

Narcissistic Entitlement Syndrome among Attorneys: Why Narcissism Destroys Young Attorney Careers

By Harrison Barnes from Los Angeles Office Managing Director

Many young attorneys can suffer from a conceited belief of themselves.

They in fact become narcissists.

While confidence and a demand for respect are much-needed attributes in law, self-congratulatory behavior is not welcomed.

Such behavior, in fact, can destroy a young attorney's career.

The word *narcissism* comes from the character made famous by the Greek poet Ovid, Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection. In the story, Echo falls in love with Narcissus and gets rejected. The story makes clear that Narcissus is only able to love himself and not others. Conversely, Echo completely loses herself in her love for Narcissus and has no sense of self at all. At the end of the story, Narcissus tells Echo, "I would die before I give you power over me." Echo responds, "I give you power over me." Both Narcissus and Echo die because their love is unattainable. Many of us cannot find a balance between ourselves and others.

One of the greatest problems facing young associates inside law firms is what I call Narcissistic Entitlement Syndrome ("NES"). Attorneys who suffer from NES often very quickly find themselves out of jobs, whether they quit, are fired, or simply move among employers to deal with the false sense of entitlement that accompanies this disorder. I need to be clear that this narcissistic personality, in my opinion, is an extremely serious subject and something I believe probably at least 10% of the associates in large and prestigious law firms suffer from NES. This is a disorder that causes a sense of entitlement, and I see it virtually every week in my conversations with attorneys. These symptoms of narcissism will cause problems in your career.

This article (a) defines NES and its symptoms and (b) explores the effects of the Entitlement Syndrome on [your career](#).

A. Narcissism Entitlement Syndrome (NES) Definition

NES, in its shortest form, can be defined as an attorney being inwardly focused and oblivious to the people and organizations around him/her that he/she is supposed to serve. I link the concepts of narcissism and entitlement in this syndrome because the sense of entitlement most often has narcissistic undertones. Attorneys with NES see themselves as special, believe they should have whatever they want regardless of the feelings of others, and continually inflate themselves while putting others down. You might be wondering what a narcissistic personality disorder is or what some of the narcissistic personality disorder symptoms are. There are five major characteristics that attorneys with NES often have.

First, because they have a narcissist personality, they are generally preoccupied with fantasies of limitless brilliance, power, and success. While this may be something that many attorneys have, the attorney with NES will generally be quite consumed with these fantasies. Advancement and achievement are extremely important to them, and they envision the environment around them as one where they should be the center of others' attention due to their achievements.

Second, attorneys with NES generally have an exaggerated sense of self-importance that is not commensurate with their actual level of achievement. They expect to be recognized as superior to others

without a corresponding level of achievement. An attorney with NES will also generally exaggerate his/her achievements to others. Indeed, attorneys with NES like to speak about their achievements (and do) quite frequently. As a product of these fantasies, the attorney will often show a very arrogant attitude. The attorney with NES believes he/she is special and should only associate and work for other high-status people and institutions.

Third, attorneys with NES generally lack empathy and are unwilling (or unable) to identify with the needs or feelings of others (which is also considered a sense of entitlement). Because of these entitlement issues, interpersonally, they are often quite exploitative and take advantage of others in order to achieve their own ends. In this respect, the attorney with NES often views those around him/her as objects to be manipulated to be in service of his/her ultimate fantasies of power, for example.

Fourth, another one of the narcissistic symptoms is that these attorneys are most often very envious of those around them with advantages they do not have and believe that others are also envious of them.

Fifth, attorneys with NES require excessive admiration. They need constant approval from those around them. The NES attorney believes that he/she should be admired by others.

Though there are many theories about what causes narcissism and the psychological underpinnings of this could certainly be explored in great detail, the narcissism is usually something that the attorney has developed as a faade and coping mechanism to deal with underlying feelings of defectiveness and isolation. When such attorneys and their work are criticized, they often react with great internal rage because they believe their self-image has been deflated. Their response is often to isolate themselves, and they may do so by [leaving the practice of law](#), switching firms, or simply having rage for those who have criticized them.

There is a difference between healthy and unhealthy narcissism inside a law firm. It is, of course, healthy to have a basic sense of your rights. You have a right to not be treated unfairly, and you also have a right to be proud of your achievements and to tell others about them. Narcissism becomes unhealthy, however, if you become obsessed with having people think you are special, and not just having a sense of your own rights, but not really caring about the rights of others.

In an essay, "Working with Problems of Narcissism in Entrepreneurial Organizations," Richard Ruth of the University of Virginia writes:

"Contemporary practitioners, both clinical and organizational, are faced with the pervasive presence of narcissistic disorders in those who consult us. It is a disquieting encounter, because—even as we recognize that our work to understand and assist persons and organizations with narcissistic pathology has increased the reach and efficacy of our interventions, and the lessons of this work in turn have transformatively affected psychoanalytic theories—there are particular qualities to work with narcissism that are painful to work with analytically, perhaps in significant part because they militate against a defensive introduction of non-analytic methods into analytic work. It is in the nature of narcissistically organized persons, and perhaps also, I will argue, narcissistic organizations, to deny the reality of the other (i.e., the analyst), to wrench the analyst into playing a hated but necessary part in the patient's internal drama, to try to disable or destroy the analyst in the service of a soothing return to a narcissistic self-sufficiency, and to project into the analyst, with resentful hatred, a whole internal world of persecutory and toxic part-objects, as the first step toward eventual understanding, health, and wholeness."

While this quote may seem overly complex, it does elucidate a final characteristic of NES that I believe merits consideration: The attorney with NES will not confront his weaknesses due to the fact that to do so would interfere with his sense of self. Instead, institutions and persons that call into question the sense of self of the

attorney with NES will be considered toxic. As a final point, this explains why attorneys with NES may move firms frequently or leave the practice of law.

B. The Effects of NES on an Attorney's Career

While I realize the picture painted above of NES may appear extreme, it is important to note that NES is something that is quite common among the highest-performing attorneys. Again, I would estimate that more than 10% of first-year associates in major law firms have NES and will have difficult careers for that reason.

Regarding attorneys with NES, it is generally the associates who have come from the very best American law schools and have had a historical pattern of academic achievement that is nothing short of extraordinary. As I am sure you can understand from the above discussion, NES is something that can actually create the sort of superachiever who shows up to work at a major law firm. In a scholastic environment-where the attorney has the luxury of choosing most of his/her courses, can work hard and get immediate feedback via grades and in conditions where the intelligence of the attorney with NES is such that he/she can perform at such a high academic level-he/she is likely to thrive. Moreover, a goal of attending law school and becoming a powerful lawyer fits in perfectly with the fantasies of the attorney with NES.

It is very easy for me to detect NES when speaking with young attorneys. An attorney with NES generally believes that he/she should be given the type of work that he/she wants. These attorneys also tend to believe that they are extremely intelligent and valuable to their employers. In addition, these sorts of attorneys tend to be very calculating and analyze most situations vis-a-vis whether or not they are getting the upper hand. If they are criticized by their employers, they may simply leave.

As a recruiter, I can tell you that I see this happening all the time. Because our firm solicits telephone calls and interest from the highest-caliber attorneys on a daily basis, the NES attorney is one of the sorts of attorneys we often speak with most frequently. The following similarities generally define the attorneys with NES I speak with:

- They generally have not worked at a "real job" before starting as a **first-year associate inside a law firm**;
- They generally did exceptionally well in college and attended a top-10 law school (NES, in fact, appears to be more likely the better the law school the person attended);
- They generally come from a sheltered upper-middle-class background, or their parents were academics; and,
- They generally believe they are smarter than the people they are working with.

In essence, the attorney with NES would likely never make it into a prestigious law firm had he/she not been sheltered by school, parents, and others for so long. The artificial academic environment; the home environment of privilege; the positive feedback from academic institutions, where social dynamics are not as emphasized as academic might; and the lack of prior work experience all serve to isolate the NES attorneys and allow their conditions to grow in the absence of a "real" environment. While I would be the first to argue that a law firm is not necessarily a "real" environment, it is much more so the real world than school or an upper-middle-class upbringing is.

The issue with NES inside a law firm is that the attorney with it is in service of themselves. For the most part, being an associate in a law firm is something that is not going to quickly lead to massive glory, riches, or fame. Instead, you are being hired to work hard and make the firm money. In your first 10-15 years, there will be little opportunity for the sort of continual positive feedback and the sorts of reassurances the NES attorney has.

In addition, this personality type is not always well suited to the practice of law because attorneys, by nature,

are supposed to be focused on the needs of their clients. As an associate, you need to be focused on the needs of the partners you are working for as well as the clients whose work you are doing.

The irony of all this, of course, is that the legal environment is perfectly suited to bringing in young attorneys with NES due to the isolationist factors that are present prior to their entering law firms. These attorneys are never happy [inside law](#) firms, the partners they are working for are often astounded by their behavior, and the associates they initially work with often do not know whether to fear NES attorneys or simply resent them.

What usually happens to the NES attorney is he/she does not hold up well to the initial criticism all new attorneys get regarding their work products. They do not take orders well, nor do they understand why other associates are considered to be their peers. Such associates most often [leave the law](#) very quickly with fantasies about achievement in a work environment that is not of the same caliber of the one they got into initially [out of law](#) school. Or they may switch between firms for a few years. Some start their own law firms. A few stick with it and "get better."

C. Conclusions

The seriousness of this topic is far greater than I am even letting on. While this topic has gone unexplored in the legal profession, it is very real and something that affects countless attorneys, especially the ones who appear strongest on paper coming out of law school.

I do not pretend to know the answers. Certainly, the inability to find a balance between one's self and others is a condition that is serious. Recognizing the presence of a problem like this is probably the first step. The second step, then, would be correcting the problem by getting help. The entire problem with the condition, though, is that those who need help for it are also very likely to never admit they have this condition.

If you have completed reading this article, you most likely do not have NES because if you did, you would not confront it by reading this article. You would have stopped several paragraphs ago. What you should understand, though, is that the attorneys you work with who have NES are likely on a dangerous collision course with failure. If the NES attorney does not fail within your organization, the chances are good he/she can negatively affect you if you work with him/her. Do your best to avoid NES attorneys.