

Raised by Narcissists

Also by Sarah Davies

How to Leave a Narcissist . . . For Good

Raised by Narcissists

**How to Handle Your
Difficult, Toxic and
Abusive Parents**

DR SARAH DAVIES



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This book is dedicated to you. And all those with the strength, courage and humility to acknowledge and face family narcissism and abuse. You are an inspiration and may you know more joy, peace and love as you take the steps to heal, grow and move on ...

*A special 'thank you' also to all those
who are my chosen family in life.*

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Introduction

This book is all about understanding and managing narcissistic parents and dysfunctional family relationships.

I imagine you are reading this book because you have an interest in or experience of parental narcissism. You may already recognise that there is narcissism in your family. You may be seeking some guidance on how to handle your difficult, toxic or abusive parent, parents or family members. Or to heal from the negative effects of growing up around them.

There may be a dominant toxic member of your family, or there may be many. Wherever there is at least one narcissist in a family system, there will be other adopted roles and knock-on effects on other family members. Some of them may be abusive or dysfunctional in their own ways, others may be negatively impacted by this. There is a ripple effect with narcissistic parenting.

My aim in writing *Raised by Narcissists* is that it serves as an informative guide to share with you how to recognise parental narcissism, to understand the short- and long-term impacts of this, and most importantly learn exactly how you can handle toxic family members moving forward. Recognising and accepting the

existence of this abuse, and mastering ways to manage it, can bring you the freedom to move on with your life and improve your relationships and well-being.

As a counselling psychologist, I have specialised in the area of narcissistic abuse since 2012. In 2019 I published my first book, *How to Leave a Narcissist . . . For Good*. This book focused on how to move on from toxic and abusive partner relationships. One thing that became apparent to me through my years of clinical work in this area was just how many people find themselves in toxic relationships as adults, repeating unhealthy dynamics from when they were young. In other words, how much this issue goes back to what we experienced and witnessed growing up. It's not every time, but there is certainly something in seeking comfort in familiarity in adult relationships. But what is *familiar* is not necessarily *healthy*.

Continually not having our needs met as children by the adults around us – who are supposed to do exactly that – is emotional and psychologically damaging. I grew up in a toxic household and didn't even fully understand this until I was an adult. Like many children raised by narcissists, I was told that the dysfunction, upset and issues were mostly *me* and *my fault*, and so I inherited this view. That I was somehow, as a child, responsible for the moods and issues of the adults around me. That I wasn't good enough and that nothing I did would ever be enough. For children of narcissists, these sorts of negative beliefs are so ingrained that it may be hard in the first instance to even consider them as anything but truth. However, they are lies. They are distorted, toxic messages, absorbed by youngsters, from the dysfunctional adults around them. It's not fair and it's certainly

not the fault of the child. Like many children growing up in a toxic family, I grew up feeling confused, anxious and insecure, and like there was something gravely wrong with me. . . that I was unfixable.

My experience propelled me to try to find ways to help and work on myself, and so began a long and ongoing journey of healing and therapeutic work. My experiences motivated me to train and work as a counselling psychologist and trauma therapist as well as explore holistic, alternative therapies and philosophies. Much has been revealed along this journey and I can honestly say my life today couldn't be much more different from how it was! I have since dedicated much of my work to helping others to heal, recover and grow from this. I hope this book supports you in your own healing and recovery.

Good parents take care of us, love us unconditionally, help soothe and regulate our emotional state. They help us to feel safe, secure, and connected in relationships. In healthy relationships we can be ourselves, feel free, laugh, and cry, be supported and supportive. This is the kind of home environment every child deserves to have. However, unfortunately the reality is that many people do not grow up within a safe, loving family environment. If you are drawn to reading this book, you probably already understand that you experienced something other than this too.

Being a child within a toxic home environment is terrifying. It's confusing and lonely. It disturbs our basic sense of safety, both with other people and within ourselves. The long-term negative impacts of this can really shape a person's core beliefs about themselves and others, as well as about the world we live in. It affects our ability or willingness to connect and influences

our relationships and life choices. Many adults who have grown up with narcissistic or neglectful parents find they have issues with self-esteem, mood, confidence or relationships. There may also be fundamental issues with shame. Some people develop struggles with food, alcohol, sex, work addiction or other ways in which they try to cope with a range of negative feelings.

Please know that healing and recovery from this are absolutely possible. You can learn ways to manage and move on. You are already on the road to recovery. This book is a roadmap to help you learn about parental narcissism as well as how to manage and move on from it.

Part One covers understanding narcissism: why people develop narcissistic personalities and ways of being, and the impact on children growing up around this. Part Two covers some key themes and models relevant to parental and family narcissism and dysfunction. I've outlined these for your information and to help support your understanding, as this will lay the foundations for your personal recovery journey. Parts Three and Four then expand and explain a number of practical tools for recovery that I've found helpful in my own experience, as well as in my clinical work supporting others over the years. Throughout the book I aim to offer guidance and supportive ideas on how you can heal from this kind of damaging relationship and ways in which you may manage this going forward.

I'd like you to know, from my personal and professional experience, that having this kind of difficult start in life does not subject you to a life sentence of suffering. You can recover and move on from parental narcissism. You can find ways to manage whatever contact you choose to have with anyone within your family. I

want to share ways in which you can work through and heal from the pain, confusion and trauma of growing up with this kind of family issue and move forward in your own life.

Embarking on a recovery journey that examines so much of your experience can be challenging; however, ultimately it's rewarding and freeing. There may be parts of this book and some content that is not relevant to you, or is difficult to read, or that you may find triggering. From my experience, coming to consider or understand that you have experienced parental narcissism is a process that takes time and ought to take time. Trust the process. My advice to you is to take your time to pause and reflect as you read this. Journal about whatever comes up for you, honour your feelings and go gently and compassionately with yourself. There will be more on how to do all this throughout the book. Please take whatever is helpful to you and feel free to leave the rest.

I sincerely hope this book is helpful to you in your journey of recovery and I truly wish you all the very best in healing and moving on.

With best wishes,
Dr Sarah Davies

PART ONE

**UNDERSTANDING
PARENTAL NARCISSISM**

Understanding Your Parent's Narcissism

In order to make sense of your narcissistic parents, it is helpful in the first instance to understand a bit about narcissism in general. Following is an explanation of how narcissistic personality develops and what Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is. We will also take a more detailed look into some typical characteristics and behaviours of the difficult and abusive parent and the ways in which parental narcissism can affect children who grow up around this.

Arming yourself with this information is very much like laying firm foundations upon which to build during your recovery.

To help with understanding parental narcissism, let's first look at where the term narcissism originates.

Narcissus and Echo – The Tragedy

The term ‘narcissism’ comes from Greek mythology and the mythological character Narcissus. The tale of Narcissus and Echo captures a tragic relationship that’s very typical of narcissistic parents and their children. Narcissus is essentially obsessed with himself and his own image. Echo is trapped by her yearning to be seen, heard and loved by Narcissus. They are both sadly caught in a pursuit of a very unobtainable, impossible concept of ‘love’.

Narcissus is a very charismatic and handsome hunter who is at the same time deeply discontent. Never satisfied, he is arrogant, aloof and very dismissive of others. As a punishment for this, Nemesis – the goddess of revenge – casts a spell on him to make him fall completely and utterly in love with the very next person he sees. After a tiring day’s hunting, Narcissus takes some time to rest by a lake. Tired and thirsty, he leans down to the water to take a drink and, in doing so, catches sight of his own reflection in the lake. As the spell dictates, he immediately falls madly in love. . . with the reflected image of himself. From that moment, Narcissus is and remains totally captivated and concerned with only himself. He has no awareness that he is, in fact, in love with himself and his own image.

Echo is a sweet and beautiful mountain nymph who has been disciplined by the goddess Hera for talking too much. Her punishment is that she loses the ability to express herself and instead can only repeat the words of others. She meets Narcissus, with whom, charming, charismatic and handsome as he is, she

immediately becomes infatuated. Echo tries desperately to be heard by him, to be seen and acknowledged by him. She tirelessly attempts to connect with him, to be met, even loved, by him. But it is all futile, because Echo has no voice of her own to speak or be heard and Narcissus is completely fixated and obsessed with himself.

The story of Narcissus and Echo captures the essence of modern-day relationships with any narcissist. It is an obsessive pursuit of an unobtainable kind of 'love': Narcissus being consumed and obsessed with himself and his own image, unable and unwilling to notice or appreciate those around him; Echo focusing so much on Narcissus and her attempts to have him hear her that ultimately there is nothing of her left.

Understanding Narcissus and Echo helps us to understand the utter futility of the kind of relationship we have with an unwell, unavailable or self-consumed parent. A narcissistic parent cannot provide the type of love that a child desires and deserves. Just like Narcissus, they will always be fundamentally too concerned with themselves. They will be too caught up in the pursuit of serving themselves to ever really be able to hear or truly care about anyone else, let alone offer any genuine affection or attention. An emotionally limited parent cannot love in the way that we need or would like. They certainly cannot do this in a healthy, meaningful or authentic way. That is a real modern-day tragedy.

A good parent is somebody who takes appropriate care of their child. They support them, meet their emotional and developmental needs and help them to grow. A good parent helps their child to feel safe, secure and loved unconditionally. If you

are reading this book, chances are that this has not been your experience. If you are the child of a narcissistic parent, I want to be very clear with you about something from the start. . . that was and is their issue. It is not your fault – in any way. It never was and never will be, despite what you may have been told or have come to believe. It is also not for you to have to endure any further abuse or be in any way responsible for what family members do.

In this book I want to cover ways in which to recognise and manage, detach, heal and move on from, parental abuse. The ideas I share here are from my work with clients over many years of specialising in this area.

Let's continue with understanding more about narcissism.

What Is Narcissism?

Narcissistic personality describes the disorder where somebody is fundamentally focused and fixated on themselves – on their own importance, as well as on meeting their own wants and needs. Clinical narcissism is basically pathological selfishness in an extreme form.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) is a diagnostic tool used by mental health professionals. It states that Narcissistic Personality Disorder is characterised by a pervasive pattern in adulthood of *grandiosity, a pathological need for admiration* and of being interpersonally *exploitative*, together with a number of the following behaviours or attitudes:

- Distinct lack of empathy. Narcissists are unwilling or unable to recognise the feelings or needs of others.
- An overinflated sense of self and self-importance. They may exaggerate or lie about achievements or skills.
- Superiority – they believe they are ‘special’ or ‘different’.
- Sense of entitlement – they expect special treatment from people or places.
- A pathological need for attention and admiration. Narcissists need constant feedback, regard or reactions from others in order to help temporarily regulate their fragile ego.
- Preoccupation with fantasies of achievement, success and status, power, beauty and/or wealth.
- Arrogant. Display haughty behaviours and attitudes.
- Interpersonally manipulative and exploitative – take advantage of other people in order to get their own selfish wants or needs met.
- Envious and jealous – often jealous of others or believe others are jealous of them.

Anger and aggression, including direct and passive-aggressive behaviours or communication, are also commonly seen in people with NPD. For somebody to be officially diagnosed with Narcissistic Personality Disorder, a specialist medical or mental health professional would assess for long-term displays of these sorts of behaviours and attitudes. However, a significant issue with diagnosis is that somebody with NPD is unlikely to seek help for themselves. Part of their issue means they will constantly blame others. They are much more likely to insist that it is you who

needs an assessment! If they do attend therapy or consultation, it is usually with the aim of using that as a means to manipulate others. The nature of a narcissistic personality includes a distinct lack of self-awareness or the ability to self-reflect honestly. These are often key to the successful outcome of therapeutic intervention. The inability of a narcissistic personality to do this is also a key reason as to why it is an incredibly difficult condition to treat.

The Narcissism Scale

Narcissism very much exists on a scale. There is a spectrum of narcissistic personality, traits and behaviours, with NPD being at the top end and occasional selfishness at the lower. Honestly, I think most of us can display *some* selfish traits *sometimes*. This does not necessarily make a person a narcissist. At the lower end of the scale, parents may be difficult, stubborn, negative or cantankerous. This is enough to make relationships tricky. At the middle to the higher end of the spectrum are strong and increasing traits of narcissism and NPD. This is characterised by extreme selfishness, arrogance, lack of empathy, manipulation and exploitative behaviour. Beyond this is sociopathy and psychopathy.

Narcissists do not possess the capacity for honest self-reflection. Self-awareness is essential for personal growth, positive connection and humility. Not every person who is narcissistic would necessarily be diagnosed with NPD. In people lower down the scale, who display narcissistic behaviours or defences, there is possibly some scope for potential change if

they can recognise and reflect on this within themselves. But for most narcissists, especially those midway or higher up the scale, they can't and won't.

Most narcissists will not ever actually come into contact with a qualified health professional and so will not be diagnosed. While it's probably not possible for you to officially diagnose family members, you can inform yourself enough about clinical narcissism to gauge a sense of what you are dealing with. Having a parent who is not willing to reflect, apologise or work through issues, wherever they are on the scale, is very difficult. My advice would be to arm yourself with enough information that is useful to you. Then try to focus on what is helpful or what you might need for yourself to help manage any difficult relationships with family members like this.

How Common Is Narcissistic Personality Disorder?

It is reported that the prevalence of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is around 5 to 6 per cent of the UK and US populations. Honestly, I fear this figure may be quite an underestimation. It is actually very difficult to gauge an accurate figure on the prevalence of narcissism within our society for a number of reasons.

Firstly, statistics tend to be reported from clinical research that captures official diagnostic figures. This is an issue because, as we know, narcissists are usually the last people to accept personal responsibility, or step forward and seek help or intervention. Instead, they will prefer – by the very nature of narcissism – to

blame others. It is therefore likely that there are many narcissists out there who have not been formally diagnosed.

Secondly, as we have also just seen, unhealthy narcissism exists very much on a scale. While many narcissistic people may not qualify for an official clinical diagnosis of NPD, they are still narcissistic or heavily *narcissistically defended* and sit somewhere on the scale. Many people function and are able to navigate life without ever coming into contact with a health professional in order to receive a diagnosis. I know that, for the families of many people I have worked with in my private practice over the years, this is certainly the case.

I think the truth is that there is more narcissism around us, to varying degrees, and more within families, than we can probably ever really accurately measure.

How Are Narcissistic Personalities Formed?

Before we go on to look at parental narcissism specifically, I think it can be useful to understand how this kind of personality develops and why people are like this in the first place. Many people I work with in my practice arrive in some degree of mental anguish due to trying to understand why their parent is the way they are. It can be helpful to understand a little more about this: not with a view to finding an excuse or justification for a parent's abuse, but more for your own understanding and journey of healing.

How do people end up being toxic and narcissistic? Well, it's complex, yet usually related to very early life experiences,

childhood influences, biochemistry, personality factors and also what is modelled to us in our formative years.

The basis of the development of a narcissistic personality is formed in the very early stages of life – usually within just the first five or six years. Further life experiences and individual ability for self-reflection and awareness can also play a role in how severe this becomes.

Most often the formation of a narcissistic personality is connected to extremes of early life experience and parenting styles.

These are:

- a) Early, consistent and significant emotional and psychological neglect or abuse
- b) Inappropriately over-the-top, overbearing, engulfing and overindulgent parenting
- c) A confusing and conflicting mix of the two.

Early Childhood Neglect and Abuse

To understand the origins and formation of a narcissistic personality in more detail, we can go back to the very beginning.

Babies and young children are egocentric. This is a normal child-development stage, where a child does not yet recognise that others have different or separate thoughts, feelings and needs from themselves. Babies and young children do not experience other people as separate beings, but as an extension of themselves. Therefore, they assume and expect that others around them automatically know how they are feeling and what they

need. They are hungry, they cry, they are responded to and fed – amazing! The parent or primary caregiver’s role is to recognise and respond appropriately to the needs of the child. In an ideal world, well-attuned or *good-enough* parents will more or less do this. So, if the child is hungry, the parent recognises this and responds appropriately by feeding the child. If a child needs comforting, a parent recognises this and responds appropriately by holding and soothing them. This attuning and ‘meeting of needs’ is really important for a child to learn that they have needs and to trust that their needs are met, and to develop a healthy attachment. If a child has these kinds of early needs met in a consistent and supportive way, they successfully progress through this developmental stage.

No parent is perfect or going to get it right every single time, and it doesn’t actually *need* to be spot-on every single time. However, significant disruptions, such as from severe neglect or abuse, can really hamper a young child’s development. Narcissistic people are effectively stuck at this early developmental stage and fixated on their own needs and wants.

Not having basic needs attended to in our formative years leads a child to shame. On a deep unconscious level, if a child consistently suffers from adults not attending to their needs they unconsciously internalise this and experience it as meaning there is something fundamentally wrong with them. That they are not worthy, or unlovable. That they are bad. This is shame. The younger we are when we experience this, the more overwhelming and shaping it can be.

If you can connect with the experience and feeling of shame

then it is possible to work through it. For some people, though, it is too much, and so overwhelming that they then adopt defences in order to protect them from ever experiencing or coming into contact with that shame ever again. Narcissism and all the characteristics of it are all effectively massive overcompensations and defences stemming from deep, unconscious insecurity. Keeping away from this sense of shame and self-loathing is essentially the core of narcissism.

Shame is a key feature of the pathology of narcissism – narcissists think and behave in any which way to avoid ever coming into contact with it.

Narcissism usually stems from early and significant neglect. Effectively, the child has unmet needs, and then remains emotionally stuck and fixated on attempting to get their needs and wants met. This is basically what you are met with in a narcissistic adult. If this early disruption is not resolved, by the time the child reaches adulthood they may have already developed narcissistic traits and personality, as well as a whole range of manipulation tactics that basically aim to serve them in getting their needs met. Narcissistic behaviours, attitudes and ways of being are all attempts to overcompensate and avoid connecting with or getting anywhere near to feelings of shame. Narcissism is deeply selfish and self-seeking.

‘My mother was not maternal at all. She was very hard and harsh, in fact, often shouting and snapping at me. I don’t ever remember being comforted by her. She very much had the view that you just ‘get on with it’ in life and that there was no time or space for feelings. Whenever I tried to reach out to her for comfort I was met with cold, stern impatience and irritation. Her own mother was just the same – if not worse. My mother’s mother was a really harsh, cold, unkind woman, even more physically abusive and emotionally neglectful than my own. Sometimes my mother would tell me some of the abusive things her own mother had done and said to her. I’m not sure why she would tell me those things. But what possible chance did she have of knowing any different when she experienced such brutal parenting herself? I felt for her in a way.’

Over-the-Top Parenting

Conversely, narcissistic traits can also arise from a significant amount of over-the-top, overindulgent, consistently inappropriate feedback – where a parent champions the child’s skills or abilities, personality or appearance far, far beyond a healthy, balanced perspective. Examples of this include the repeating of compliments, exaggeration or overestimation of a child’s skill or ability, beauty, power, status, achievements or potential. It leads the child to develop an inflated sense of ego and confused sense of entitlement. This sets the scene for unrealistic expectations and arrogance. Often there has also been a distinct lack of boundaries either taught or modelled, and so the child has not ever learnt or developed a sense of personal responsibility or accountability.

Children can also learn from the direct modelling of narcissistic behaviour.

Many people I have worked with therapeutically have described the confusion of growing up with a parent who constantly exaggerated their power or ability. Often this is erratic and irrelevant. This is very confusing for a child and can leave them feeling much like a fraud or imposter. This leads to an unstable sense of identity. It's certainly not the kind of parenting that builds firm, stable or appropriate self-esteem or self-worth. If anything, there is a sense of shame and fear that develops from being anything less than great or perfect as a result of this. This kind of over-the-top, overindulgent style of parenting is less common in my experience; however, as parenting trends change over time there may be more of this kind of narcissism to be seen.

Either way, where there is narcissism there has usually been a failure to successfully progress through important emotional, psychological and relational developmental stages in early childhood. Narcissists are effectively stuck at an egocentric, selfish, self-absorbed, self-seeking stage, focused only on their own wants and needs and disregarding other people's.

Adult Toddlers

If you've ever witnessed an adult narcissist in a rage, you may have noticed it is literally like watching a toddler having a tantrum; screaming, shouting, kicking, throwing toys around, trying to manipulate in whichever way they can to get what they want. Emotionally, adult narcissists are toddlers.

As we've seen, the essence of narcissism and narcissistic personality lies in shame. Because when a child suffers from significant and early neglect, they experience a sense of shame. Instead of being able to acknowledge, admit, or even consider working on this, they may develop narcissistic behaviours and characteristics to serve the function of keeping deep shame and worthlessness well at bay. Often narcissistic parents are shameless and the traits they display are all ways to keep them far away from ever coming into contact with a sense of shame themselves. Shame is very much the root of narcissism and, rather than experiencing their own shame, a narcissistic parent is much more likely to be *shaming*.

Developing Narcissism

The development of narcissism, as we've covered, often comes from extremes of parenting and early life experiences. However, importantly, not everyone who experiences this goes on to develop narcissistic personality disorder. You may wonder why. This can be due to a number of factors. The extent of the early shaping damage is key. There may also be other individual differences and life experiences that prevent the development of a narcissistic personality. For example, having supportive, reparative relationships along the way. The depth and timing of the damage is determinable; it is understood that, typically, narcissistic traits are formed within the first five years of life and evident by adolescence or early adulthood. It is possible to adopt and demonstrate narcissistic behaviours via what has

been modelled to us by our parents. Children watch, learn and repeat what they see, including what their parents or other influential people in their life do or say. Children learn by mirroring words and behaviours. Some people can demonstrate narcissistic behaviours in this way, although this isn't the same as full NPD.

The extent to which narcissistic tendencies can be worked on is determined by the ability, scope and motivation for genuine personal insight, self-awareness and desire for change. The ability to connect with and to experience feelings of empathy, remorse and shame, as well as the capacity to self-reflect honestly and be genuinely considerate to other people, are necessary factors in the potential to be less narcissistic or recover from this. Most narcissists at the mid range to upper end of the scale do not have this capacity, and never will.

Having early needs met shapes the psychological and emotional development of every child. Often in those who develop a core narcissistic personality, their early needs have been very repeatedly unmet or significantly disrupted. This may be due to their parents being narcissistic, uncaring, over-the-top, over-indulgent, preoccupied or unavailable. It can also be because of the parent or parents' own mental health issues, alcoholism, addictions or trauma.

Summary

Narcissism is defined by extreme selfishness and self-seeking and a distinct lack of empathy. The formation of narcissistic personality is usually determined from a very young age and relates to early and significant abuse or neglect, or extremes of parenting. Narcissism is defined by a lack of empathy.

Narcissistic people do not experience guilt or remorse in the same way others do. Defining characteristics of narcissism include arrogance, a strong sense of entitlement and superiority, jealousy and envy, and a pathological need for admiration and attention. However, as narcissism is very much on a scale, narcissistic parents may exhibit all of these traits, or only some, and to varying degrees.

It may be that your parent or parents are somewhere on the spectrum of narcissism. They may be difficult or dysfunctional, or highly disturbed and dangerous, or somewhere in between. The level of pathology or toxic behaviour may vary. Narcissism, because of its active and effective range of defences, is very difficult to treat. Regardless of where they may be on the spectrum, the principles and recovery tools outlined throughout this book can help you to increase your own awareness and understanding of toxic relationships, and support growth in areas that are protective to healthy relationships and positive mental health, such as boundaries, communication and self-care.

REFLECTION POINT

It may be helpful to think about and reflect upon your own parents' early life experiences. Not to justify or excuse any of their abusive behaviours, but more for your own understanding and sense-making. This is about your journey of healing and recovery.

- What do you know about your parents' childhood and background?
- What do you know about their parents or generations going back?
- Are there any significant experiences that you know of in their history?
- How might this have influenced how they are or how they parented?
- How do you feel about this at this point?

It may be helpful to journal or share with a safe person your thoughts and feelings about this or any reflections or memories that come up for you at this point and moving forward.

The Narcissistic Parent

While there is a wide-ranging mix of other personality traits, looks, interests, profiles and gender in the narcissistic parent, there are a number of core traits and behaviours that define parental narcissism. The main characteristics of these, as well as how they can affect children growing up, are outlined in this chapter.

Generally speaking, there are two main types of narcissism – overt and covert. They share the same core pathology; however, the presentation is different.

Overt narcissism is typically a more direct, aggressive, brazen and unapologetic display of narcissism and selfishness and is arguably easier to spot than more subtle, covert forms. Overt narcissism resembles the more stereotypical perception and media portrayal of narcissism and tends to reflect clearer, more direct attempts at manipulation or exploitation.

Overt types tend to be larger-than-life, seductive personalities; charming, bold, confident and charismatic. They tend to be the kind of people who place a large emphasis on image, power, success, beauty and wealth. They are often self-assured,