

# Overcoming Male Narcissism (Part I)

By Jay Wegter

**We live in a culture that fosters emotional dependency.** Matriarchal homes tend to emasculate the males that grow up in them. It is an added challenge to grow up as a confident decision-maker if one's father set an example of acquiescing to the pressure of "mother knows best."

**When male authority and headship are rejected in marriage and family, the adult sons of those families often manifest character traits of passivity, dependency, boyishness, and hostility.** With few role models to look to and with detached fathers, males frequently grow up believing that no one really cares about them or could care about them but a woman. These men are suspicious of other men, especially masculine men. They have few close male friendships. They are often hostile loners. Often there is an element of self-pity that allows narcissistic men an excuse for pursuing sensuality. These men are further weakened by that decision to sow to their lusts.

**If that direction is permitted to continue, the female is increasingly viewed as a goddess figure to be adored and worshipped.** For a man to live for lust is to fly in the face of God's plan for masculinity. The pleasure-oriented male will lack genuine self-respect. His speech will often belie personal character shot through with cynicism, facetiousness, and pusillanimity. His moral cowardice will breed sensual opportunism. Living for sensual pleasure is actually a "death wish" (1 Tim. 5:6).

**A man's emotional dependency will affect his perception of male-female relationships.** He will see women as having fewer needs than he has. He will be tempted to lean upon them, and to view them as his emotional lifeline. He will see them as the only ones who have the potential to truly know him. He imagines that if he found the right woman, he would need no male friends. He readily courts acceptance from women, not knowing that such acceptance is never free.

**Looking to women for acceptance is counterproductive.** Instead of building up a man, it slices off layers of one's manhood by a regressing to emotional dependency. For God's plan for masculine greatness is to "get into submission to someone who is great." "The lesser is [to be] blessed by the greater" (Heb. 7:7). By God's design, men should *look up* for their acceptance (John 5:44; 12:43). Greatness and honor come by being in submission to Someone great, the Lord Jesus Christ. There is a divinely appointed "chain of honor and authority." Conversely, males who have an unhealthy emotional dependence upon their mothers (or wives, or girlfriends) commonly defy authority (Jer 44:15-19).

**Male narcissism is lust driven—it does not embrace self-denial as a principle necessary for God-glorifying manhood.** Henceforth in this essay, a man's unmortified passions will be referred to as his *feminine shadow*. This designation is appropriate for a number of reasons. First, a lust-driven person has no reliable ethical backbone; he cannot function as a man of principle. Secondly, passions take a man captive so that he cannot serve others. Third, delayed gratification is the very heartbeat of godly masculinity, thus, gratification indulged eviscerates male strength (Prov 5:9-10). Sowing to unbridled passion is the very opposite of godly manhood. Giving in to one's passions has the net effect of making a male less masculine.

**The *feminine shadow* houses more than sexual lust. It also invites a male to indulge in hatred, resentment, extreme emotions, escapism, self-pity, and emotional dependency.** The *feminine shadow* has no principle but the worship of self. Every addict has permitted his *feminine shadow* to rule him. He has said “yes” to her solicitations and seductive promises of pleasure and fulfillment. According to Scripture, every man who lives for pleasure is an enemy of the cross of Christ (Phil. 3:18-19).

**Like the sirens that wooed Odysseus, the *feminine shadow* allures and deceives, only to slay the manhood of those who sell themselves to her.** When we say “yes” to her, the turning dynamo of our manhood is unable to rotate smoothly. Creativity dries up. Strength and vigor are given away (Prov. 5:9; 11:17; 14:30; 16:32; 25:28). The male becomes even more restless. He becomes increasingly impetuous, fragmented and impulsive. His thoughts and emotions kick out anger, blame, shame, depression, and self-hate. He becomes unable to take on endeavors that require strength of masculinity and service to others. He cannot marshal causes that require a pure and clear conscience. His former river of strength fragments into multiple anemic rivulets.

**The temptation to yield to one’s sinful passions is complicated by the fact that that one’s desires have many external accomplices.** The pressure of the world, its incessant parade of pornographic images, its unwholesome role models, and its satanic philosophy of freedom all work at unleashing a man’s passions.

**Ungodly women also incite a man’s *feminine shadow*.** Though God holds a man totally responsible for every decision he makes, a man ought to know the potential a woman possesses for sending stimuli and suggestions toward a man’s *feminine shadow*. Even women who know the Lord may manifest their sin nature so that it calls for a response from the man’s *feminine shadow*. The biblical example of King Ahab powerfully illustrates how far a man can go in the direction of compromise due to the solicitations of a woman (Jezebel) (1 Kings 21:25).

**Masculinity is built upon self-control. When a man allows a woman to control him, it involves saying “yes” to his own *feminine shadow*.** At times, a woman may suggest to a man that he has no choice in a matter, “he ought to just let nature or circumstances take their course.” The opposite is true. Godly manhood involves owning one’s choices. The narcissist lives without this immutable truth in view. He allows his emotions to carry him along and then he refuses responsibility for the choices he made while under the influence of those emotions. Narcissists are willing “victims” of their emotions (or *feminine shadows*). The narcissist has never learned that he has a choice. He responds to the inner despotism of his *feminine shadow* as if he owes allegiance to her. True manhood involves a radical mortification of the *feminine shadow*.

**The answer is not a stoic denial of all emotion, nor is the answer to regard feelings as a nuisance.** Strong emotions and desires can be harnessed for righteous causes. Christ’s cleansing the temple of money changers provides a vivid example (John 2:14-17). In the righteous man, the choice to express his emotions appropriately is always governed by his love of the truth, and love of God’s glory. On the other hand, there is a modern day spirit of anarchy that gives permission to people to act upon their emotions as if in the name of authenticity, they legitimize any behavior.

**The Scriptures are replete with examples of men who gave in to the compulsive bidding of their *feminine shadows*.**

Scriptural examples include the following:

CAIN – Gen. 4:7

HAMAN – Esther 3:1-6; 5:9-14

SAMSON – Judges 16

AHAB – 1 Kings 21:1-7

DAVID – 1 Sam. 25:21-34

SOLOMON – 1 Kings 10:1-14

**Narcissism is often manifested in relationships by a male's attempt at niceness, manipulation, and/or adaptability.** Speaking the truth in love for the purpose of edification is supplanted by a chameleon-like ideal that lets a man adapt himself to the tastes of others. Healthy confrontation in love is replaced with passive aggression. *An example of passive aggression would be as follows. Instead of yelling at the neighbor's barking dog to be quiet, the passive aggressive person opens the yard gate in the middle of the night hoping the dog will run away or get hit by a car.* In less extreme ways, the passive aggressive narcissist demonstrates his contempt for others by “showing” instead of “telling” or by gossip and slander instead of constructive criticism and admonishment. He acts out, but he does not take the risk to speak the truth in love.

**The Bible places a high value upon gentleness and kindness but not upon niceness.** Niceness is a Western invention by those who have no biblical solutions to the inevitable conflicts that take place in relationships. Niceness is an attempt to make relationships risk free. Niceness vaunts itself as filled with understanding, kindness, and sensitivity. Yet niceness winds up doing far greater damage than the truth spoken in an appropriate and timely manner. People allow themselves to be controlled and manipulated by others in the name of niceness. That is something Jesus never did. Niceness is not spirituality. Proverbs warns that those who flatter others are actually spreading a net for their feet (Prov 29:5; 28:23).

**Narcissists are often outwardly nice but inwardly hostile. Their boyish niceness allows them to be easily controlled by women.** The following section lists some of the ways that narcissists manifest a *passive-responder* posture toward women.

- 1.) ***Responding to nurture and acceptance from others as if they have obligated you.*** In this instance, the male responds with indebtedness and gratitude. He allows himself to be controlled and possessed. Acceptance may be communicated to him through praise, flattery, hugs, physical affection etc. He feels radically indebted and grateful that someone has accepted him. He welcomes female approval to the point that he becomes dependent upon the female (and others) to carry his value.
- 2.) ***He relates to the woman as a “mother knows best” figure.*** When he relates to a woman who discounts his perceptions, he allows her challenges to weaken his judgments to the point of acute self-doubt. The woman he is with is not comfortable with two separate opinions. The nice narcissist sacrifices his opinion or conviction for the sake of harmony. He allows the confidence he has in his views to be eroded. Backing down becomes a habit.
- 3.) ***He relates to the woman as a permission giver.*** In order to reduce the risk of rejection, he gravitates toward the kind of woman who addresses him from a “mother

child” ego state. Phrases from the female can be recognized as follows, “If I were you,” “You can do this for me now,” “Why don’t you,” “Are you sure you know what you are doing.” The woman may poke fun at the male’s attempts to lead. In this unhealthy link up and arrangement the male’s niceness and passivity only increase.

- 4.) ***Relating to the woman as a “mother confessor” figure.*** The narcissist doesn’t know when to guard his privacy. He doesn’t understand that appropriate levels of intimacy are reserved for their commensurate level of commitment. He is far too ready to bare his soul to the first woman who shows him understanding and acceptance. In conversation with her, he begins to engage in “hyper self-revelation.” He assumes a posture of reporting-in to mother. In worst cases, he gets into the habit of asking the woman to make his decisions for him. Those he makes on his own, he broadcasts for the sake of ratification.
- 5.) ***He permits the woman to evaluate him ahead of Christ as his chief evaluator.*** He readily responds to messages of guilt and obligation. He welcomes the opportunity to “prove” his love when the woman designs a test for him. He is easily controlled through the woman’s “needs” even when her purported needs are not genuine, but born of manipulation and control.

***Narcissism damages relationships. The capacity to love flows from choice.***

As one pastor quipped, the very strongest marriages are between two Christian people who commit for life but “do not need each other.” The radical dependency of the narcissist inhibits his ability to love. It is the dependent person who relies upon others to give definition to his life. The greater the dependence, the less he is able to operate upon a basis of choice. Without a reasonable level of personhood—by virtue of union with Christ and identity in Christ reckoned, the narcissist will be unable to sustain the self-expression necessary for intimacy. A personal, gospel-based sense of identity is necessary if one is to have the ability to share oneself with another believer out of choice. Dependency suffocates love. Dependent insecurity must be broken if one is to be capable of mature love.

***Love and trust depend upon honest communication. Dependent people cannot communicate honestly.*** The dependent person adopts the posture of ingratiation in order to be sure that others love him. He fears that he cannot survive as a separate individual. He is always adapting and controlling to make sure outside forces are working for him. This is due to the fact that all his strength comes from others. He is unable to be truly transparent. He must be able to control his outer face in order to manipulate others into fulfilling his need for security. His relationships are a “transaction,” that is he works for support and approval. He fears being himself. He fears that such authenticity would result in rejection. Therefore, he cannot be transparent or assertive. He cannot communicate honestly. He is too weak to trust others. He feels he must protect himself from exposure. He masks his vulnerability so that others will be kept from knowing him as he truly is.

***Emotional intimacy only comes through vulnerability and sharing of self in an appropriate manner in a relationship of commitment and trust.*** A relationship that operates upon closeness and intimacy accentuates vulnerability. Such a prospect causes the narcissist to panic. The potential for pain is considered too great. The narcissist regards the level of pain that must be endured to maintain a loving commitment to be too great a price. Honest, intimate communication frightens him away because exposure comes with it.

**The narcissistic male gravitates to a mothering woman for the very reason that her overt acceptance of him appears to make things “risk free.”** She makes things “easy for him” by divining and anticipating his needs, by making him feel special, and by “helping him” with his decisions. But in the final analysis, his masculinity is stifled, and remains in a boyish posture.

The inability to accept ourselves in Christ makes loving others difficult. In order to love, it requires a level of authenticity. We must be able to remain true enough to our convictions to allow what’s on the inside to be expressed to our spouse. When we stand on our hind legs to voice our convictions, it exposes us to the possibility of rejection. There is the risk involved; the other person may withdraw approval. This is not a problem for the man who pleases Christ first.

By contrast, the narcissist is drawn to the other person, but moves away from self-knowledge. These barriers to self-knowledge make compatibility difficult. The narcissist is more comfortable asking himself, “what *should* I feel?” than “how *do* I really feel?” He needs to learn to ask, “Does this decision compromise my convictions?”

Identity and personhood are important. Apart from God’s grace in Christ, personal strengths and weaknesses tend to be diminished or exaggerated (Rom. 12:3). We can only give ourselves in relationships to the extent that we accept ourselves; that of course means exercising a realistic evaluation of our weaknesses, limitations, and strengths.

***Without the sense of personal identity that comes from consenting to Christ’s love (reckoning one’s acceptance in the Beloved), a person cannot risk vulnerability.*** Feelings make us vulnerable. If we are to live fully and intimately, we must allow ourselves to feel these emotions and to own them. (The Psalmist sought a God-glorifying contact with the Lord at the points of personal emotion. Not only did he seek to “interface” with the Lord in his joy and awe, but also in his sorrow and despondency.)

Owning emotions is not the same thing as being controlled by them. As a man, Jesus experienced a full range of human emotions, but He never let them exercise sinful dominion over Him. (We must follow the example of our Lord; emotions do not give us an excuse to follow lustful passions and self-will.)

Caring is only possible through feeling. The command to “weep with those who weep,” is an injunction that depends upon the feelings born of radical empathy (Rom. 12:15).

In order to allow oneself to feel, it is necessary to have developed the capacity for pain. That capacity comes from having learned to experience frustration and childhood deprivation. Every saint must cultivate a willingness to suffer for Christ’s sake (Rom 8:17).

Being comfortable with a full spectrum of feelings and emotions makes our experience of loving another person immensely rich and intimate. Without feelings, there is no love. Without risking pain, there is no love. Without loving, there is no sharing of ourselves. The intimacy that is possible in a loving relationship is measured in terms of communicative compatibility. In this kind of relationship, there is a growing freedom to be oneself.

The narcissist steers away from transparency. He postures. He is the chameleon, actor, the thespian, the “as if” character. He tries to be what he should be, but there is an immense chasm between what he is on the outside and what he is on the inside. Narcissists welcome a role, but do not wish to be themselves. (The other extreme is also common. The emotionally dependent male may err in the direction of exhibiting a “hyper-transparency.” He may pour out his heart to the woman for purposes of seeking her acceptance, understanding, evaluation, and approval. He feels accepted and understood by a mothering female, and she gains the pseudo security of being needed by a male who faithfully gives her his personal emotional updates.)

***The price of denying emotions is the polar opposite of being ruled by one's emotions.***

No amount of acting or suppressing can eliminate our feelings. Ultimately they will be expressed if they are not “processed” before the Lord as in the pattern of the Psalms. Every man faces a choice. Either he deals with his emotions directly, processing them before God as the Psalmist does, or he will find that his emotions will deal with him.

Suppressed emotions have a host of detrimental side effects. They negatively affect physical health and bodily organs. They contaminate our thought life. They produce stress. Suppressed emotions cause us to “split off” from the region of our souls that are capable of experiencing pain. This split comes at a cost. When the feeling part of one's soul is shut down, there is a resultant lack of ability for empathetic caring from the heart. There is also a resultant cowardice that blames all of our negative emotions upon our circumstances.

This chain of events can be catastrophic at times. Israel's King Saul was angry about Samuel's prophecy of losing the throne due to disobedience. Saul did not own his anger, jealousy, and covetousness. As a result, he “externalized” his inner rage acting as if his real problem was the very existence of young David. Then the King commits the remainder of his life to the elimination of God's chosen man, David.

The true solution is to face our feelings in the presence of God. Then we have the opportunity to examine the reason that they exist. Anger can be an ally. It can tell us about a conviction we have that is in danger of being compromised. It can tell us that we are feeling weak, vulnerable, or violated and in need of God's grace.

When we process our emotions in the presence of God, we place ourselves in a position to be comforted and counseled by God (Ps. 62:8; 2 Cor. 1:3-11). Praying our feelings to God opens up the possibility of locating the appropriate Biblical precept or truth that will address our problem. Only when we lay the burden of our feelings at the Lord's feet will we be able to respond whole-heartedly to His Word in that area of our lives (there are numerous Psalms that exemplify this pattern of pouring out the heart in preparation to receive the precept – see Ps 73; 42; 37).

If we do not face our emotions, we are denying ourselves *choice* and giving up the chance for more responsibility in our lives. Narcissists often decline this choice, and as a

consequence they develop a secret mindset of victimhood, martyrdom, passivity, and hostility. These negative feelings born of suppression tend to contaminate relationships.

Suppressed negative feelings (those that are never processed before the Lord) can act detrimentally on the conscience, lowering our resistance to sin and giving us an excuse for self-will.

We have a Great High Priest who welcomes us in our pain. We must avail ourselves of His generous installments of grace and mercy to help in time of need (Heb 4:16).

***God has a solution to the narcissist's "brick wall" of inability at loving.***

The narcissist desires love, but runs into a brick wall of inability. 1.) He can't handle pain, frustration, rejection, and failure. Therefore, he won't risk transparency and trust before God and others. 2.) He lacks a sense of identity and personhood; therefore, he won't expose his true self to vulnerability and caring. 3.) Without a sense of acceptance in Christ, he finds it too uncomfortable to share his real self and function as a transparent and authentic person. Therefore, he pushes away the prospect of being loved as he truly is and for whom he really is.

God's answer is radical identification with Christ so that He is regarded as our "Source Person." Galatians 2:20 espouses a level of maturity demonstrated by Paul. The Christian life becomes literally built around Christ. He is regarded as our completeness (Col 2:10).

The maturing believer reckons Christ to be his ***status, favor, sonship, blessing, security, provision, and honor***. Christ is Source Person. The concept is simple, but its execution takes time to learn and practice: Either we regard Christ to be the source of these profound needs, basic to our personhood, OR we regard our fellow sinners to be the source of these things.

By radical identification with Christ, the kind Paul practiced in Galatians 2:20, we gradually find that all we need is in Him. He weans us from the worship of the creature (Rom 1:25). He sets us free from unhealthy dependency upon others so that we may truly learn to care for others.