10 Things to Know About Narcissistic Personality Disorder
1. Narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) is characterized by complex self-experiences, including grandiosity, anger, self-derogation, and emptiness or apathy.

2. Lack of empathy is a feature of NPD and romantic relationships are typically shallow and difficult to maintain.

3. Frequently, there are impaired professional outcomes as well as co-occurring disorders.
4. Impaired ability to recognize inner states is a feature of NPD

5. An agency deficit is a core characteristic of the disorder: There are typical oscillations between diminished agency and hyperagentic behavior

6. Structured options for psychotherapy are available

7. Persons with NPD are often amenable to treatment
8. Core features include feelings of vulnerability, fear of rejection, and lack of insight

9. Keeping patients in therapy longer will help promote a personality change

10. Evidence of the effectiveness of manualized treatments for NPD is needed
CASE VIGNETTE
“Fred” (name and identity changed) was a brilliant manager in his late 20s who had NPD. He displayed the following traits:

- perfectionism
- emotionally constricted
- unable to enjoy life
- reacted to any slights and criticisms with frozen anger
- exhibited overcontrolling behavior to prevent criticism
- his goal was to reach the highest performance level at work
- he wanted to be recognized by others for his special qualities
- social life made sense only in terms of professional achievements
- attempts at autonomy or acting spontaneously were inhibited for fear of rejection
- self-esteem was regulated by physical exercise in order to reach perfect harmony in the functioning of his body
Relationship

Fred wanted his girlfriend to be “perfect” and criticized her when she gained weight. His rigid, overcritical attitude and his inability to fully enjoy sexual life strained their relationship.

He was offered a job in a major firm in Europe that would require him to move abroad. His girlfriend was supportive but also sad at the idea of separation.

Fred interpreted this as a sort of “emotional blackmail” and became angry because he felt she was constraining his freedom.
Therapy

The therapist adopted a validating stance and encouraged Fred to relax rather than strive to be accepted only when he reached the highest standards.

It was pointed out that receiving criticism instead of emotional recognition had made Fred suffer.

Associations were made between the patient’s current NPD and events that had taken place when he was younger. He was always an excellent student and at the top of his class, but his father was never satisfied and always expected more.
Fred came to understand that as a child, not meeting unrelenting moral and performance standards spelled terror and inability to give life meaning.

He realized that he took his girlfriend’s reaction to the job offer as another sign that he could not be free to follow his own plans without evoking negative reactions in others. He realized that she was not being tyrannical, but supportive.

**Outcome**

With therapy, Fred’s ability to empathize increased. NPD is largely understudied, in spite of clinicians’ warnings that this is the most frequent presentation in patients.
Case based on “Narcissistic Personality Disorder: Rethinking What We Know,” by Giancarlo Dimaggio, MD, published in Psychiatric Times