

LIVING

Edited by Susan Schwartz
susan.schwartz@scomp.com

Are the people we love to hate true narcissists, or are they just jerks?

Jan Hoffman investigates

Here's looking at me, kid

Janie Lynn Spears is a narcissist, to say nothing of her older sister. So is Hillary Rodham Clinton, Bill, too. And who can forget Eliot Spitzer? But please, let's forget that recent narcissist du jour, Peter Cook, the philandering ex-husband of model Christie Brinkley.

Madonna seemingly takes nightly baths in her own reflected glow. Have we forgotten anybody pop-analysed with that word so far? Naomi Campbell, anyone?

As disparate as they are, all of these folks and many others, including Saddam Hussein and Russell Crowe, have been labelled narcissists. It has become the go-to diagnosis by columnists, bloggers and TV psychologists. A term that has deep roots in psychoanalytic literature seems to have become a popular descriptor so bloated it's been rendered meaningless.

"It sounds more impressive to say that someone is narcissistic rather than a jerk," says psychoanalyst Susan Jaffe.

Are any of these characters truly narcissists? Only their therapists know for sure.

We love to label the offensive behaviour of others to separate them from us: it's their problem, not ours. And labels have their periods of vogue (remember "chauvinist"?).

"Narcissist" is among our current favourites. It has been splashed at bad boyfriends, successful executives, reality show contestants, users of YouTube and Facebook, and, obviously, celebrities.

But even though it has acquired a silly elasticity, it has also taken on rich layers of meaning: despite its being a derogatory stamp, the very people we label narcissistic often are those who attract as well as repel us.

"The study of narcissism is a growth industry in academia," says Daniel Ames, a social and

personality psychologist at Columbia Business School, who puts his students through a narcissism personality test. "It helps us to understand and explain behaviour, whether it's in the bedroom or the boardroom. And it's just a lot of fun to talk about."

But during the recent Brinkley-Cook custody smearfest, Stephen Herman, a court-appointed psychiatrist affiliated with Weill Medical College at Cornell University, did not have fun in mind when he testified that Cook was a narcissist. Last week, he said he had been using the term in its clinical sense, "not so much to label someone but to give insight into behaviour, and indicate the relatively inflexible personality characteristic that it is".

There are people in extremis ... Who do they think they are? There's a certain pleasure in watching them fall back to Earth

George Makari, psychiatrist

In the clinical diagnostic manual, the many criteria for narcissistic personality disorder include a "pervasive pattern of grandiosity [in fantasy or behaviour], a need for admiration and a lack of empathy".

Havelock Ellis, a late-19th-century British sexologist, has been credited with coining the term "narcissist", after the myth of Narcissus, the Greek youth fatally enamoured of his own reflection. Narcissists, Sigmund Freud later wrote, were nearly untreatable.

Unspeakably lonely and shackled by grandiose fantasies, they were incapable of forming relationships, not even with a psychoanalyst.

In the 1970s, psychoanalysts argued that narcissistic personality disorder occurs across a continuum and is not impervious to treatment. It's a theory that continues to be refined.

Today, therapists say, patients who receive a diagnosis of the disorder remain among the most challenging to help because they often believe their problem is that others never sufficiently recognise how special they are. In childhood they have been deprived of essential emotional sustenance; as adults, their arrogance, sense of entitlement and exhibitionistic tendencies spring from the deepest humiliation.

Psychologist Marion Solomon, author of *Narcissism and Intimacy*, says true narcissists are startled when their spouses say they are miserable in the relationship. They seek treatment, she says, only at the urging of their partner.

As narcissism gained greater clinical consideration, it penetrated the culture as well, after Tom Wolfe's declaration of the 70s as "the Me decade" and Christopher Lasch's book *The Culture of Narcissism*.

"Narcissism became equated in a simplistic way with selfishness and self-centeredness," says Natasha Zaretsky, who teaches modern cultural history at Southern Illinois University. "It became a catch-all for people turning inward

and retreating from the politics of the 60s."

By the 80s, "narcissistic", like other psychological terminology – "insane", "psychotic" and "hysterical" – was seeping into the popular vernacular. Back then, narcissistic was the pop-psych, dismissive explanation for the scourge of that era – the single man incapable of committing.

Narcissism has fresh currency. In parenting debates about praise and self-esteem, critics fear we are raising a generation of narcissists. But Richard Robins, a psychology professor at the University of California, notes that earned self-confidence can be mistakenly dismissed as narcissistic. A narcissist's self-confidence is inflated and superficial, masking a bottomless insecurity.

And, in a culture obsessed by celebrity, which gets its thrills from the coarsest exhibitionists, "narcissistic" has become a term to describe the preening of the famous. "We've developed a different kind of narcissism," Solomon says. "You're successful, famous and treated as the centre of the world. So you start to believe you're the centre of the world because that is how the world treats you."



Illustration: Stephen Case

someone comes along and says, 'Get out!' That's a narcissistic drama."

In the past decade or so, social psychologists have studied narcissistic traits in actors, CEOs and politicians, for whom such tendencies are all but built into the job description. The narcissism test Ames gives includes 16 pairs of choices ("everybody likes to hear my stories" or "sometimes I tell good stories", for instance). He recalls one student who got a perfect score: "He boasted that he aced the narcissistic test."

He tells executives the test can offer insight into how others perceive them, but is not an inherent predictor of success. High scorers often have an infectious energy, an intoxicating confidence – but they can be oblivious to advice and contemptuous of others.

Many people are condescending and self-involved, but they may not be narcissistic. Therapists say that to affix the label, the trait or the diagnosis, one must spend considerable time with the person. Determining that someone is a narcissist, Ames adds, "is not something you can gauge from TV."

The New York Times

Some psychoanalysts say our fascination with celebrities and our need to diminish them is its own kind of narcissistic narrative. The playground superhero fantasies of children are normal, explains psychiatrist and historian George Makari, author of *Revolution in Mind: The Creation of Psychoanalysis*.

"We have to mature out of the grandiose, childlike visions of ourselves as perfect and omnipotent," Makari says. "But then there are these people in extremis – [baseball player] Alex Rodriguez, who hits 50 home runs in a season. Who do they

think they are? And so there's a certain pleasure in watching them fall back to Earth."

Prudence Gourguechon, an analyst and president of the American Psychoanalytic Association, also sees a narcissistic narrative in reality shows such as *American Idol*. "The healthy part of narcissism says, 'I am a whole and wonderful person with something great inside of me,'" she says. "I can sing" or "I'm beautiful."

But the allure and tension in the shows are created, she adds, as the audience hunders for the takedown. "Are you good enough? Or are you going to be humiliated? Then

Ask Sharon

Edited by Susan Schwartz
susan.schwartz@scomp.com

My ex-husband and I are both seeing other people since we broke up 18 months ago. But we are unhappy with our partners. He hasn't said anything to me, but I think our divorce is a mistake. I'd like to see if we can get back together. But I am unsure how to broach it and worried about being rejected.

To say the divorce is a mistake is to look at your ex-husband through a lens changed by living without him. Splitting up a marriage and family can be so devastating there is a great temptation to undo the decision. Sometimes a person believes it is better to be with the devil you know than the devil you don't. And facing the future after a divorce is daunting. Less financial security and the fear of never finding a new partner are paramount anxieties.

Divorce is a highly traumatic event entailing loss, grief, mourning, feelings of rejection and failure and major changes in lifestyle. A person hopefully heals and grows after living through it but the wounds mend slowly. During that time many people consider reuniting with their ex to avoid the emotional turmoil of change. Be aware that the odds of a remarriage are against you.

You and your ex need to discuss the situation and see if you are on the same page about reconciliation. You both need to consider what led to the decision to divorce and what steps you both must take to make things different this time.

Any efforts towards reuniting must be slow. This is not a time to resume sexual relations or consider moving in together. Ideally, you both should avoid telling friends, family or children that you are considering getting back together. You both need to rebuild trust and a feeling of being safe with one another. This takes time and commitment even if you still love each other and want to try again.

Your efforts to rebuild a healthy relationship need to be made with a skilled counsellor. The counselling will help both of you to reconcile your emotions and hopes with the real world obstacles that you will face. And both of you must develop better strategies for coping with the problems that ended the marriage in the first place.

My husband and I were married six months ago. The problem is he has a 13-year-old daughter who refuses to accept me. She is making life difficult for me and takes every opportunity to complain to my husband where she finds fault in me. How can I get her to be on my side?

You are dealing with a difficult situation that will not end overnight. Stepfamilies are created from loss and grief. A child is bound to feel emotionally disrupted by the split-up, and feel anger and resentment towards the new family situation. It is most convenient to take it out on

the stepparents. They are strangers, interlopers and their presence indicates their natural parents are unlikely to reunite.

Divorce makes children feel destabilised and unsafe. They feel out of control because their home and family have been overhauled and they had no choice in the matter. Children can feel scared,



suspicious, unsettled, confused or angry after the divorce. Kids fear they may lose their connection to one or both parents and worry they will have no home or family. A stepparent is expendable. Children often see the stepparent as a competitor for a parent's attention.

You need to recognise that your stepdaughter is afraid and hurting. Her rude, difficult behaviour is not directed at you even if it feels that way. Rather, it is an expression of the child's pain and frustration acted out on you. When children behave

the worst they need love the most. Hold on to your knee-jerk anger when the child attacks you. Let your partner manage negative behaviour with appropriate consequences. She needs to learn she cannot split you two apart. Rather, she has to know she is safe and loved even when she acts badly. She is capable of controlling her behaviour.

As a stepparent never talk badly about a natural parent or try to act the disciplinarian. Ideally, as you build a relationship you should see yourself more like a benevolent aunt or non-judgmental older friend or sister than a parent. Your stepdaughter needs respect and love and you can encourage reciprocity.

Emphasise your positive feelings and reward positive behaviour. Show acceptance and caring even if it is not reciprocated.

Acceptance of a stepparent is a slow process. Be consistent and predictable; provide stability and affection. Hopefully you can start to create trust in the relationship. Let her know you care. When your stepdaughter is ready she will tell you she cares about you too. It can take some time to happen.

Sharon Glick is a licensed clinical social worker in private practice. She is listed with the Community Advice Bureau. Send questions to susan.schwartz@scomp.com

Signposts: Self-trust

How do we learn to trust again when perhaps as children we were not taken care of, or as adults our hearts get broken and we feel betrayed? If we want peace of mind, we need to learn to trust – trust ourselves, trust others and trust the process of life.

When Gwennie came to me for coaching, she said her goal was to gain confidence and a feeling of self-worth, to have freedom from negative self-talk. Her father had abandoned the family when she was eight years old. As a young teenager she had been sexually abused by her stepfather and her mother turned a blind eye to it.

Her parents didn't keep her safe; they didn't take care of her needs. Consequently, she didn't feel loved, valued or respected. She felt she had no worth and was unable to trust.

As an adult, she had no trust in her ability to make decisions. She constantly sought approval and had to do things "right", according to what others thought was "right".

By paying more attention to other people's opinions than her own, she was giving her power away. She also didn't trust the sincerity of her partner's "I love you". She complained that the relationship was unequal, that her partner did not respect her.

I asked Gwennie to look at how she loved herself, how she stood in her relationships. Gwennie learned that her fear of rejection caused her to do everything to avoid it, including rejecting herself before she could be rejected by others.

She had to do the one thing she feared most – learn to trust herself and risk being vulnerable, being rejected. She needed to learn to respect and value herself enough to think of herself first. She had to trust her own thoughts, feelings and actions, and listen to her intuition. Trusting ourselves first is the key to trusting others. When we trust another person we are trusting our evaluation of them.

Gwennie chose to begin treating herself with respect. Here are some of the things she decided to do:

- Speak what was true for her, share her thoughts, beliefs and feelings. To do this, she first had to define herself.
- Create boundaries, learn to count on herself to say yes and no when she needed to.
- Let go of good or bad decisions and know that as long as she was making choices it's part of the journey.
- Treat herself kindly and stop the negative self-talk. She kept on track by asking herself, "Is what I am saying loving, compassionate, kind, empowering or insightful?"
- Believe absolutely she had her own answers. She asked "if I didn't worry about anyone else's approval or ask anyone else's opinion, what would I do now?"
- Take risks.
- Act as if the world was for her and to love life.

So Gwennie risked hosting a barbecue without seeking perfection,

without fearing she had nothing to contribute socially. She risked going kayaking for the first time, trusting that she looked good enough in her wetsuit, and had fun with the seals. She risked having a conversation with her mother-in-law about interference. It led to a huge leap in her self-confidence. She trusted her mother to look after her toddler, and reconnected with her partner. Finally, she risked meeting her father whom she had not seen in 30 years and trusted herself to share her feelings: the gift was connection.

When we trust ourselves, we know we are good enough as we are, with all our strengths and weaknesses. We're not afraid of making mistakes because we know we'll survive, even learn and grow. When we trust ourselves, we live more in alignment with what matters to us. We can make powerful choices. We can stop trying to control life and instead have faith in our ability to respond to it and deal with its messiness.

Self-trust is built on risk taking. As we stretch beyond our idea of ourselves and learn that we can do it, we gain the ability to stretch more. The more we do it, the more we learn we can rely on ourselves.

I say to all my clients, "Believe in yourself – you are already brilliant". Gwennie learned to do just that.

Glynis Ferguson is a member of the Hong Kong International Coaching Community (Info@coachinghk.org)