outbursts of rage

NPD in brief profile cont'd...

(excerpts from *The Wizard of Oz and Other Narcissists* by E. Payson)

Excessively:

- Requires attention, admiration, special consideration, or recognition (even if covert – the martyr parent, hypochondriac)
- Demonstrates a grandiose sense of entitlement – hallmark!
- Controls and manipulates others to achieve their goals – often tenacious and persuasive
- Criticizes self (internally – not overtly) and others
- Holds unrealistic expectations of self and others
- Holds an over-estimation of self and their needs – maintains the belief that they are more unique and special than others – (a grandiose self-image)
- Manifests compulsive behaviors
- Demonstrates an all or nothing approach to life
- Compulsively pursues status, power, money, beauty, recognition, etc.

Understanding the continuum of narcissism

(excerpts from *The Wizard of Oz and Other Narcissists* by E. Payson)

As individuals all of us fall somewhere on the continuum of narcissistic traits and have normal needs for the *narcissistic supplies* of recognition, empathy, appreciation, and support. In addition, when under stress, we tend to require more comfort, attention, and support from others than we are perhaps able to give. However, when the stressful period passes, a person with an overall healthy sense of self will return to the balanced give and take of reciprocal sharing with others. The narcissist, however, rarely moves past his or her excessive need for the narcissistic supplies and maintains an unrelenting tendency to feel that his needs and/or circumstances are more special, more unique, or more important than yours....

As mentioned, narcissistic traits are shared by virtually everyone to some degree because having narcissistic needs is normal, such as needing to feel valued and special for who we are, unique and individual. Narcissistic needs, therefore, include the drive to feel validated, admired, appreciated, valued, and loved. The healthy or unhealthy degree of narcissistic needs and connecting problems in a person could be depicted on a continuum that might look like the following:

Continuum of Healthy Neurotic Personality Disorder

Healthy Self	Neurotic	Personality-Disorder
Strong sense of self	Overall intact sense of self	Severely impaired sense of self
Capacity to self-reflect, acknowledge problems, and take responsibility	Ability to self-reflect, experience the pain of these problems, and have motivation for change	Little or no capacity to observe self and acknowledge problems
Defenses are flexible	Defenses at times rigid	Defenses rigid and brittle
Full capacity to empathize with others	Significant capacity to empathize with others	Little or only superficial ability to empathize with others
Narcissistic needs balance with awareness of others and their needs	Narcissistic issues connected to specific emotional problems	Narcissistic issues connected to primary means of experiencing self
Conscience fully developed	Conscience developed with areas of distortion	Conscience not fully developed or at times marginally developed
Self-esteem is sturdy and resilient to the ups and downs of life	Low self-esteem issues are common; becomes fragile when encountering difficulties connected to emotional wounds	Self-esteem is merged with grandiosity and combined with defenses of "splitting" off parts of unwanted self

Translating these characteristics to functions that we continue to work on in developing our healthy selves!

For simplicity, we will categorize three essential functions that are analogous to the body; the head, the heart, and the gut.

- The Head - *The observing self function***
 - The capacity to utilize self-reflection with an effort to *self-examine, reality check* one's perceptions with others and the outside world and *to learn and grow from the feedback*
- The Heart – *Empathic function***
 - The capacity to empathize with others (also to be self-compassionate). The ability to *feel with others in their experiences* (not feeling identical to another person) but the ability to resonate from a deeper place within the self. *Again, the ability to feel with someone in their experience.*
- The Gut – *Self-regulation function***
 - The ability to regulate impulses and affect states (emotional states). In other words, to self-contain or regulate impulses (the classical “delayed gratification” challenges), and also to *self-contain or regulate behaviors when feeling upset emotionally or feeling reactive*. To learn effective skills for managing these powerful states.

Translating these characteristics to functions that we continue to work on in the development of our healthy selves Cont'd...

The ability to develop these functions in an ongoing way allows us to be healthy and self-fulfilled individuals – individuals able to know ourselves, pursue healthier relationships, and to pursue our purposes, goals and ambitions in life.

Having ADHD inevitably creates challenges in the development of these functions.

The degree to which these functions are impeded, we might say, is the degree to which a person may appear narcissistic – self-absorbed, perhaps less able to empathize, be more likely to become defensive and reactive, and generally less able to evaluate the impact of one's ADHD behaviors on others in our lives.

Going back to our illustration – the following offers a few examples:

Having ADHD creates challenges to these functions!

The Head

the observing self
function

The impact of these limitations on others.

Others often feel ignored, dismissed, and devalued in reaction to these issues. Without self-awareness and effort on the part of the ADHD individual to manage these limitations, significant others in the ADHD person's milieu often feel put upon and frustrated to over-function for these limitations. These patterns eventually lead to feelings of resentment and burn out for others in the ADHD person's life.

A few examples of how ADHD issues may impede the development of this function.

- **Hyperfocus** – distorts/impedes a person's ability to evaluate objectively an accurate perspective of time, creating time distortions and time management issues, as well as lack of awareness of a person's environment and others.
- **Forgetfulness** – distorts/impedes a person's ability to evaluate objectively agreements made and details of collaborative exchanges with others.
- **Disorganization** – distorts/impedes a person's ability to track/sort timelines, physical items in physical spaces, and to rank things in terms of priorities.
- **Distractibility** – distorts/impedes giving quality attention to a project or to others.

Having ADHD creates challenges to these functions! Cont'd...

The Heart

A few examples of how ADHD issues may impede the development of this function.

the empathic function

The impact of these limitations on others.

Other family members often feel unimportant, undesired, hurt, sad and lonely in the relationship.

Others in the work or social milieu may also feel hurt, unimportant, insignificant.

Finally, others will feel confused, hurt, resentful themselves, and even despair by the no-win experience of being resented for their efforts to fill in the gaps and repair for the lost threads of functioning.

- **Preoccupations with ADHD challenges** – divert awareness and energy away from attending to and investing in another person's experiences and feelings, in other words, reduced empathic resonance and intimacy deficits.
- **Inner feelings of shame and inadequacy with these challenges** – create defensiveness and significant challenges with empathizing with others in the person's family, work or social life.
- **Lack of awareness of the impact on others** – also creates limitations in the ADHD person's ability to empathize, and even a tendency to deny the other person(s) feelings.
- **Conscious/unconscious feelings of dependency on others** – can cause the ADHD person to project resentment onto those that they feel dependent. This can create not only a lack of empathy but also an invalidation of the other.

Having ADHD creates challenges to these functions! Cont'd...

The Gut

the self-regulation function

The impact of these limitations on others.

The overall reactivity that results from these limitations tends to create feelings of fear and anxiety on the part of others – an erosion of safety and mutual support when the push-pulls of competing needs occur in a family, work environment, or social milieu. Ultimately these limitations can truly corrode the bonds with others and create distance that takes time to rebuild.

A few examples of how ADHD issues may impede the development of this function.

- **Impulsivity** – limitations with self containment (delayed gratification skills) of desires and needs can cause the ADHD individual to appear “selfish,” and insensitive to a lack of fairness with respect to others and their needs.
- **Low frustration tolerance** – can cause an individual to lash out or behave impatiently with self and others – behaviors that also cause self-sabotage with goals and ambitions.
- **Compulsions** – connected to impulsivity, these behaviors tend to be chronic and are often a form of self-soothing. Consequently, the ADHD person may minimize the impact of these behaviors.
- **Affect regulation (regulation of intense emotional states)** – limitations with self-containment and skill development for dialoguing with others.

Let's recap and return to our couples

In summary the dividing line for individuals with ADHD and narcissistic issues is the same as the dividing line between a person with neurotic issues (who has the basic functions described previously, albeit with deficiencies and defenses as well) and someone with a narcissistic personality disorder (who has significantly more impediments to accessing these functions) in order to develop a healthier self.

In other words,

- Can you look at yourself with an honest effort to self-examine, acknowledge issues (whatever they may be), be open to outside perspectives, receive feedback and utilize your skills of discernment?
- Can you be concerned about the impact of your issues on your self (self-compassion) and on others and deepen your empathy with others? *Developing more mature empathy is perhaps the single most important function when we are dealing with narcissistic issues in ourselves.*
- Finally, can you commit to change and work towards creating better management of your issues?

Our first couple -

Our first example of a couple revealed a person who had many of these challenges (minus the hyperactivity end of the continuum), but many limitations with the functions we have identified.

- The significant element for this man was *his concern and empathy for his wife* that she was so frustrated and confused by his chronic lateness, his forgetfulness, his distractibility and challenges with follow through on agreements and tasks, etc.
- His concern and empathy (though at times compromised due to feelings of shame) kept him on a willingness path to get assessed and treated for his ADHD. I should mention that *shame, first and foremost creates challenges with empathy for self, and then also there are added self-protective defenses that create impediments to empathy with other(s). He, nonetheless, had a significant capacity for empathy.*
- His diagnosis and treatment further helped him with a new openness to learn and observe himself with more objective accuracy (the observing self). He received the added bonus of discovering he had a significant degree of intelligence.
- His overall ability for self-regulation and self-discipline allowed him to commit to change efforts, strategies for coping with his ADHD, and continued learning and growing.

Our second couple -

The second couple revealed that there was a combination of both ADHD and narcissistic tendencies or traits. This man took considerably more time to be open to the fact that he had ADHD and to agree to go for an assessment. He had many of the narcissistic tendencies described earlier.

- However, once he became more accepting, he too felt relief and was able to develop greater objectivity about himself and his functioning (observing self).
- He was able to develop more empathy for his wife and the impact of his ADHD issues on their relationship. Alongside this development, he also developed more self-compassion and self-acceptance helping him to be a more patient and self-aware person. He embraced the ADHD diagnosis, which helped him to accept he could be imperfect, even wrong at times, and not have this so intimately connected to his sense of self (a frequent issue with regards to narcissistic wounding).
- He and his wife were able to work more collaboratively together as he worked on managing his ADHD symptoms and develop healthier functions with self-regulation.

Our third couple -

The third example reveals a man who could not consider that he contributed any real issues in the marriage, and it was in his view that his wife's issues that were almost exclusively the problem.

- His rationale, as mentioned previously, was that he was very happy in the marriage, and because she was the unhappy partner, the issues must be primarily hers. *(notice the inability for empathy)*
- Also, he minimized, denied and often revised history when she tried to reveal patterns of his ADHD. He had even been diagnosed and treated for a time in childhood for ADHD – a diagnosis his mother very much agreed with. *(notice the significant impediment of his observing self function)*
- Finally, no matter how many times the wife would try to bring the issues forth for problem solving and change, his temporary change efforts were thwarted by his overall denial and minimization. These defenses contributed to the inability to sustain any change efforts he initially acknowledged. *(notice the problematic issues with self-regulation).*
- *This process revealed that the husband had more significant issues with narcissism (perhaps even NPD). In other words, ADHD was certainly the lesser of the problems he faced and ultimately that his wife faced also.*

The good news is – you can choose!

While there may be challenges to navigating life with ADHD,

the good news resides in the fact that you have enough psychological health to embark on a path of greater development and fulfillment!

You can achieve greater fulfillment with respect to

- your self-esteem,
- your relationships,
- your goals and ambitions, and
- your overall resilience and growth.

You can change your life and feel the fulfillment of becoming your best self!