

How narcissistic perfectionists hurt those around them

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Sometimes, we throw around the word "perfect" so often that the list of things to be "perfect" at can feel endless: be the perfect parent, like the one seen on the mommy blog; be the perfect manager, like the ones who inspire teams to overcome any challenge; be the perfect party host, so friends will remember the occasion for years to come.

Most people, when faced with such expectations, can usually listen to the logical voice in their head, reminding them that perfection itself is basically unattainable. But for others, the voice of a narcissistic perfectionist drowns out logic—and when that happens, it isn't pretty.

Dalhousie's Personality Research Team describes a narcissistic perfectionist as someone who is grandiose, has a high sense of entitlement and holds unrealistic expectations of those around them. In other words, narcissistic perfectionists see themselves as special and as unique, and these individuals demand perfection of those around them in a very critical way.

"Narcissistic perfectionists don't play nicely with other people," says Simon Sherry, a clinical psychologist and an associate professor in the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience.

"A narcissistic perfectionist parent demands perfect performance from his daughter on the hockey rink, but not necessarily from anyone else out there," says Logan Nealis, a Clinical Psychology PhD student with the Personality Research Team. "They're getting a sense of vitality or self-esteem through the perfect performance of other people, and they bask in that glow vicariously."

New research on when narcissism and perfectionism collide

Recently, Dr. Sherry's Personality Research Team published two studies on narcissistic perfectionism, providing the first empirical evidence on the topic. Despite decades of clinical observations pointing toward narcissistic perfectionism, no one had set out to empirically study what happens when narcissism and perfectionism collide.

"We have a well-characterized understanding of neurotic perfectionists," says Dr. Sherry. "We understand the perfectionist who is self-critical and self-doubting, who has an extreme and exaggerated concern over

mistakes. The gap in knowledge has to do with narcissistic perfectionists."

Together, Dr. Sherry and Nealis put narcissistic perfectionism under a microscope and collected much needed data on this long-speculated but never truly studied personality construct.

The first study, published in the Journal of Research in Personality, used a daily-diary approach to collect data from samples of undergraduate students. The second, published in the Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment, included perspectives from the parents, friends, roommates or romantic partners of those who fit into the narcissistic perfectionism mould.

"Our most consistent finding across the two studies is that narcissistic perfectionism is associated with social negativity in the form of anger, derogation, conflict and hostility," explains Dr. Sherry.

The evidence sheds light on how much others suffer from the actions of a narcissistic perfectionist.

"When you look at what appears to be happening between the ears of a narcissistic perfectionist, you see they're thinking really negative, hostile, critical things about other people," says Dr. Sherry. "They maintain this superior sense of themselves: 'I'm perfect, I'm awesome, and you're not so you're defective.'"

Great expectations

So what does narcissistic perfectionism look like in real life? The researchers point to public figures like Donald Trump and Simon Cowell as individuals who appear to be exemplars of narcissistic perfectionism. And in one of the two papers, the researchers examine popular biographies of the late Steve Jobs, the brilliant creative genius behind

Apple,

"According to one biography, [Jobs] expected perfection from others in an entitled, demanding, and hyper-critical manner," the authors write.

"Employees reported going from 'hero to zero' in Jobs' estimation after even minor mistakes; employees also noted Jobs routinely derogated them in front of co-workers."

Based on accounts of his alleged behaviour, Jobs has been a poster boy for perfectionism in the global psychology community. However, Dr. Sherry and Nealis argue these accounts don't seem to fit into the standard personality model of perfectionism. They believe narcissistic perfectionism is more fitting.

"If you have high expectations of someone, that may well be a positive thing—if it's paired with a warm, nurturing interpersonal style," says Nealis. "But high expectations paired with feelings of grandiosity and entitlement to the perfect performance of others creates a much more negative combination."

"In the world view of a narcissistic perfectionist, the problem exists outside of themselves," adds Dr. Sherry. "It's the co-worker, it's the spouse, it's the roommate."

Influencing change

Both researchers say that when they describe this concept of narcissistic perfectionism to friends, family and others outside of research and academia, there's a consistent response. They hear comments like "Oh, I'm thinking of someone like that right now," and "That sounds like my boss." But Dr. Sherry wonders if there's more to consider.

"We may be characterizing a problem of our times," he says. "It may very well be that we live in an age of entitlement where grandiose

demands are often made in everyday life."

Even though the concept of narcissistic perfectionism is empirically new, psychologists already use therapeutic tactics to influence change in patients that experience negative and unhealthy relationships with others. Dr. Sherry believes it's important to help the narcissistic perfectionist better understand their impact on others.

That said, he notes that a narcissistic perfectionist probably won't seek therapy until someone or something bursts their bubble—the end of a marriage or the loss of a job, for example.

"Narcissistic perfectionists have a need for other people to satisfy their unreasonable expectations... And if you don't, they get angry," says Dr. Sherry. "Making them more aware of the impact [their actions] ultimately have on others might—keyword, "might"—spark change."

More information: Logan J. Nealis et al. Revitalizing Narcissistic Perfectionism: Evidence of the Reliability and the Validity of an Emerging Construct, *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment* (2016). [DOI: 10.1007/s10862-016-9537-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10862-016-9537-y)

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