

WHY IS IT  
ALWAYS  
ABOUT  
**YOU**  
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The Seven Deadly Sins  
of Narcissism

**Sandy Hotchkiss, LCSW**

FREE PRESS

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY SINGAPORE





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For Donald Ever “a friend to my excitement”

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This book was in my head for five years before I began putting it on paper, and many people have nurtured it along the way.

I wish to thank my patients, who confirmed my belief that a book about why Narcissists act the way they do had a place in the world. Their struggles to extricate themselves from the webs cast by narcissistic parents, lovers, spouses, bosses, and friends made psychoanalytic theory come alive for me and showed me how it is possible to develop a whole and separate Self beyond childhood. I am particularly grateful to those who gave permission for me to share their stories in these pages.

I also wish to thank all of my professional colleagues who supported me when I decided to cancel my managed-care contracts in late 1997. Giving up more than half of my practice created the time to write this book, but it also meant a loss of income. I am fortunate to be part of a community that has helped me keep my doors open through a very tumultuous time in the history of psychotherapy, when managed care has taken control of the therapy process and threatens the very essence of what we do that is helpful.

Thanks, too, to my wonderful husband, Donald Hildreth, who dragged me from the dark ages of legal pads and ballpoint pens, electric typewriters and Wite-Out, to the joys of the word processor. I wrote the first several chapters of this book sitting back-to-back with him in his art studio, me at his computer and he at his easel, in the *feng shui* corner of our house. Ultimately, he bought me my own little laptop, and a whole new world opened up. Thank you for bringing me into the light, and for always being the light of my life.

This book could not have been conceived, let alone published, without the significant contributions of James Masterson, M.D. I discovered the Masterson Approach to treating Disorders of the Self in 1980 and his clear, sound, and utterly relevant model has been the foundation of my clinical work throughout my career. In early 2000, he generously agreed to read portions of the manuscript and ultimately opened the door for me at Simon & Schuster. That he was also willing to write my Foreword is an honor I will treasure for a lifetime.

Writing this book has brought me in closer contact with many delightful people who have each been instrumental as the journey unfolded. Topping the list is my dear friend and colleague Suzanne Lake, Psy.D., who read every draft of the manuscript, offering tireless encouragement through countless anxious moments. My agent, Peter Fleming, will always be dear to me as the first person from the literary world to express enthusiasm about my ideas. Elizabeth Knowles of Harvard Press and Kitty Moore at Guilford generously gave time and feedback on early drafts. Emily Brown, LCSW, has been a model and an advisor. Aileen Berg, a gift from heaven, provided the essential link to ultimate publication. And my stepson, Jeremy Hildreth, made it happen with the “Only You Can Prevent Narcissism” T-shirt that brought Aileen and me together. What serendipity!

Thanks also go to Kathy Coss, Colleen Garner, Carol Schwartz, and Whitney Wagner for their impressions of early drafts of the manuscript. Thank you, moms and girlfriends!

My experience at The Free Press has been wonderful from the outset. Thanks so much to Trish Todd, who listened to her friend Aileen Berg and passed my proposal on to Philip Rappaport, who has been sweetheart of an editor. Immersing oneself in narcissism can activate anger, and Philip’s kindness and optimism helped me keep my balance through the revision process. Thanks also to Philip’s able assistant Elizabeth Haymaker for putting my manuscript on disk.







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People who are involved in business and/or close relationships with people who have Narcissistic Personality Disorder are often bewildered and perplexed by the extraordinary contradictions of their behavior, in contrast to the underlying enduring consistency of their narcissistic needs. These needs are expressed in their grandiose search for constant admiration, underneath which lies an exquisite vulnerability to the slightest rebuff, which then evokes devastating shame. Their behavior can be charismatic and charming one minute, cold and calculating the next, or on occasion breaking into unpredictable rages.

I have often seen this bewilderment in the parents, spouses, and children of patients in treatment. They cannot believe what their perception is telling them: that the patient is caught in the unvarying cycle of narcissistic vulnerability and defense.

I have long wished we had a book that provides an understanding of the cyclical vicissitudes of this problem, as well as the possibilities offered by treatment.

At last we do have such a book: *Why Is It Always About You?* by Sandy Hotchkiss, LCSW. This book is beautifully written and a pleasure to read. Ms. Hotchkiss has marshaled and integrated the considerable professional literature on the subject and translated it into plain English for the lay reader. Highly technical concepts are explained and concretely illustrated in detail. Excellent references are noted with each chapter. This volume fills a vast void in the literature and is a must-read for anyone, whether a professional or a layperson, seeking a better understanding of the Narcissistic Personality Disorder.

*James F. Masterson, M.D.*

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*Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry*

*Cornell University Medical College, New York Hospital*



## They're Everywhere

IT'S A QUARTER TILL FIVE, and you've had one of those days at work. The phones have been ringing nonstop, lunch was a whiff of pizza wafting down from the employee lounge, and everyone seems to have wanted a piece of *you* to chew on. But despite the interruptions, you've been able to finish that report that's been hanging over your head for the past week. As you feel yourself winding down, you look over your phone messages and start to prioritize what you'll tackle tomorrow. Your thoughts begin to drift to a good meal, a hot soak in the tub, and an early bedtime.

Suddenly, your reverie is punctured by a head poking into your cubicle. "The big guy needs us to run these numbers again," your coworker says, dropping a stack of papers on your desk. "Sorry I can't stay to help—Judy and I have theater tickets." Not again, you think. Why does this always happen at the last minute, and why am I the one who usually gets stuck staying late?

An hour later, you climb into your car and head for home. At a stop sign, you wait while three teenagers slowly shuffle across the street, oblivious to the cars in every direction. Could they go any slower? You tap your horn politely, hoping to jolt them into picking up the pace. They continue their leisurely stroll, one of them snarling an obscenity as he passes by. Kids. When did they become so hostile?

Home at last, you walk in the door and see your husband relaxing in front of the evening news, a beer in hand and two empties on the coffee table. "You're late," he calls out. "What's for dinner?" "Leftovers," you yell back, relieved that there's something edible in the fridge. "I've been craving fried chicken all day," he says, petulantly. "You could cook a decent meal for a guy every once in a while. Or *you* could pay a call on the Colonel, you mutter under your breath.

Later, while you're washing the dishes, the phone rings. It's your mother. "You haven't called me in three days," she says as soon as she hears your voice. "Hi, Mom, how ya doin'?" you reply. "Not good, not good. I'm out of milk, my check needs to be deposited, and the darned cleaning lady didn't show up again. If I had a daughter who cared about anything besides her career, I wouldn't have to hire people to do these things for me." And if I had a mother, a voice inside you says, maybe there would be someone who gave a rip how *my* day has gone.

Ten P.M. Your big, cozy bed beckons. You climb into your old flannel jammies and crawl, at last, into its king-sized embrace. But your day is not quite over. "Honey," your husband says, pulling you close and nuzzling your neck, "why don't you put on that nightie I gave you for your birthday?" Earth to hubby—do I look like I'm in the mood?

Sometimes it seems as if the world is full of selfish people who have no thought for others except how to use them for their own purposes. Their needs are more important than anyone else's, and they expect to be accommodated in all things. They can't seem to see the bigger picture, or to comprehend why they might not always come first. Their expectations have an almost childlike quality, yet they can be tyrannically outraged or pitifully depressed when thwarted. Often, we give in to them because it seems safer not to rock their boat.

We all know people like this. They may be our parents, siblings, or children; our spouses, lovers, and friends; our coworkers and bosses; the people we get to know through the clubs and organizations we



belong to. They are everywhere, and the more intertwined our lives are with theirs, the more miserable we feel.

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That misery is a byproduct of a personality flaw that, by cultural standards, has become disturbingly “normal.” We sense that something is wrong but can’t quite put our finger on what it is. We see it in our daily dealings with one another, which in many cases have become less kind, courteous, or inclined toward generosity. We feel it in our workplaces, which are permeated with resentment, anxiety, and debilitating job-related stress. But perhaps the place where we are most affected is in those intimate relationships with friends, lovers, and family that give life its richness and meaning. Even in its very nature, this sickness isolates us from one another and from reality, and it stands between us and all that we can hope to have and be. Its name is narcissism, and it lurks behind many of the social ills that plague twenty-first-century America.

There is nothing new about narcissism. There have always been vain, grasping, manipulative characters who have an inflated perception of themselves and little regard for others. What is troubling about contemporary culture is the extent to which these personality flaws have received a widespread stamp of approval. Narcissism is not just tolerated in our day and age, it is glorified. Many of our leaders and the public figures we admire flaunt their narcissistic proclivities, and we can’t wait to emulate their excesses. On them, outrageous behavior looks glamorous and exciting, so we give ourselves permission to share in the “fun.” Before we know it, the distinction between what’s healthy and what isn’t gets fuzzy, and “Everybody does it” becomes the justification for continuing down the path.

Back in the mid-1970s, the sociologist Christopher Lasch wrote a book called *The Culture of Narcissism* that made a lot of people think about what had been going on in American society since the end of World War II. He discussed the feelings of omnipotence, prosperity, and security that had characterized our national spirit in the 1950s, reaching an apex in the “Camelot” days of the Kennedy administration. Things began to shift when a young and much-idealized president was cut down by an assassin’s bullet, just as the first wave of baby boomers hit the shores of adolescence. A tsunami of youthful confusion and experimentation engulfed the culture, even as America began to grapple with other disasters. In the next fifteen years, economic stagnation, defeat in Vietnam, and the impending exhaustion of natural resources created a mood of pessimism. In an “Age of Diminishing Expectations,” wrote Lasch, the rosy glow on the horizon had dimmed.

While the “can-do” spirit of the 1950s and 1960s had yielded unprecedented advances in science and technology, these achievements ultimately proved insufficient to bring about the political and social reforms that an increasingly youth-dominated culture aspired to in the late 1960s. Lasch described how we came to despair of changing society and began to turn inward, focusing on the only thing we could hope to control, ourselves. Through expanded consciousness, health, and personal growth, we sought to soothe our anxiety about an uncertain world. We became, in a sense, preoccupied with “Self.”

For all our anxious preoccupation, however, we seem to have a love-hate relationship with the very notion of “Self.” Sometimes it is associated with undesirable qualities such as selfishness, egotism, and conceit. On the other hand, “selflessness” also raises our suspicions. If someone is overly invested in caring for others, we call them codependent and tell them to start putting themselves first. Martyrdom is distinctly out of style. But when we hyphenate the word Self and add “awareness” or “esteem,” Self becomes downright positive.

Is Self good or is it bad? It would not be possible to function, let alone survive, without some degree of investment in the Self. Without attention to ourselves, we would remain undeveloped and unaware

our talents lying dormant and our values unformed. In a world without ego, there would be no originality, no color, no contrast. Variety would cease to exist, and choice would become unnecessary. Even love would be meaningless if there were no “I” to be smitten with “you.”

Healthy narcissism, the investment of energy in one’s genuine Self, has primitive roots in infancy and early childhood and blossoms into full flower in an emotionally rich, productive, and satisfying adult life. It is healthy narcissism that allows us to laugh at ourselves and our imperfections, to dig deep within ourselves to create something uniquely ours, and to leave a positive personal stamp on the world. Healthy narcissism is the capacity to feel a full range of emotions and to share in the emotional life of others, the wisdom to separate truth from fantasy while still being able to dream, and the ability to assertively pursue and enjoy our own accomplishments without crippling self-doubt. Healthy narcissism depends on real self-esteem, which is something completely lacking in the people we commonly describe as Narcissists.

The Narcissist we recognize as unhealthy is someone who, no matter what age, has not yet fully developed emotionally or morally. This person lacks a realistic sense of Self and an internalized system of values—apart from unmitigated self-interest—that guides behavior. In place of an accurate assessment of personal strengths, there is an exaggerated posture of importance unrelated to any real accomplishments. Instead of humility in the face of inevitable shortcomings, there is an overwhelming, and utterly intolerable, sense of shame, though this is often well-disguised. There is also no ability to value, or often enough even to recognize, the separate existence or feelings of other people. The Narcissist may be intimidating, mesmerizing, even larger-than-life, but beneath the bombast or the charm is an emotional cripple with the moral development of a toddler.

The characteristic ways that Narcissists think and behave are what I describe in Part I as the Seven Deadly Sins. Some of these, such as entitlement and the rage that accompanies it, arrogance, and magical thinking (grandiosity and omnipotence) are familiar faces of narcissism. But you may be surprised to learn that poor interpersonal boundaries, the emotional shallowness that stems from buried shame, envy and its sidekick contempt, and the exploitiveness that fills the vacuum created by the absence of empathy are even more indicative of unhealthy narcissism than an inflated ego or mere selfishness. These are the behavior and attitudes that protect an undeveloped Self at the expense of the well-being of others. They are deadly because they invade and annihilate the integrity of everyone they touch, and sinful because they destroy the sinner as well. The Seven Deadly Sins of Narcissism not only hurt others, but they prevent the Narcissist from developing a genuine Self.

To begin to understand how to protect yourself from the Narcissists you encounter in your life, it is useful to know who you are dealing with and how they came to be the way they are. In Part II, you will learn that narcissism is a normal stage we all pass through in early childhood on our way to becoming more complete human beings. To make the transition, we need the help of healthy parents who have their own unhealthy narcissism in reasonable check and are capable of nurturing individuality in their children while teaching values and respect for others. When parents are themselves narcissistic, they often use their children in self-serving ways and fail to guide them to a healthy resolution of normal childhood narcissism. The result is another generation of Narcissists—as well as people who seem to be magnets for this personality type.

In Part III, you will learn four survival strategies for defending your Self against the damage that Narcissists can do. The first step is to identify whatever vulnerabilities have been carried forward from your past. The more you were exposed to parental narcissism as a child, the more sensitive you may be to the Narcissists you encounter in the present. While Narcissists tend to beget Narcissists, such parents also raise children who are the mirror image of narcissism—more shame-sensitive than shameless, more covert in their hunger for recognition, more likely to be exploited than to exploit, but

just as confused about personal boundaries. This confusion, along with their difficulty in asserting themselves, makes them easy prey for the Narcissists who will continue to use them as their parents did. If you find yourself frequently drawn into relationships with narcissistic people, you must figure out what the attraction is for you, see past fantasy to reality, find the courage to set limits and the clarity to recognize your own and others' boundaries, and work at cultivating and maintaining reciprocal relationships. These are your best defenses against the unhealthy narcissism of others, and this book is designed to show you how to apply these principles in your daily life.

Narcissists see themselves as “special people,” so Part IV is devoted to exploring in greater depth those particular situations in which narcissism can be especially troubling. With adolescents and in love relationships, for example, there is a fine line between what's normal and what isn't. Narcissists are also more prone to addictive and compulsive behavior because of their special sensitivity to shame. Coping with narcissism on the job or with an elderly parent requires an ability to detach emotionally while still engaging in necessary tasks with equanimity, respect, and compassion. I hope that some of the techniques discussed will help you make better decisions about your own relationships and live with greater peace of mind.

Finally, Part V looks to the future and what needs to be done to get control of the unhealthy narcissism that surrounds us. Our culture is full of narcissistic influences that numb us to the reality of the problems we face. To fight back, we need strong, real Selves that are capable of transcending mere self-interest. When we understand where self-esteem really comes from and make a commitment to raising healthy children—when this becomes our number-one priority—we will have turned the corner toward a better world.



## PART I

# The Seven Deadly Sins of Narcissism

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*Stephanie felt the ball leave her racquet cleanly and watched it sail deep into the back court, just inside the baseline. The focus of her attention was split between the path of the ball and her own body mechanics. “Watch the ball,” she told herself, “get sideways, hit through, finish up.” Forehand after forehand, she repeated her silent mantra until the rhythm of the drill overtook her conscious efforts of control. For a few precious moments, she was in that “zone” that athletes cherish when everything comes together and there are no mistakes.*

*She was smiling secretly, enjoying a licit high, wondering if her husband, Doug, had also noticed how well she was hitting today, when a heavily underspun return angled into her backhand. She lunged, stabbed, and caught the ball on her racquet rim, sending it flying out of the court. “You never read that spin,” Doug scolded from the far court. “Never,” Stephanie echoed, suddenly feeling as though she had just blown an internal tire. Pain washed over her and settled in the middle of her chest. She felt too heavy to move her feet, too awkward to connect the racquet at the end of her arm with the small neon projectile hurtling toward her. “I’ll never be any good at this game,” she thought miserably, smashing the next three balls into the net. The elation of only moments before had evaporated, replaced by a hopeless feeling of ineptitude. Stephanie swallowed the tears rising in her throat and gave herself a mental kick in the backside. “You’re such a baby,” she muttered to herself as she prepared to pack up and go home. “You wimping out on me again?” Doug called out. He was only teasing, trying to goad her back into the drill, but his words were like salt on a fresh abrasion. There would be no more tennis this day.*

Boy, is she touchy, you may be thinking, and you would be right. In my business, we call this a “narcissistic injury,” and as trivial as the things that provoke it may seem to an observer, to the injured party, the pain is devastating, as it was for Stephanie in this instance. What seems like a rather mundane occurrence is actually the reopening of a very old wound: a relationship of trust is disrupted by a “misattuned” communication (his criticism colliding with her joy) and, adding insult to injury, Stephanie’s trusted husband failed to help make the pain go away. Stephanie’s sensitivity, her sudden collapse from a state of pleasure, and her difficulty recovering her emotional balance all point to a very primitive sequence of experiences encoded deep within her psyche, most likely beyond the reach of her conscious memory. It is her hard drive for the emotion of shame.

Shame is among the most unbearable of human feelings, regardless of our age or station in life. Unlike guilt, it speaks not to the misdeed but to the misery of a pervasive personal flaw. We first experience shame in the eyes of our mother or primary attachment figure, when, starting around the age of one, we bring her (usually) our excitement and, instead of sharing our pleasure, she scowls and says, “No!” Her unexpected disapproval shatters the illusion of power and importance that is how we see ourselves at that early age, derived from our union with her. Without warning, we have been ejected from this paradise, and it can only be because we are bad. We feel bad, therefore we are bad.

For some children, this experience, repeated over and over in the course of socialization, is so crushing that they never quite get over it, and they spend their lives avoiding anything that makes them feel ashamed. Recent research in neurobiology has shown that the developing brain is not yet ready to process the intense experience of shame at the age when socialization begins and that the lack of an emotionally attuned parent at this crucial time can actually stunt—for life—the growth of the

pathways for regulating such profoundly unpleasant emotions. What helps the infant's brain develop properly is for parents to provide what the young brain is not yet able to, the soothing of the very shame they have inflicted.

Catherine is the mother of a vivacious two-year-old who is the apple of her family's eye. When Janey had to share her mother's attention with a visiting infant one day, she expressed her indignance by hitting the baby. Catherine was horrified and scolded her daughter, then sent her to her room in tears of shame. Catherine felt compassion for her daughter, however, and did not let her sit with the humiliation too long. After a few moments, she went to her and said, "It was bad to hit the baby, and you must never do that again. But you are a good girl, and Mommy loves you. Now, let's go say 'I'm sorry' to Betsy," and then she gave her a hug. Together, they returned to the living room and Catherine helped Janey apologize.

When parents do not respond as Catherine did to soothe the shame they inflict, children develop their own means of compensating--they wall off the intolerable feeling, and they use fantasy to distance themselves from the monster behind the wall. They cling to notions of themselves as special, powerful, or important.

In the Narcissist, shame is so intolerable that the means have been developed not to experience it at all. What psychologists call "bypassed shame" looks like shamelessness or the absence of a conscience, hiding behind a protective barrier of denial, coldness, blame, or rage. Since there are no healthy internal mechanisms available to process this painful feeling, the shame is directed outward, away from the Self. It can never be "my fault."

I recall one young woman I worked with from her late teens until her mid-twenties. A child of divorce who had been alternately pampered and ignored by her self-centered father, she struggled mightily with chronic feelings of low self-worth. She saw herself as stupid and repeatedly acted out her sense of incompetence. These feelings, however, and the shame that accompanied them, were close to the surface compared with the humiliation she felt at having been rejected and abandoned by her father. The depth of that pain was to be dramatically expressed one day shortly after she learned that he had been diagnosed with cancer. "Just in time for my wedding," she said, her mouth contorting in an ugly sneer. "'He's never paid for anything in my life.'" The specter of his possible death--the ultimate abandonment--had pushed her past the shame of inadequacy to a state of congealed rage. She showed not even a hint of embarrassment at the coldness of her outburst, only raw, wounded contempt.

More typically, the shamelessness of the Narcissist comes across as cool indifference or even amorality. We sense that these people are emotionally shallow, and we may think of them as thick-skinned, sure of themselves, and aloof. Then, all of a sudden, they may surprise us by reacting to some minor incident or social slight. When shaming sneaks past the barriers, these "shameless" ones are unmasked for what they really are--supremely shame-sensitive. That is when you will see a flash of hurt, usually followed by rage and blame. When the stink of shame has penetrated their walls, they fumigate with a vengeance.

Shame is the feeling that lurks beneath all unhealthy narcissism, and the inability to process shame in healthy ways to face it, neutralize it, and move on as healthier individuals do--leads to the characteristic postures, attitudes, and behavior of the Narcissist.



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