



Malignant Manipulators: Ticking Time Bombs

Malignant narcissists not only believe they are always right, they vindictively go out on a limb to prove it.

The difference between someone within the normal range of the narcissistic personality disorder and someone at the extreme end of the spectrum is not always self-evident, as the disparity lies within. For example, take Max, a real estate developer. In his dog-eat-dog world, looking out for Number one was what life was all about. To him, most deals were win-or-lose propositions, people were either winners or losers and if you didn't take advantage of others, others would take advantage of you. Pulling a fast one was standard business practice, as long as you didn't get caught.

Despite this dark worldview, Max had a charming exterior and liked creating a buzz. He told people what they wanted to hear, and used exaggeration and embellishment to impress others. When that didn't work, he'd try a mix of lies, half-truths and obfuscation. For Max, honouring agreements was relative, and a contract was nothing more than the beginning of a discussion. He saw himself as having a natural sense for how to play people against each other and of being keenly perceptive of his adversaries' Achilles heels. He had to be Machiavellian in the business world; acting otherwise meant being weak. And Max hated weakness.

This modus operandi had paid off. With a string of

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successful deals behind him, Max had a glamorous lifestyle: money, cars, homes and admiration. All his ex-wives had been very attractive.

And while there were "haters", those who said he was vindictive, untrustworthy or unscrupulously manipulative, Max felt that his critics were blatantly unfair and envious of his talent.

Identifying malignant narcissism

Have you ever met a person like Max and wondered, "What's that guy all about?"

While attempts to categorise someone else's motivations and behaviours can be overly simplistic or reductionist (too often we label people without understanding the context and the dynamic nature of human functioning), putting a name on a specific behavioural pattern can provide an anchor point, especially with people such as Max, whose manipulative behaviours can be contradictory and confusing. Given the way these types of people victimise and terrorise those around them, the rest of us need to know what makes them tick before it is too late.

In 1964, well-known psychoanalyst Erich Fromm first coined the term "malignant narcissism". He

described it as a “severe mental sickness” which embodied “the quintessence of evil”. Other clinicians agreed. Psychoanalyst Otto Kernberg defined malignant narcissism as “an extreme form of antisocial personality disorder that is manifested in a person who is pathologically grandiose, lacking in conscience and behavioural regulation, and with characteristic demonstrations of joyful cruelty and sadism.”

These clinicians agree that while narcissistic personality disorders are quite common, malignant narcissists are an unusual variant. What differentiates a malignant narcissist from a benign one is the pattern of sadism, their gratuitous enjoyment of the pain of others. Their lack of empathy is a defining feature. While garden-variety narcissists may purposefully damage other people in pursuit of their own selfish desires (but may regret doing so), a malignant narcissist will harm others while having little or no regret for the damage they may have caused.

Their behaviour has a vindictive, demeaning quality. They have little or no conscience. And while they may acknowledge the difference between what society considers “right” and “wrong”, the real meaning of these distinctions is lost to them. They don’t possess the socialising emotions like love, anguish, joy, disgust, shame and guilt to guide their relationships with others. Whatever their transgressions, they experience no remorse and are unable to feel pity or compassion for others.

While the run-of-the-mill narcissist has a marked sense of entitlement, little empathy and can be exploitative of others, the malignant narcissist is even more strongly marked by these negative characteristics. Such people are short-tempered, thin-skinned and unable to listen or accept other people’s opinions. However, because of their talent in mimicry, they are able to beguile people and can present themselves quite favourably on first impression.

Narcissists in the workplace

In addition, malignant narcissists lack a concept of the future, have an inability to plan and hate to be bored. Their behaviour is very much centred on short-term gains. They are masters at seizing opportunities but are very poor in thinking through the consequences or next steps. In the long run (as they view the people they associate with as competitors or prey), individuals at the extreme end of the narcissism spectrum undermine the organisations they are involved in.

The question then becomes how can we deal with malignant narcissists? Can they be “cured,” or, at the least, properly managed? Unfortunately, in my

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psychotherapeutic experience, there is very little that can be done. The best advice is to stay out of their way.

The primary reason I suggest staying away from malignant narcissists is that they are incredibly adept at what psychologists call “impression management”. Skilful shape shifters, they can portray many diverse social faces or “personas” to manipulate those around them. Any attempt by others to help malignant narcissists to change may end badly for the people trying to help. The most likely outcome is further manipulation and harm.

Moreover, when these emotional manipulators are confronted with their wrongdoings, they can resort to anger, defensiveness and vindictive rage. They almost never accept responsibility for their own actions. If things have turned out badly, it must be someone else’s fault. Whatever efforts are made to show them the error of their ways, they will continue deceiving and manipulating others to attain their own personal goals.

Thus, when faced with malignant narcissists, we do well to keep George Bernard Shaw’s comment in mind: “I learned long ago, never to wrestle with a pig. You get dirty, and besides, the pig likes it!”

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