



## Narcissistic Entitlement Syndrome

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

The word "narcissism" comes from the Greek character Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection and was made famous by the Greek poet Ovid. The story is one of great psychological complexity. In the story, Echo falls in love with Narcissus and gets rejected. The story makes it clear that Narcissus is only able to love himself and not others. Conversely, Echo completely loses herself in her love for Narcissus and has no sense of self at all. At the end of the story, Narcissus tells Echo, "I would die before I would give you power over me," and Echo responds, "I give you power over me." Both Narcissus and Echo die because their love is unattainable. They, like many of us, cannot find a balance between themselves



and others.

One of the greatest problems facing many people in the job market today is what I call [Narcissistic Entitlement Syndrome](#) ("NES"). This is especially prevalent among the younger people of this generation. I would also argue that it is the reason why the United States of America is experiencing an overall decline in terms of economic productivity and its contribution to the world. I first started noticing NES several years ago amongst recent graduates of elite [law schools](#). Over the past five or six years I have watched NES infect a large proportion of young workers in the United States, and spread beyond this to many seasoned members of the job market.

People who suffer from NES often find themselves out of a job very quickly-whether they quit, are fired, or simply move between employers to deal with their disorder. I need to be clear that this, in my opinion, is an extremely serious subject, and something I believe probably more than 10 percent of the workforce suffers from. I am talking about a disorder I see virtually every week in my conversations with young workers in the [job market](#)-and older ones as well-and it is something that can cause your career to self destruct.

NES is something that is not easily defined but, in its simplest form, it is demonstrated by a person being inwardly focused and oblivious to the people and organizations that he or she are supposed to serve. I link the concepts of "entitlement" and "narcissism" when discussing this syndrome because the sense of entitlement most often has classic narcissistic undertones. People with NES see themselves as special, believe they should have whatever they want regardless of the feelings of others, and continually inflate themselves while putting others down. There are five major characteristics that people with NES often exhibit:

First, they are generally preoccupied with fantasies of limitless brilliance, power, and success. While these types of thoughts may occur from time to time even amongst healthy people, the person with NES will generally be quite consumed by these fantasies. Advancement and achievement are extremely important to them and they envision the environment around them as one where they should be the center of all others' attention due to their achievements.

Second, people with NES generally have an exaggerated sense of self importance that is not commensurate with their actual level of achievement. They expect to be recognized as superior to others without a corresponding level of achievement. People with NES will also generally exaggerate their achievements to those around them. Indeed, people with NES like to speak about their achievements (and do so) quite frequently. As a product of these fantasies, the person will often possess a very arrogant attitude. People with NES believe they are "special," and that they should only associate with and work for other high-status people and institutions.

Third, a person with NES generally lacks empathy and is unwilling (or unable) to identify with the needs or feelings of others. Interpersonally, they are often quite exploitative, taking advantage of others in order to achieve their own ends. In this respect, people with NES often view those around them as objects to be manipulated in service of their ultimate fantasies of power.

Fourth, people with NES are most often very envious of those around them, particularly those who have advantages they themselves do not. At the same time people with NES believe that others are also envious of them.

Fifth, people with NES require excessive admiration. They need constant approval from those around them. People with NES believe that they should be constantly admired by others.

While the psychological underpinnings of all this could certainly be explored in great detail, the narcissism is usually something that the person has developed as a façade and coping mechanism to deal with underlying feelings of defectiveness and isolation. When such people and their work are criticized, they often react with great internal rage because they believe their self image has been deflated. Their response is often to further isolate themselves, and they may do so by leaving the profession they are in, switching employers, or simply directing their rage at those who have criticized them.

There is a difference between healthy and unhealthy narcissism within a company. It is, of course, healthy to have a basic sense of your rights. You have a right to be treated fairly, and you also have a right to be proud of your achievements and to

tell others about them. Narcissism becomes unhealthy, if you become obsessed with having people think you are special, and if you have not just a sense of your own rights--but no regard for the rights of others.

In an essay, "Working with Problems of Narcissism in Entrepreneurial Organizations," Richard Ruth of the University of Virginia writes:

*Contemporary practitioners, both clinical and organizational, are faced with the pervasive presence of narcissistic disorders in those who consult us. It is a disquieting encounter, because--even as we recognize that our work to understand and assist persons and organizations with narcissistic pathology has increased the reach and efficacy of our interventions, and the lessons of this work in turn have transformatively impacted psychoanalytic theories--there are particular qualities at work with narcissism that are painful to work with analytically, perhaps in significant part because they militate against a defensive introduction of non-analytic methods into analytic work. It is in the nature of narcissistically organized persons, and perhaps also, I will argue, narcissistic organizations, to deny the reality of the other (i.e., the analyst), to wrench the analyst into playing a hated but necessary part in the patient's internal drama, to try to disable or destroy the analyst in the service of a soothing return to a narcissistic self-sufficiency, and to project onto the analyst, with resentful hatred, a whole internal world of persecutory and toxic part-objects, as the first step toward eventual understanding, health, and wholeness.*

While this quote may seem overly complex, it does elucidate a final characteristic of NES that I believe merits consideration: That a person with NES will not confront his or her weaknesses because doing so would interfere with his or her inflated sense of self. Instead, institutions and individuals that call into question that sense of self of the person with NES are perceived by the person as toxic objects. As a final point, this explains why people with NES may change employers frequently or leave their chosen profession.

I realize that the picture painted above of NES may appear extreme, however it is important to note that NES is quite common, especially among the highest performing people inside most organizations. Again, I would estimate that over 10 percent of people starting their careers in major firms have NES and will have more difficult careers for that reason.

People with NES are generally the people who have come from the very best schools and have had a historical pattern of academic achievement that is nothing short of extraordinary. NES is something that can actually create the sort of super achiever who shows up to work and truly excels. In a scholastic environment, where such persons have the luxury of choosing most of their courses, working hard, and getting immediate feedback via grades, and in conditions that demand performance at a high academic level, persons with NES are likely to thrive.

It is very easy for me to pick up the signs of NES when speaking with young people in the job market and others. People with NES generally believe that they should be given the type of work that they want. They also tend to believe that they are extremely intelligent and valuable to their employer. In addition, these sorts of people tend to be very calculating, analyzing most situations vis-à-vis whether or not they are getting the upper hand. If they are criticized by their employer, they may simply leave, rather than facing the possibility of any shortcomings in ability or performance.

As a recruiter I can tell you that I see this occur frequently. Because our firm solicits telephone calls and interest from the highest caliber people on a daily basis, the NES person is one of the types of people we often speak with. The following similarities generally define the people with NES, whom I speak with:

- They generally have not worked at a "real job" before starting as a first-year associate inside a [law firm](#);
- They generally did exceptionally well in college and attended a top 10 law school (NES, in fact, appears to be more likely to occur in a person who has attended better law schools);
- They generally come from a sheltered, upper middle-class background, or their parents are academics;
- They generally believe they are smarter than the people they are working with.

In essence, people with NES would likely never have made it into a prestigious law firm had they not been sheltered by school, parents, and others for so long. The artificial academic environment, the home environment of privilege, the constant positive feedback from academic institutions (where social dynamics are not as emphasized as much as common academics might have been), and the lack of prior work experience all serve to isolate the person with NES, allowing their condition to grow in the absence of a "real world" environment. While I would be the first to argue that a law firm is not necessarily a real world environment, it is much more like the real world than a school or a sheltered upper middle-class upbringing is.

The issue with NES inside a law firm and other organizations is that the persons with this disorder are primarily in service of themselves. For the most part, working for an organization is something that is not going to quickly lead to massive glory, riches, or fame. Instead, employees are hired to work hard to make money for their firm. There may be little opportunity for the sort of continual positive feedback and the kind of reassurances the NES person needs, and may be used to from his or her upbringing.

What usually happens to the NES persons is that he or she does not hold up well against the initial criticism that all new workers in most companies receive--no matter how constructive the criticism may be. The person does not take orders well, nor do they understand why others are considered to be their peers. Such people most often leave the employer quickly with fantasies about achievement in a much higher caliber work environment. Or, they may switch between firms for a few years. Some start their own businesses--most of which fail. A few stick with it and become better employees.

While this topic has gone largely unexplored, it is very real and it affects numerous people--especially the ones who appear strongest on paper. I do not pretend to know the answers. Certainly, the inability to find a balance between one's self and others is a serious condition. Recognizing the presence of a problem like this is usually the first step. The second step, then, would be correcting the problem by getting help. The biggest challenge in dealing with this condition, though, is that those who need help are not likely to ever realize or admit they have it.

If you have completed reading this article, you most likely do not have NES because, if you did, you would not confront it by reading all the way through. You would have stopped several paragraphs ago. What you should understand, though, is that the people you work with who have NES are likely on a dangerous collision course with failure. If the NES person does not fail within your organization, the chances are great he or she can negatively affect you if you work with him or her. Do your best to avoid NES people.

## THE LESSON

Narcissistic Entitlement Syndrome (NES) afflicts many people in the current job market; they see themselves as special, and deserving of whatever they want at the expense of others. NES puts these people on a collision course with failure. Even

if they do not themselves fail, colleagues with NES can negatively affect you; avoid NES and people afflicted with it at all costs.

**Read More About Never Act Entitled:**

- [Do Not Be Controlled By Your Need to Feel Significant](#)
- [You Will Succeed in Your Job Search and Life When You Are Concerned With Giving and Not Taking](#)

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