



North West Regional
Psychotherapy
Association

PASSIVE & COVERT NARCISSISM

Alan Priest, 14 July 2025

NARCISSISM THEORIES

- **Psychodynamic Theories – Freud, Kohut, Kernberg**
- **Attachment Theory - John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth**
- **Social Learning Theory - Albert Bandura**
- **Cognitive-Behavioural Theories**
- **Person Centred Theories**
- **Cultural and Societal Influences**

“ARROGANT”

“ENTITLED”

“GRANDIOSE”

NARCISSISM THEORIES

- **Psychodynamic Theories – Freud, Kohut, Kernberg**
 - *Freud*: Introduced the concept of primary narcissism (a normal stage in infancy) and secondary narcissism (a pathological return to self-focus)
 - *Kohut (Self Psychology)*: Narcissism develops from unmet childhood needs for validation and mirroring. The child creates a “false self” to gain approval
 - *Kernberg (Object Relations Theory)*: Narcissism arises from early relational trauma and a failure to integrate positive and negative self-images, leading to a grandiose self
- **Attachment Theory - John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth**
 - Children who experience inconsistent caregiving may develop narcissistic traits as a defence against feelings of abandonment or inadequacy
- **Social Learning Theory - Albert Bandura**
 - Narcissism is learned through modelling and reinforcement
 - Overpraising children or teaching them they are superior without effort can foster entitlement and grandiosity.

NARCISSISM THEORIES

- **Cognitive-Behavioural Theories**

- Narcissistic traits are maintained by distorted thinking patterns, such as:
 - Overestimation of abilities
 - Minimisation of others' worth
 - Beliefs of being special or unique
- These beliefs are reinforced by selective attention and confirmation bias

- **Cultural and Societal Influences**

- Individualistic cultures that emphasise achievement, fame, and self-promotion may foster narcissistic traits. Traits like confidence and dominance can be adaptive in certain environments, even if they come at a social cost
- Social media and celebrity culture can amplify narcissistic behaviours by rewarding attention-seeking.

NARCISSISM THEORIES

- **Person Centred Theories**
 - Failure to establish a stable self-concept compatible with relational functioning
 - Possibly caused by not being able to interject “healthy” conventions and values

PASSIVE OR COVERT NARCISSISM



Empirical research has established unequivocal quantitative evidence to support the idea of two (or even three) distinct types of narcissism

See Houlcroft et al. (2012)
in resources at end

Also known as passive-aggressive narcissism

Less apparent than overt narcissism

Involves subtle manipulation, hypersensitivity, and a fragile self-esteem.

"WITHDRAWN"

"SHY"

"INHIBITED"

DIFFERENCES
FROM OVERT
NARCISSISM

Overt narcissists are
openly grandiose and
attention-seeking

Covert narcissists are
more introverted and
subtle – shame-based

Covert narcissism is
harder to detect

POSSIBLE KEY TRAITS



Hypersensitivity to criticism

Feelings of neglect or
belittlement

Passive-aggressive behaviour

Grandiose “secret” fantasies

Social withdrawal

Victim mentality

BEHAVIOURAL PATTERNS



Often appears shy or introverted

Avoids direct confrontation

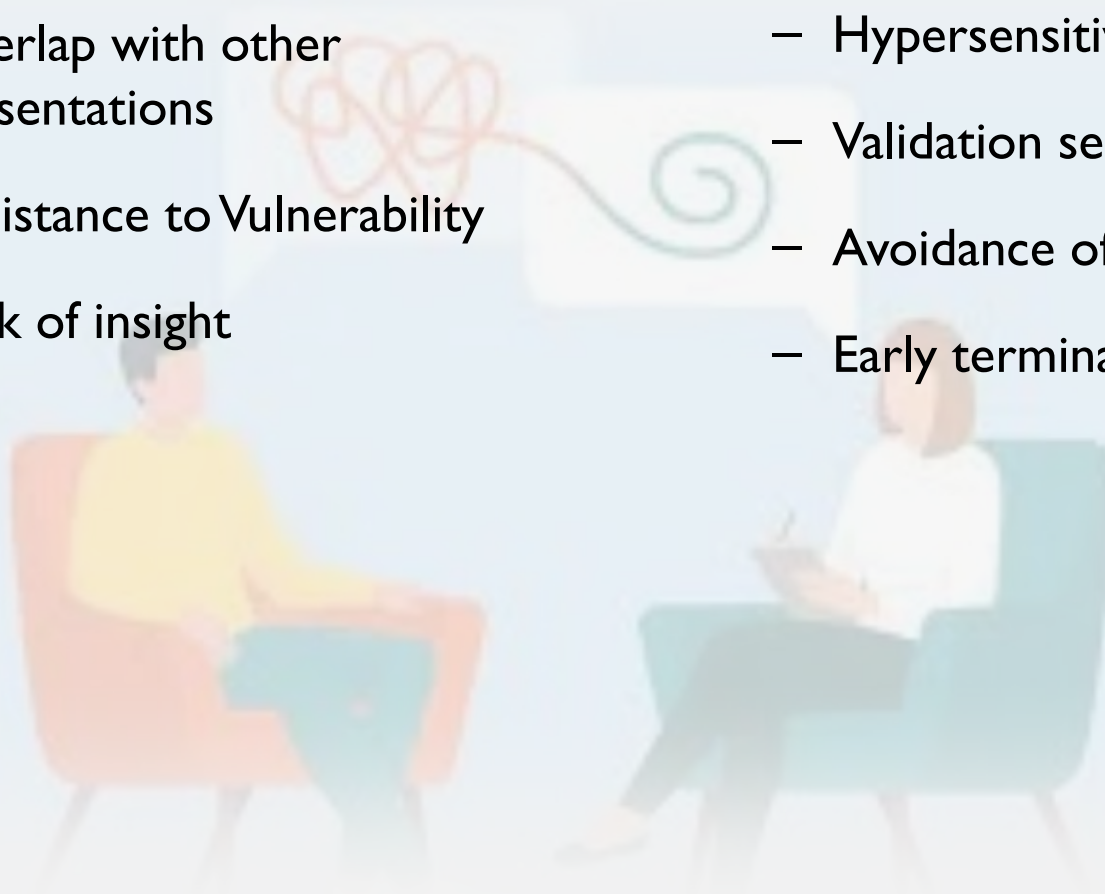
Uses guilt-tripping or “the silent treatment”

Seeks validation through indirect means e.g.:

- “being a martyr”
- “making sacrifices for the sake of others”
- “rescuing” or apparently prioritising others’ needs to seek validation ... becoming angry when they don’t get it

WHAT ARE THE THERAPEUTIC CHALLENGES?

- Possible topics for discussion
 - Subtle presentation
 - Overlap with other presentations
 - Resistance to Vulnerability
 - Lack of insight
 - Passive-aggressive
 - Idealisation/Devaluation
 - Hypersensitivity to criticism
 - Validation seeking
 - Avoidance of accountability
 - Early termination



WHAT ARE THE THERAPEUTIC CHALLENGES?

- Subtle presentation
 - Often appear shy, introverted, or even superficially empathic, masking narcissistic traits
- Overlap with other presentations
 - Symptoms can mimic depression, anxiety, or borderline traits

THERAPEUTIC CHALLENGES

- Resistance to Vulnerability
 - May appear superficially vulnerable (e.g. “victim” presentation), however...
 - resist exploring painful emotions or past trauma, fearing lack of control and exposure of fragile self-esteem
 - Often lack of insight: unaware of manipulative behaviours; may externalise blame e.g. “no matter how hard I try, I always fail”

THERAPEUTIC CHALLENGES (2)

- Passive-Aggressive in therapeutic relationship
 - silent treatment, victimhood, manipulation
 - “I’m sure you have clients whose needs are more pressing”
- Idealisation then Devaluation
 - subtly attack and devalue when boundaries are enforced



OTHER CHALLENGES

Hypersensitivity to Criticism: Even gentle feedback can be perceived as an attack, leading to withdrawal or rage

Validation-Seeking: They may seek constant reassurance, making it hard to challenge maladaptive beliefs

Avoidance of Accountability: Resist taking responsibility for their actions, stalling therapeutic progress.

Early Termination: When therapy begins to uncover deeper issues, may abruptly quit

THERAPEUTIC STRATEGIES

- Establish Clear Boundaries: Consistency and firmness are essential to avoid being manipulated
- Schema work- to uncover deep-rooted patterns and unmet emotional
- Psychodynamic: Here and now work imagining how things would be now, if the 'there and then' had been different
- Empathy and Self-Reflection - Encourage gradual self-awareness without triggering shame
- Narrative work - Encourage client to see their situation as a story that can be 're-storied'

RESOURCES

“The current study provides further empirical support for Grandiose Narcissism and Vulnerable Narcissism through factor and correlational analyses cf. Miller et al. (2011). Unexpectedly, a third possible dimension of Narcissism emerged from this study. Empirical support for the two dimensions of Narcissism, and the emergence of a possible third dimension, highlights the phenomenological breadth and complexity of Narcissism.”

Houlcroft, L., Bore, M., & Munro, D. (2012). Three faces of narcissism. *Personality and individual differences*, 53(3), 274-278. Available [here](#). Accessed July 12, 2025

RESOURCES

A historical review of narcissism and narcissistic personality

The second form of narcissism, covert narcissism, is marked by largely unconscious feelings of grandeur and openly displayed lack of self-confidence and initiative, vague feelings of depression, and an absence of zest for work (narcissistic deficiency). Covertly narcissistic individuals appear to be hypersensitive, anxious, timid, and insecure, but on close contact surprise observers with their grandiose fantasies (Kernberg, 1986). Moreover, they share with the overt narcissists those narcissistic characteristics, such as exploitativeness and a sense of entitlement, whose expression does not depend on interpersonal style.

(in Wink, 1991)

Levy, K. N., Ellison, W. D., & Reynoso, J. S. (2011). A historical review of narcissism and narcissistic personality. *The handbook of narcissism and narcissistic personality disorder: Theoretical approaches, empirical findings, and treatments*, 1-13. Available [here](#) (Accessed 12 July, 2025)

RESOURCES

‘I am glad I am late’: The case of Mr P

Mr P arrives for his session 35 minutes late. Comes into the room. Doesn't respond to my saying 'Hello'. Takes off his jacket. Hangs it on the chair. Then checks that it is straight and without wrinkles. Puts his keys and wallet on to the couch. Sits on the couch. Takes off his shoes. Then lies on the couch. Makes some grunting, stretching, yawning noises. Eventually finds a comfortable place. Turns on his side, and goes to sleep. Three minutes before the end of the session, I say 'It's nearly time'. He wakes up. Then puts his shoes on, checks his wallet and keys, puts them in the pocket of his jacket, and leaves. He does not say 'Goodbye'.

Twomey, D. (1995). 'I am glad I am late': The case of Mr P. In Judy Cooper and Nilda Maxwell (eds.). *Narcissistic Wounds: Clinical Perspectives*, pp. 127-138. (Accessed 12 July, 2025). Available from Alan's OneDrive [here](#)

RESOURCES

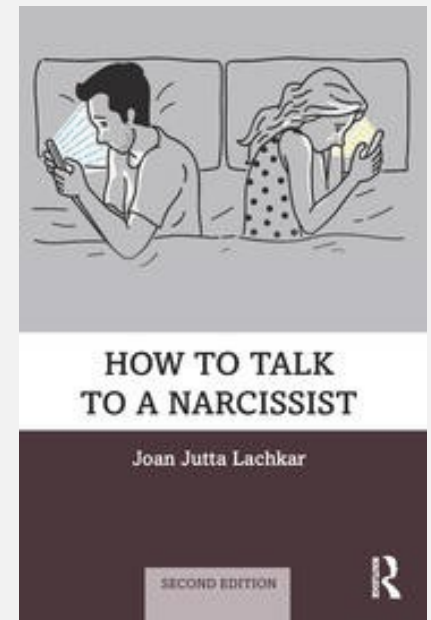
“How to talk to a narcissist” (2019, 2nd ed.) (Joan Jutta Lachkar)

(Kindle edition £25.24, Paperback £26.27 from Amazon)

Bringing to light new developments in the treatment of marital conflict, this second edition of How to Talk to a Narcissist addresses the ever-changing faces and phases of narcissism within the context of marital therapy. This is a practical guide that focuses on specific communication styles in addressing patients with severe narcissistic personality pathology, as well as those with borderline personality disorder.

The book starts with an overview of the different kinds of narcissists and borderlines. Dr. Lachkar analyses these high-conflict personality disorders from a clinical, psychodynamic, and psychoanalytic perspective and delves into the various defenses that a narcissist or borderline might use. Updated treatment approaches and techniques are included along with an examination of the historical and theoretical perspectives that ground these approaches. Also included are detailed case illustrations.

This book is useful for both beginning and seasoned practitioners and is recommended for all clinicians treating individuals, couples, and groups within the scope of various narcissistic personality disorders.



For details of the previous edition, email Alan

https://www.amazon.co.uk/How-Talk-Narcissist-Joan-Lachkar-dp-0815382022/dp/0815382022/ref=dp_ob_title_bk

RESOURCES

Narcissism and Personal Pronoun Usage

If someone who is narcissistically damaged has failed to *individuate*, if such a person views others in his/her world essentially as *extensions of their self*, what implications might this have that their use of language?

Covert narcissists share with their overt counterparts' characteristics such as exploitativeness and a sense of entitlement. They appear hypersensitive to criticism, anxious, timid, and insecure, yet they have grandiose fantasies and expectations of entitlement (Kernberg, 1986). However, they attempt to address these needs in an entirely different way. They probably -- but not certainly -- demonstrate the same linguistic characteristics in terms of pronoun usage, and a correlation with depression.

Priest, A. (2025)
Narcissism and Personal Pronouns. Unpublished – prepared for NWRPA meeting July 2025

Available from Alan's OneDrive [here](#).
(Accessed July 12, 2025)