

## Communicating with Narcissistic Personalities

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When we describe someone as a narcissistic personality—or *narcissist*—we are suggesting, to summarize a complex subject, that this individual, in his interpersonal relationships, is likely, on a regular basis, to regard others more as *objects* than persons, whose purpose is continually to meet his needs and demands—in short, his expectations.

Narcissists, at bottom, expect to be catered to. Underlying this expectation is a core, immature, selfishly managed *attitude of entitlement*. As you'd imagine, narcissists handle frustration and disappointment poorly. The narcissist's position is that he should never *be* frustrated or disappointed, if you are doing your job, which is to gratify him. Narcissists express their frustration/disappointment often with rageful, controlling, bullying, vindictive, contemptuous, abusive displays.

Note the following strategies for dealing with narcissists. They are widely adaptable and can encourage the narcissist's more prosocial responses.

- 1) Use *I-language* as much as possible. This is a great idea in general, and especially advisable with narcissists. *I-language* defuses defensiveness, aggressiveness, and rage. As narcissists are prone to all three, you'll appreciate the de-escalating effects of *I-language*. *I-language*, used properly, is *non-accusatory*; this is good, as narcissists feel easily accused, and often respond to the experience of attack venomously. *I-language* owns one's subjective experience, versus *You-language*, which often projects that experience. For example: "*I* find your comments hurtful" (less likely to elicit defense), versus "*You* are an insensitive person to say that" (more likely to elicit defense).
- 2) Compliment the narcissist, as you set boundaries. You must set boundaries with narcissists, who, seeing others as existing principally to serve them, will think nothing of trespassing your space (mental and/or physical). Narcissists can be excellent, stimulating company *when pleased with you*; when *displeased*—that is, when feeling disappointed—they can turn cold, cruel, contemptuous and destructive. A *well-chosen compliment* can sometimes support the narcissist's self-interest to honor your boundaries. For instance, instead of, "I told you to stop calling me so much, Ben! You're really alienating me!," try something along the lines of, "You have such a nice voice, Ben. I find it so much sexier-sounding when I hear from you once or twice a day, versus six or seven."

- 3) Remind yourself repeatedly that you are *dealing with a narcissist*. This won't change his behaviors and attitudes, but it *can* make your *experience of him* less personal. Remember, in the narcissist's world, it's *all about him*, and *not at all about you*. In this sense, it's really *not* personal. (Of course, if his behaviors escalate to seriously destructive levels, more self-protective measures may be necessary.) It can be difficult to acquire this detached, bemused perspective of the narcissist in your life, but it's worth aspiring to.
- 4) When possible, *validate/recognize* the narcissist's concerns/expectations, as you *establish and firmly maintain* your boundaries. *Validating, recognizing* language, like *I-language*, tends effectively to de-escalate anger and defensiveness. Think about it: It's hard to stay agitated and furious when someone's validating your experience. Validating the narcissist doesn't mean endorsing his disrespect; it means recognizing his demands, however self-centered they are. So, instead of, "Are you *kidding*? You expect me to take responsibility for *that*?" try something like, "So, you feel *I'm* the one who dropped the ball? Okay...I see it quite differently. And I'm not real comfortable taking the hit for this."

Presently, let's examine several examples that implement combinations of these strategies. The examples reflect written, email responses to a bullying, narcissist boss. The strategies, remember, can be adapted widely in many contexts.

I appreciate that you want this today, \_\_\_\_\_you want it when you want it. I'm not able to produce it today because [explanation]. I understand this may disappoint you, but from my end, this is what I'm up against. I have every expectation of being able to complete this assignment to your satisfaction by [     ].

Analysis: In this example, notice the *I-language* used; the strategy of validation/recognition; and the establishment of a boundary. See if you can locate and differentiate the strategies.

I register your concern with the report I submitted, \_\_\_\_\_. Based on our last correspondence, I was not aware that you expected something more detailed than this rough draft, at this point. You would like a more complete report by tomorrow....I appreciate that, but it may not be possible in view of the fact that [     ]; however, you can be sure that I intend to provide something complete, and to your fullest satisfaction, as very soon as possible.

Analysis: Notice again the effective use of *I-language*; the use of *recognition*—both of the boss's experience, and demands; and the all-important establishment of boundaries.

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As disappointed as I sense you are with my feedback, Jim, on my end, I must admit that *I'm* a bit disappointed that you impute to me a motive of ["carelessness/disregard?"]. I'd have hoped you thought more of me than that?

Analysis: This example deploys more good use of *validation* (of the boss's experience), and *I-language*, supporting the palatability of the communicator's strongly asserted boundary.

One of the many things I admire about you, \_\_\_\_, is your writing ability, and so it surprises me that you couldn't find a way, in your email, to register your frustration with me in a way that leaves me feeling less accused? I am very invested in this project, and very invested in leaving you fully satisfied. If you have any real doubts about that, maybe we should discuss directly?

Analysis: Again, note the effectiveness of *I-language*—how it incorporates, all at once, the use of validation, compliments, and boundary-establishment?

I don't expect you to settle for less than you want, Jim, just to recognize, possibly, how much I've got on my plate right now, and how difficult it is to meet so many demands simultaneously? I am making this report, and its submission to you in the form you ask, as high a priority as I can reasonably make it.

Analysis: here again the *validating I-language* nicely *sets-up* the established boundary. That boundary is then followed by language affirming the boss's expectations.

Your suggestion, Don, in your [last email/our last conversation], that I am "underinvested" in solving [this problem] is frankly hurtful. I have always appreciated your very high standards, and have always tried to meet them. If, from time to time, I've fallen short, from your perspective, I can hear that; but to raise doubts about my "investment" feels like a stab at my integrity. I really don't appreciate that, and ask you, in the future, to be more thoughtful about how you express your disappointment.

Analysis: Many strategies employed here effectively in the course of establishing a strong, dignified boundary. See if you can identify them.

Conclusion: Narcissistic personalities present extremely difficult problems for the people in their lives. Their exaggerated sense of entitlement leaves them feeling uninhibitedly presumptuous; self-righteous in their expectation of others' cooperation and gratifying attention; and self-justified in their often angry, controlling, hurtful, and destructive responses to disappointment.

The practice and use of the strategies above, appealing to the narcissist's self-interest, can effectively elicit his more prosocial, and less undermining, behaviors.