

Differentiating Narcissists and Psychopaths

By
Steve Becker, LCSW, CHT

We can begin by noting something that both narcissists and psychopaths share: a tendency to regard others as *objects* more than persons. Immediately this raises concerns: you don't have to *empathize* with objects; objects don't have *feelings* worth recognizing. You can *toy* with objects; manipulate and exploit them for your own gratification, with a paucity of guilt.

Welcome to the world of the narcissist and psychopath. Theirs is a mindset of *immediate, demanded* gratification, with a view of others as expected—indeed *existing*—to serve their agendas. Frustrate their agendas, and you can expect repercussions, ranging from the disruptive to ruinous.

The behaviors of narcissists and psychopaths can look very similar in their staggering disregard and abuse of others. Distinctions arise, however, in the explanation of their actions. The narcissist will crave recognition and validation. He will *demand* that others notice and appreciate his special qualities; his special qualities make his *needs* special, which leaves him feeling *entitled to their satisfaction*. He demands all this as if his inner self is at stake, and it is. Disappointment leaves him feeling unappreciated, neglected. Anger and rage then surface in aggressive and passive-aggressive displays, often in proportion to the hurt and vulnerability he can't own.

The psychopath is less obsessed than the narcissist with validation. Indeed, his inner world seems to *lack much of anything* to validate: it is barren, with *nothing in it* that would even be responsive to validation. An emotional cipher, the psychopath's exploitation of others is more *predatory* than the narcissist's. For the psychopath, who may be paranoid, the world is something like a gigantic hunt, populated by personified-*objects* to be mined to his advantage.

As an example, let's take a hypothetical narcissist and psychopath: Both males (females can be narcissists and psychopaths), both married, with families; and both compulsively conducting extra-marital affairs. Both have managed to avoid exposure principally due to the ease and remarkable skill with which they routinely lie and dissemble. They are equally persuasive in declaiming their fidelity to their wives as they are at contriving their unmarried status to their mistresses. Nevertheless, from time to time, their wives may approach them with uneasy suspicions, to which they'll respond not with accountability, but *as with outrage* to have to *deign to address* their wives' anxieties. They will impugn their wives for raising doubts about them, leaving the latter feeling defensive, guilty, and perhaps ashamed.

To this point, there is little on the surface to distinguish them. But going deeper, we discover that our narcissist is actually terribly insecure and needy. For him, having affairs *validates* his masculinity. His seductive abilities *reassure him* of his manhood. If he can no longer seduce and sleep with women, he is nothing; he has "lost it." Feeling his nothingness/worthlessness, he grows depressed, despairing. He might even feel like killing himself. To salvage his collapsing self-image, he needs an *infusion of*

reassurance, sought in a new affair. In the narcissist's world, the more *his* psychic welfare is threatened, the more *hers* is disposable.

The narcissist will rationalize his actions with his greatest defenses—blame and contempt: My wife has been nasty to me *for a long time*, and doesn't *remotely appreciate* me anymore. She's *lucky all I do is cheat*; I could *leave her* instead, with *nothing*. The fact that I've *stayed* is almost charitable. And these women I cheat with...sure, they all think I'm unmarried, and you know what, I basically *am*.

Our narcissist, as you see, has a dim notion of ethics; but his ethics are corrupted by alarming rationalizations. He is expert at furnishing these rationalizations seamlessly, leaving him as if with the *untroubled conscience of the psychopath*.

Our psychopath, meanwhile, *has no ethics*, and thus no need for rationalizations. He has affairs *because he wants to*. Life, for him, is a game. The game is about figuring out how to *get* what he wants *now*, by whatever statagems necessary. And it's a *game without rules*. Without rules, there *is* no violation, no exploitation; and even if there *is*, it's *part of the game*. So our psychopath *makes up the rules* as he goes along, duping this individual and that, lying like a shameless child as he improvises his way in and out of his schemes, sometimes smoothly, sometimes not—but *always* heedless of, and absolutely indifferent to, the damage he causes.

The psychopath will sit back, reflecting on his infidelities, and laughing, think, "I've still got it." He will mean, "I've *still* got the ability to maneuver these women like a puppeteer." This will amuse him. The narcissist will sit back, and likewise think, "I've still got it." But he will mean, "I'm still attractive. Women still find me irresistible. I'm okay, for now."

Commonly, the psychopath is upheld as the incarnation of the murderous bogeyman. While it's true that many coldblooded killers are psychopaths, most psychopaths are *not* killers. The majority of psychopaths would find a messy murder too inconvenient and personally unpleasant a task to assume. *This*—the personal inconvenience and unpleasantness, *not* empathy for the slaughtered victim—explains why a great many more psychopaths than not, with chilling non-compunction, are more likely to target your life's savings than butcher you, and dispose of your remains in several industrial-strength Hefty bags.

This doesn't make the non-murderous psychopath "less psychopathic," or "more sensitive" than the murderous psychopath; it merely reflects the calculus psychopaths apply in their decision-making: how can I *get*, or *take* what I want, for maximum instant gain, at minimum personal inconvenience?

Steve Becker, LCSW, CH.T, has a psychotherapy, hypnotherapy, and clinical consulting practice in Westfield, NJ. He can be reached at 908-233-5755; his website is powercommunicating.com.