

Working Effectively with Especially Challenging Behaviors, Part Two

By Diana Leafe Christian

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These behaviors are often characterized by self-centeredness and entitlement, as demonstrated in Griswald's story. Gustave Courbet, Self-Portrait with a Black Dog.

“We thought we were a bad community!”

My heart went out to the woman who blurted this out and her friends who approached me after an evening consultation for their group. Some seemed near tears.

“You are *not* a bad community and you never were!” I said heatedly. “You’ve just been dealing with an exceptionally bad situation!”

Their community had endured seven years of conflict because a member I’ll call Griswald had consistently blocked a proposal everyone else wanted desperately—to install an efficient furnace in the basement of their large home, a former Rust Belt steel baron’s 150-year-old Victorian later converted to apartments. Even though the building had many fireplaces and old-time radiators, every winter the

apartments were so cold most of the children caught colds, coughing and sniffing for weeks, no matter that even indoors they bundled up in parkas and hats. Griswald, who lived in a separate, better heated building, adamantly opposed the new furnace each time the community proposed it. He blocked for various reasons: it was unnecessary, it was too expensive, he distrusted its new technology, or for reasons he couldn't quite articulate and they couldn't quite understand.

No community deserved this!

After seven years of sick children and parents in distress, in the last year a newer member discovered a long-forgotten community document revealing that in its earlier years the now 30-year-old community had agreed to a voting fallback option if one or more people consistently blocked a proposal everyone else wanted. But when he shared this, most other members didn't want to implement what they saw as a non-humane "legalistic" agreement. In their view, blocking a proposal was an almost sacred right in community that they were loath to violate. The newer member, a father with two small children, saw it differently.

Slowly, in meetings with individuals and small groups over a year's time, he convinced the other families to use their voting back-up for the furnace proposal to break the stalemate and end their winter misery. Finally, in a dramatic meeting, the group brought up the voting fallback after Griswald blocked the furnace again. While he was incredulous and then furious that they'd use the voting fallback, they nevertheless, with great trepidation, voted in favor of buying the furnace and approved the proposal. That winter the apartments were finally warm enough and the parents and children much happier and healthier.

They'd solved one problem, but triggered another. In a rage that his community had bypassed his adamant refusal of the furnace and what he saw as his inviolable right to block, Griswald embarked on a campaign of revenge.

He stopped speaking to everyone. He still collected his food every week from the community pantry but no longer paid for it. Nor did he pay his monthly community dues, vowing he'd never pay them again and no one could make him. Of course he contributed nothing toward the new furnace. Trying to engage him with Nonviolent Communication got nowhere. When they tried to set up mediations he refused.

Griswald complained to the county zoning board and local building department about minor infractions. He reported his suspicions and alleged legal violations to the state health department and county child protection services. The authorities, who for decades had had no problem with the community but were obligated to respond to complaints, visited multiple times to investigate. This not only cost the group time, energy, legal fees, but also embarrassment when the allegations were reported in the local paper.

When community members begged Griswald to stop, he'd retort that they'd brought it on themselves. "You want to hurt this community through some legalistic *voting*? *I'll* show you hurt! *I'll* show you 'legal'!"

This is why I'd been hired as a consultant. That evening several community members told me how guilty they felt in hurting Griswald. Some even believed they deserved his retribution. Yet they also believed they had to use their voting option to get the furnace and stop their suffering. Many felt stuck in this dilemma. They were baffled as to what they could do to end Griswald's ongoing vengeance.

It was heartbreaking. No community deserved this!

I'd done my best to assure the group that, in my opinion, not only had they done the right thing by finally exercising their voting fallback to get the furnace, but it was the vengeful community member who was in the wrong, not them. And no matter how outraged any individual community member might be, it is right for a group to use its own agreed-on self-governance process to solve its problems. And Griswald, not the community, was responsible for his war of wrath and retribution. And what about the hurt *they* felt? What about the damage *they'd* felt in being miserably cold and with sick children every winter when they had a reasonable solution Griswald repeatedly prevented? Hadn't he been hurting *them*? And wasn't he hurting them still with his crusade of punishment?

I was able to convince most community members that evening that this wasn't normal behavior—this was selfish, offensive, and damaging behavior that had harmed the whole group. It harmed them for the years they couldn't implement a solution they were desperate for. And Griswald's retaliation had certainly become abusive and extreme by this time. We talked about what potential consequences they could arrange, including legal measures, to demand that he stop his violations of the community. And if he didn't, their Bylaws (fortunately) gave them the right to kick him out.

Devaluing, Dehumanizing, Invalidating

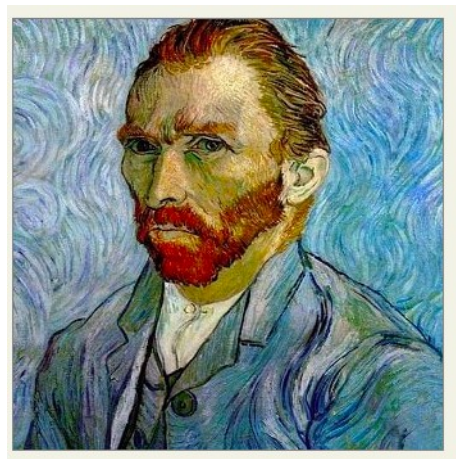
Psychologist Dr. Ramani Durvasula in her book *Don't You Know Who I Am?* describes people like Griswald as those who “truly believe they're so special the rules don't apply to them,” and live with “the childlike conviction that results in genuine surprise and then anger and rage” when they don't get the special treatment they think they deserve. (See *Book Reviews*, gen-us.net/DLC.)

What I call *especially challenging behaviors* are clusters of attitudes and behaviors that can hurt others. Attitudes and behaviors that confuse, alarm, and sometimes devastate fellow community members, like Griswald's, not just once in a while but consistently, and which can persist for decades.

Behaviors like those of people described in the first article in this series (#193, *Winter 2021*), like Dwight, disdainful and contemptuous to others, blatantly lying, and behaving heartlessly to his friend Charlie. And Mavis, often overbearing and harsh to younger people yet unable to tolerate their attempts to give her feedback. And Olive, aggressive in meetings while believing herself victimized, and demanding obedience from her work exchanger.

While most of us attracted to community are usually cooperative, good-hearted folks, even just one community member with these characteristics can make a huge difference in our sense of peace, safety, and well-being. The actions of people like Griswald, Olive, Mavis, and Dwight can be so hurtful and intimidating we can dread being on committees with them, avoid meetings or shared meals because they might be there, and, when we feel most desperate, even consider leaving our own community and moving away.

Mental health professionals call behaviors like these “narcissistic” behaviors. Dr. Durvasula also uses the term “toxic” behaviors, by which she means experiencing these behaviors in others is usually harmful to us. These are people, she says, who, “through their words, behaviors, conduct, attitude, and



Like Griswald, people with these behaviors can bristle with hostility and carry out campaigns of revenge. Van Gogh, *Self-Portrait*.

emotional expression, consistently devalue, dehumanize, invalidate, and abuse other people.” (See chart, “Narcissistic Attitudes and Behaviors,” and “Impaired Empathy, pg. 10 below, and the section “What’s Going On Here?” in the first article in this series, pg. 4, GEN-US.net/DLC.)

Psychologist Dr. Craig Malkin, author of *Rethinking Narcissism*, cites psychological research demonstrating that to some degree almost everyone unconsciously (or consciously) perceives themselves as special and unique. According to the research, not only is this normal, there’s evidence we may need to see ourselves this way for happiness and self-confidence. Dr. Malkin calls this normal healthy need “narcissism,” and proposes a 10-point scale of how important it is to us. Self-effacing people who are reluctant to feel special are at 1 on his scale. Most of us are at about 5, he says, enjoying our feelings of specialness *but not at other people’s expense*. For those in the 8, 9, and 10 range though, the desire to feel special becomes a craving—an addiction—to compensate for feeling empty inside, and as we have seen, with little to no concern for how their words and actions affect others. *These* are the kinds behaviors we’re exploring in this article series: an attempt to help us recognize these behaviors and protect ourselves and our communities from them. This is what I mean by “working effectively” with these behaviors. (See *Book Reviews*, GEN-US.net/DLC.)

Recognizing These Behaviors

However, it’s complex. Most people like Griswald and those noted above exhibit *some but not all* of these behaviors. Moreover, each person’s cluster of narcissistic behaviors can be *different from the cluster of behaviors* in others who also do these behaviors. In each person these behaviors can be *different at different times, and they can come and go*. They can be *aimed at some people but not others*.

So it’s not about recognizing various negative attitudes and behaviors that many of us do sometimes, but recognizing certain *patterns of behavior* that are consistent though perhaps intermittent, aimed at some people but maybe not others, and which persist over time.

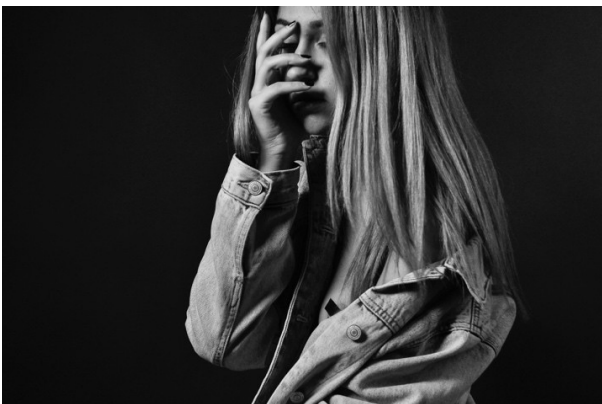
“Toxic people are not necessarily uniformly toxic,” Dr. Durvasula notes, “which makes it complicated.” Some treat everyone badly, but most people doing these behaviors, she writes, “are too smart for that.” There are some whom they target, and other people they treat well, either because they want something from them, or because the person’s continued goodwill and support is useful to their purposes. In Dwight’s community, for example, he consistently treated Rose well, while targeting his girlfriend and his business partner. Mavis had her favorites too, yet often bullied young people. Olive treated her work exchangers courteously at first, and some escaped her wrath altogether, yet she singled out some of them for abuse.

The behaviors can be different at different times, and they can come and go. They can be aimed at some people but not others.

I suggest we *don’t* consider people who do these behaviors as *being narcissists* or as *having narcissism*, even though psychologists use these terms. I suggest instead we consider that people may *do* narcissistic behaviors, rather than that they *are* narcissists. If we know Nonviolent Communication we know better than to consider people as ongoing states of being—people do different things at different times. I believe we are qualified only to observe that some community members may consistently do these clusters of behaviors, not to characterize them as being one thing or another. *We’re* not their therapists! Even just speculating out loud about this can trigger other community members’ negative responses to us.

At the same time, to protect our own feelings of emotional safety and safeguard community harmony, we've got to be realistic. For community sanity we need to recognize these clusters of on-and-off hurtful behaviors that persist over the years. We need to understand, as Griswald's community finally did, that these aren't *normal* behaviors. And they don't respond to normal community remedies.

“Habituation” and Empathy — Why Communities Are Especially Vulnerable



Yet this pattern of behaviors can come and go, vary in intensity, and occur in the presence of some people but not others. Photo Credit: Emiliano Vittoriosi.

How Griswald treated his community—and got away with it—is a painful example of well-intentioned community members being naïve about, vulnerable to, and harmfully impacted by one member's narcissistic behaviors. Why were they so helpless, and for so long? Partly it was because their classical, traditional consensus allowed one member to stop what everyone else wanted. At the same time, the community became accustomed to—desensitized to—Griswald's selfish, unreasonable behaviors. And when he fiercely rebuked them, many believed him and felt guilty for using their own community governance to solve their community problems.

Psychologists call this blindness “habituation.” “Once we get used to a person who is deeply entitled, toxic, or narcissistic, it can become the new normal,” Dr. Durvasula writes. As happened in Griswald's community, people who've lived with these behaviors for a long time can lose the ability to recognize them for what they are. They can forget they have the right to ask for—to require—cooperation and goodwill instead!

But it's more than just habituation. It's community culture itself. While most community members value cooperation and good will—especially, psychologists say, people who are empaths or “Highly Sensitive People”—most people who live in community are *more* likely to be vulnerable to these behaviors than others and the most likely to be harmed by them. Most community members expect the best in others, and want to give people a second chance. Unfortunately, the Griswalds of the world benefit from this. A community is like a perfectly designed petri dish for these behaviors to bloom and flourish undeterred!

This series focuses on what we can do to work effectively with these behaviors as individuals and as small groups of members. And as whole communities, *if* our community can generate the courage and political will to take action, as Griswald's community finally did.

Six Ways We Can Protect Ourselves and Our Communities

People who highly value compassion and detest the callous dismissal of suffering may perceive this exploration of challenging behaviors with an emotional charge on the issue, with a feeling of protection for others, fearing that this article series advocates blaming and vilifying people. I hope you can see that's not the case. I *do not* suggest we criticize or vilify any fellow community members, but rather consider what we can do to protect ourselves and our communities from these behaviors while continuing to feel compassion and understanding for the people who do them. Here are some actions we can take, actions that have been “field-tested” by myself and several friends who live in community.

- (1) *Learn much more about narcissistic behaviors so we'll be more realistic and know what to expect.*
- (2) *Lower our expectations* that the person will be able respond to most requests for empathy, reciprocity, and cooperation. Realistic expectations make us far less likely to feel stunned and baffled, so we won't keep expecting that *this time* the person will feel empathy, *this time* they'll care about our feelings, *this time* they'll have more self-awareness about how they treat us.
- (3) *Set limits and boundaries* with people who do these things so their behaviors will affect us far less.
- (4) *If you communicate with someone who does these behaviors, make all communications "public"* to the degree you can. Meet with them only in the presence of others. Put phone calls on speaker phone so others in the room can hear, and let them know you're doing this. Share your email exchanges with others in your community, and let them know you're doing this.
- (5) *Consider an Inner Ninja technique* for self-protection. This is a simple physical practice that's exceptionally easy to do, takes only half a second, and doesn't negatively affect the other person at all. While it's difficult to understand how it could make a difference, it seems to immediately stop the negative effects of hurtful or manipulative words and energy, whether the person is across the room or even right in front of us. Email me at diana@ic.org and I'll send details.
- (6) *Get outside healing help* to become far less vulnerable yourself—far less likely to be targeted—from healing professionals: psychotherapists who specialize in helping people affected by this, trauma-healing specialists, spiritual healers, shamanic counselors—whatever works. Outside healing help can assist us in developing a greater inner emotional resilience and self-confidence, fortifying us from within. Some of my friends and I have done this and it helped enormously.

This second article in the series is about how we can learn more, and lowering our expectations

How We Can Learn More

As described in the first article, my friend Rose was baffled by Dwight's increasing arrogance, and so was his girlfriend, whom I'll call Beth Ann. I knew Dwight and Rose's community well, and I was distressed too. Dwight had always been friendly until he started acting as if I didn't exist, and even in small groups he'd look right through me as if I were not there, except when he wanted something from me, when he'd be all warmth and smiles again. I later learned this is a typical narcissistic behavior.

These people usually don't have nor want to have self-awareness about their motives or behaviors.

While I knew little about narcissistic behaviors at the time, I suggested we learn more. Rose and I ordered books on narcissism. After finishing these we read each other's books and sent them on to Beth Ann, and then shared what we were learning in emails. After only a month each of us felt more empowered and less confused. Beth Ann realized she hadn't done anything to make Dwight treat her with contempt. Rose no longer felt anguished and baffled. I stopped thinking Dwight had suddenly perceived a terrible flaw in me. Our little Narcissistic Behaviors Study Group was probably the best thing we could have done.

If Griswald's community had done this (and replaced their classic consensus with modified consensus), they might have gotten warm a whole lot sooner! They probably would have found ways to stop Griswald's revenge earlier and not seen themselves as a "bad community" either.

But, first, please don't be motivated to do this from anticipating that once you better understand why someone is targeting you and treating you badly, finally you'll know just what to say to them so they'll "get it" and start treating you better. After learning more about these behaviors you'll see why *this* doesn't work!

Most resources on this topic focus on the effects of these behaviors on someone in romantic or partner relationships, with one or both parents, in the workplace, or among friends. While useful, none of these approaches are directly relevant. I recommend both above-referenced books, *Don't You Know Who I Am?* by (Post Hill Press, New York, 2019), and *Rethinking Narcissism* (Harper Perennial, New York, 2015). Both offer clear, thorough, basic portrayals of these behaviors and how they can affect us. They cover the overt/extroverted, covert/introverted, and other versions of these behaviors, describe the kinds of childhood trauma that can trigger these behaviors in later life, and offer practical steps to protect ourselves. We can also learn more from youtube videos on these topics, especially those of Dr. Malkin (youtube channel: Craig Malkin), Dr. Durvasula (channel: DoctorRamani), and Abdul Saad (channel: Vital Mind Psychology). The most useful single video I've found is *Oprah's 12 Most Frequently Asked Questions on Narcissism* with Dr.Malkin. (See Book Reviews GEN-US.net/DLC, for more about these books and other useful resources on narcissistic behaviors.)

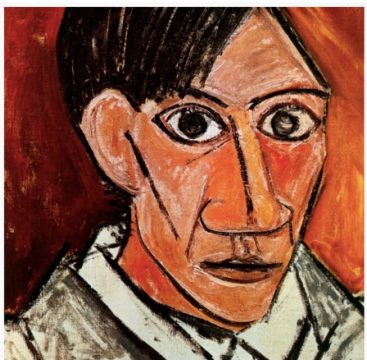
What We Can Learn About these (Trauma-Induced) Behaviors



One of the best ways we can protect ourselves is to learn a whole lot more about these behaviors. Photo Credit: Seven Shooter.

The sooner we learn more the sooner we can revise our assumptions and get more realistic about what does and doesn't work when interacting with fellow community members who exhibit these behaviors.

To start with we can learn that most people who do these behaviors experienced various kinds of trauma as infants or young children, including the trauma of simply not receiving warmth and empathy from either parent. This can lead to various kinds of challenging behaviors as adults, including but not limited to narcissistic behaviors (including behaviors like borderline, histrionic, and other behaviors, or just plain high anxiety), or there can also be no harmful behaviors at all. Experiencing this degree of early trauma usually means the child cannot develop enough empathy to grow into a caring, cooperative adult (*see "Impaired Empathy," pg. 10, below*). It can trigger suppressed rage and the unconscious belief that the person is somehow defective. People compensate for secretly feeling defective by creating what psychologists call a "false persona" of superiority, self-centeredness, and entitlement. This helps them deal with their unending dread, conscious or unconscious, that what they believe is their actual worthless, defective self will be clearly revealed to everyone they interact with.



We learn that people with attitudes of superiority and entitlement are actually compensating for an unconscious belief they're actually defective, living in constant fear, conscious or unconscious, that others will find this out. Pablo Picasso, Self-Portrait.

I think even just having this understanding is enough to trigger compassion for people in our communities who do these things. And . . . we still need to be realistic. We need to realize, from learning more about this, that most people exhibiting narcissistic behaviors:

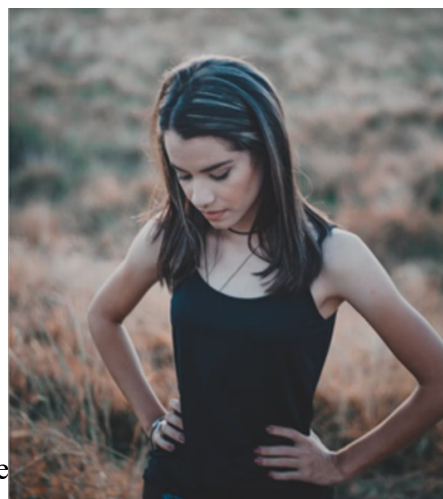
- Go into these behaviors as compensations as soon as they feel threatened, consciously or unconsciously. The more threatened they feel, the more intense their behaviors.
- Feel threatened often, and from things that wouldn't threaten others: someone expressing opinion different from their own or disagreeing with them, no matter how courteously; someone attempting to give them feedback, no matter how courteously; someone not doing what they've told them to do—"disobeying" them. When this occurs the person apparently feels sudden desperate panic, although probably not consciously, and these behaviors come rushing out to protect them. Therefore they:
 - Don't have nor want to have self-awareness about their motives or behaviors.
 - Will not and cannot understand how their behaviors may negatively affect others.
 - Care about their image in the community and don't want other community members to dislike them or not respect them.
 - Do their behaviors privately, one-on-one with the people they target, where no one else can witness them and other community members will be less likely to believe this ever occurs.
 - Or, do their behaviors publicly, often in community meetings, or in emails that invalidate, put-down, or criticize other community members, while not realizing this can trigger others not to like or respect them.
 - Will not and cannot tolerate feedback about their behaviors, contemptuously dismissing feedback and turning to back on you ("No, *you* do that!"), or reacting with sudden pain or rage as though they'd just been attacked.
 - Like to receive empathy, but will not, and cannot, feel much empathy for others, or feel it for very long.

- Will not and cannot usually respond to Nonviolent Communication (NVC), talking stick circles, mediation practices such as Restorative Circles, or mediations with outside community consultants.
- Soon revert to their usual protective behaviors, even when they do temporarily respond well to one of these modalities.
- Will not and cannot usually respond to being given “a second chance” (or a third, or fourth, or 18th chance), by people they’ve targeted in their community, or by the whole community.
- Will not and cannot apologize to their fellow community members.
- Do not want and will not consider seeking outside healing help, such as from a therapist, counselor, life coach, spiritual healer, shaman, or any other practitioner of self-understanding and transformation.
- Probably cannot and will not change, and will mostly likely continue these behaviors for the rest of their lives.
- Can usually only be deterred in these attitudes and behaviors when people firmly, consistently — and ideally compassionately — set limits and boundaries on them (as Rose did with Dwight in the first article).

Maybe you’ve tried various remedies in your community: heartfelt conversations, formal mediations, or giving second chances—but nothing seemed to make any difference. If so, please don’t blame yourselves. Please don’t think your group wasn’t skilled enough or your group didn’t try hard enough. The methods that normally resolve conflict in community simply don’t work with this pattern of behaviors, for all the above reasons.

Lowering Our Expectations, Raising Our Emotional Safety

By getting a clearer picture of these clusters of behaviors we can recognize them more easily and develop realistic expectations about them. We can stop hoping the community members who do these behaviors will respond to our requests for empathy, reciprocation, and cooperation. With realistic expectations we’re far less likely to be hurt personally, and will not keep expecting that *this time* the person will care about us, *this time* they’ll be able to change, *this time* they’ll *want* to change. And while there are ways we can work effectively with these community members—which also involve setting limits and boundaries with them—we can do this while still feeling compassion and understanding.



*It can be difficult to lower our expectations and realize the person may never express much empathy or care about our feelings.
Photo credit: Marcelo Matarazzo.*

In Future Articles

In the next article we’ll focus on setting limits and boundaries with those who do these behaviors, making our communications with them public, and even seeking healing help to become far less vulnerable to these behaviors ourselves. Future articles will explore how the covert forms of these behaviors affect communities, working with Dr. Malkin’s proposed spectrum of these behaviors, and

what we can do as small groups of members and even whole communities to create more emotional safety and peace of mind in the communities we love.

Diana Leafe Christian, author of Creating a Life Together and Finding Community, speaks at conferences, offers consultations, and leads workshops and online trainings on creating successful new communities, and on Sociocracy, a self-governance and decision-making method. She lives at Earthaven Ecovillage in North Carolina. See www.DianaLeafeChristian.org.

Sidebar 1: Narcissistic Attitudes and Behaviors

<p>More Obvious, Overt, Extroverted Narcissistic Behaviors: (Grandiosity on the outside, insecurity on the inside)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delusions of superiority; self-centeredness Entitlement Impaired empathy Lying; exaggerating accomplishments Rapidly escalating anger; sudden angry outbursts Grandiosity Craving attention Criticizing others Mocking or jeering at others Invalidating, demeaning, or belittling others Bullying others 	<p>Less Obvious, Covert, Introverted Behaviors: (Insecurity on the outside, grandiosity on the inside)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delusions of superiority; self-centeredness Relishing vengeance Manipulating others; using people Hypersensitivity to criticism Projecting their behaviors & attitudes onto others “Gaslighting” others (telling someone what they directly observed didn’t actually happen) Envy others; resenting others Limited self-awareness Grooming newer or less confident members to be their allies and support their version of reality
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Sidebar 2: Impaired Empathy

I wrote in the first article that people with these behaviors have little to no empathy, but I was wrong. Until recently mental health professionals believed people with narcissistic behaviors feel little to no empathy because they didn’t receive it as a child and so didn’t develop it during the short developmental window in childhood for this. They believed people with these behaviors can only simulate the appearance of empathy for short periods, but don’t actually *feel* it and cannot simulate it for long because it becomes exhausting to keep up the pretense. But according to more recent research, most people with narcissistic behaviors (in contrast to sociopaths and psychopaths) *do* have the capacity to feel empathy, so psychotherapists now characterize this trait as “impaired empathy” rather than “no empathy.” They’re capable of “flashes of empathy,” says Dr. Malkin, author of *Rethinking Narcissism*, but any capacity to feel empathy and extend it to others, he says, is frequently blocked by their (subconscious) preoccupation with their own suppressed emotional distress. —DLC