

## Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

**Dear Kathleen,**

**My boyfriend and I had a huge screaming match last week that ended when he slammed his way out the door yelling that I am arrogant, selfish, spoiled, and a “narcissus.” What exactly did he mean by that?**

**-- Connie**

Dear Connie,

I'm pretty sure that your boyfriend wasn't comparing you to a beautiful daffodil (a narcissus), along with his litany of your other shortcomings. I think he said (or meant to say) that you are a “narcissist.” Of course, I can't tell you whether you are or not, but here's some information about narcissism. You can read it and make your own call about whether your boyfriend has a point, or was just lashing out at you in anger. (BTW, have you two ever thought about some healthier ways to resolve conflicts than by yelling at each other and screeching out the door? Inquiring minds want to know...).

According to the Greek myth, Narcissus was a dazzlingly beautiful young man but as scornful as he was gorgeous. He's kind of like Brad Pitt in the looks department, but with the personality of Attila the Hun. He's so stuck on himself that he spurns lovers one after the other. One day, he goes out into the forest (I think to net stags) and leans over a spring to quench his thirst. There he sees what he believes to be a beautiful nymph, but in fact, he has fallen in love with his own reflection.

Psychologists have used this character's name to describe the Narcissistic Personality Disorder. This is a pervasive pattern of behavior characterized by grandiosity, excessive need for admiration, and lack of empathy for others, sometimes to the point of a cold indifference to what anyone else needs. Your boyfriend's description of narcissism as selfish, spoiled, and arrogant was actually right on target (this is not to say that you are those things, only that he had some of his facts straight went he went slamming out the door).

A diagnosis of Narcissistic Personality Disorder can be based on answering, “yes” to five or more of the following statements:

1. Has a grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements).
2. Is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love.
3. Believes that he or she is "special" and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions).
4. Requires excessive admiration.
5. Has a sense of entitlement, i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations.
6. Is interpersonally exploitative, i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends.

7. Lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others.
8. Is often envious of others, or believes that others are envious of him or her.
9. Shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes.

It should be clear that some people might exhibit narcissistic tendencies without having a full-blown personality disorder. It's possible – though not necessarily desirable -- to be a little haughty and arrogant without thinking that you're "King of the World." What is most interesting is that, underneath the surface of narcissistic people lies not self-love at all, but rather, self-loathing, fear, a dread of failure, and an inability to endure it's emotional outcome, shame. It's estimated that about one million Americans suffer from Narcissistic Personality Disorder. No one knows how many simply show narcissistic tendencies though I am certain we could each name a few people we know who fit into that category. Whether you share those tendencies or not, it may inspire you to know that a loving, committed relationship is the best context for anyone to work on stretching beyond self-absorption. (Not to mention stretching your vocabulary!)

Send your personal coaching questions to [kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com](mailto:kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com) or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at [www.fullpotentialliving.com](http://www.fullpotentialliving.com).