

September 28, 2016 5:45 p.m.

## Narcissists Are Lonely Little Creatures

By **Drake Baer**



Photo: Jonathan Bachman/Getty Images

The presidential rise of Donald Trump has thrust Wendy Behary's field into the national spotlight: She's the author of *Disarming the Narcissist: Surviving and Thriving With the Self-Absorbed*, as well as the founder of the Cognitive Therapy Center of New Jersey. She notes that while it's dangerous to diagnose at a distance, Trump's blustery need for dominance smacks of self-absorption. Like Science of Us reported back in March, "[Trump Is a Near-Perfect Example of Needy Narcissism.](#)"

Everybody knows a Trumpy personality: a blowhard, a **conversational demagogue**, a constant, forceful center of attention. But, as Behary warned me over the phone yesterday, if you want to defend yourself from the narcissist at work, or at Christmas, you need to grasp *why* they are narcissistic. Behary is trained in **Schema Therapy**, which endeavors to understand schemas: toxic emotional and behavioral patterns that start in childhood, and continue throughout life if they're left unchecked, colored by beliefs, thoughts, and themes about how the world operates. Indeed, for the narcissist, their narcissism is a survival skill that helped them escape childhood, an adjustment that becomes maladaptive in adult life.

"We all start out as little people," Behary says. "We all meet an environment, we're all helpless." The perspective of schema therapy is to look at the needs that weren't met, and see how personality forms around those traumas and unmet needs, like a pearl forms around a grain of sand. A narcissist may have been raised by abusive parents, overly pressured to not just achieve but be the best, or serve as a sort of showpiece for the family. One authority figure may say nothing is good enough, another that everything they do is perfect. They're often taught that even *having* needs for support, love, praise, guidance, discipline, and limits are weaknesses, things to be ashamed of. Because of this, Behary says, narcissists can develop a crusty outer shell. She often hears confessions like *I just learned not to need anyone, I don't need people* from the clients that come into her practice. "They're walled off against their own human needs," she says. "My classic line is, 'It's not your fault you're like this, but it is your responsibility at 45 or 50, to learn how to undo this, if you want to spare your relationships, keep your job intact.'"

The small person inside a big personality is a lonely child that felt unlovable, that grew up laden with demands for performance. There's often awkwardness in social interactions, which itself leads to bullying, and in adulthood, repeatedly pushing intimate connection away. "They don't really have friends," she says, "They don't really have friends, they have followers." Because of their childhoods, they develop obsessive standards, where everything has to be the best — how else could they win the approval of Mom or Dad? They develop compulsive behaviors to keep themselves distracted and stimulated. At the bottom of it all is a sense of defectiveness and shame, she says, stemming from "having been made to feel weak for wanting love and affection." Because of their early experiences, they learn that they can't count on other people to meet their needs, and to compensate for that, a sort pathological self-reliance takes root. "The narcissist will work very hard to become super capable, super autonomous, so they won't be beholden to anyone, and they won't need anyone," she says.

In adult life, that means they act "supremely entitled" to do what they want and have what they want, make the rules and break them as they see fit, she says. As their families grow up, they may find new problems: Their spouse reads some books or gets some therapy, and takes a healthier stance in their relationship dynamic. The kids come of age, and they no longer have to put up with their neglect, demands, or criticism. Spouses divorce, children estrange. Again, the narcissist is alone. "The loneliness, the emptiness, the sense of unlovability, the isolation continues," she says.

It's only when a narcissist has reached a breaking point like that, Behary says, that they might find the right help; not just any therapist, but someone experienced with narcissism. It's not necessary that that point is even reached, though: The world outwardly rewards narcissists, in many ways; they're charming, manipulative, and goal-oriented, they go on **more dates** and become **titans of industry**. But while they may control everything around them, they are yet to accept themselves. "Underneath all the noise is insecurity," she says.

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