



Understanding Empathy, Narcissism, and Mental Illness

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I have [written previously](#) about my experience with a traumatic relationship with a narcissist. I am currently in a very good place regarding this relationship—all loose ends tied and closed, good relations present, no communication. No other relationship I've had in life, so far, has taught me directly quite as much about human experience—so, now that I've healed from the relationship, I can say that I am thankful for it.

Lack of Empathy

One of the key symptoms of Narcissism (and a handful of other mental illnesses) is **lack of empathy**.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is characterized in DSM-5 by grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy. However, recent research suggests narcissists may have cognitive empathy (understanding others' emotions) but lack affective empathy (sharing those emotions).

This manifests in a number of different forms, which can be a bit confusing:

1. "I know how you feel, and I don't give a fuck."
2. "I have no mental capacity to understand that others have feelings at all, especially in regards to myself or my actions."

In my case, I understood the concept of **#1**, the sociopathic form of lack of empathy.

"Sociopathic" is not a clinical term; the proper diagnosis would be Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD). While both NPD and ASPD can involve empathy deficits, they have distinct diagnostic criteria and presentations.

It showed its head very rarely, and was very damaging. However, it took me over a year of non-interaction to pick up on the ever-pervasive and honestly very strange effects of **#2**—this person was typically completely unaware of others having emotions and their actions having impact upon them—in any way—in daily life.

A Change in Perspective

This is quite fascinating to me, and understanding this fully enabled me to go back, re-evaluate all of the abusive behavior that I experienced, and actually approach it with understanding, empathy, and compassion.

This reflects post-traumatic growth—a psychological concept where individuals develop enhanced personal strength, relationships, and life appreciation following adversity, identified by researchers like Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun.

This person was often telling me the truth (what seemed nonsensical at the time), through the lens of a single-person emotional painting of the world.

This describes a form of egocentrism—the cognitive inability to differentiate between one's own perspective and others'. While normal in children, it can persist in certain personality disorders and developmental conditions.

Their behavior was still abusive, but it helped me come to peace with what happened, holding forgiveness, reduce blame and confusion, and increased my own understanding of [how mental illnesses can manifest](#).

In Closing

So, I just wanted to share this perspective with you to perhaps help open your mind to how mental illness can manifest in unexpected ways, and how understanding these ideas can help past situations even after the experience is long over.

Good luck out there!

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- [MentalHealthError: an exception occurred](#).