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The Best in Every Way: A Clinical Diagnosis of Walter White

Emma D. Bergquist

In a world where most people prioritize their self-interest over that of others, it is easy today to find people living in a narcissistic state more often than they do not. While the term narcissism may be used to describe a wide range of intensities of this trait, clinical narcissism has a more rigid definition. To fit into this category, one must meet a specific set of standards. These standards are comprised of nine points, of which if an individual encompasses at least five of these traits, they can be clinically diagnosed with a narcissistic personality disorder. Walter White, created by Vince Gilligan for the show *Breaking Bad*, is one such individual. His daily interactions with others and his view of himself exemplify all of the traits linked to narcissistic personality disorder. Walt has devolved since the beginning of the series into someone who has no regard for anything other than his self-interest. By examining the social and internal interactions of the character Walter White, it is clear that he could be clinically diagnosed with a narcissistic personality disorder.

The clinical definition of narcissistic personality disorder is outlined in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition* (DSM-5) as an individual exemplifying the following traits: 1. Has a grandiose sense of self-importance 2. Is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love. 3. Believes that he or she is “special” and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions). 4. Requires excessive admiration. 5. Has a sense of entitlement 6. Is interpersonally exploitative 7. Lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others. 8. Is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her. 9. Shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) [1].

Walter White, in alliance with his over-achieving mentality, encompasses all nine of these attributes. Throughout the series, it is apparent that Walt dives deeper into his ego as he grows more accustomed to the world of meth cooking. Specifically, the final season of *Breaking Bad* highlights many situations in which it is apparent that Walt is no longer looking out for his family or his partners. He is only using them as a way to further his agenda that is centered around what is best for himself.

Having a large sense of self-importance is evident in the way that Walt conducts himself. When Walt meets a new person in the meth world, he automatically assumes that this man knows who he is. When talking to these men, Walt claims, “You all know exactly who I am” (5.7, 5:20) before commanding them to “say [his] name” (5.7, 5:26). These two statements portray a man who sees himself as superior to others and famous among other people in his profession. He assumes that he is well-known and

respected by those that he has not even met yet. Walt views himself as someone more important than those around him, as clearly evidenced in the way that he assumed he was known, even when he, himself, did not directly know the men that he was talking to. From this, it is seen that Walt fulfills the first characteristic of a grandiose sense of self-importance from DSM-5.

Walt also indulges in a fantasy of unlimited success regarding his meth business. Jesse attempts to convince Walt that they should take a five-million-dollar buyout and leave the meth business. Even though this is a large sum of money, more than Walt needs, he refuses to walk away from their illegal activity. In this same conversation with Jesse, Walt says, “Jesse, you asked me if I was in the meth business or the money business. Neither. I’m in the empire business” (5.6, 31:38). Walt refuses to give up the power he has because he wants more. He lives behind the idea that he can be the most powerful man in the meth business. The main factor that drives the majority of Walt’s decisions is his need to be the best. Walt is constantly trying to be better than everyone around him and he firmly believes that he can, and will, be the most successful player in the meth business, creating an empire. This is a clear indication that Walt encompasses the second characteristic of being preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success and power as outlined in DSM-5.

Along those same lines, Walt believes that because he is such a special component in their operation, he must only associate with those that are on his same level: the best. When talking to a distributor that worked for Gus in the past, Walt claims that “1,000 gallons of methylamine is worth more in my hands than it is in yours or anyone else’s, for that matter” (5.7, 1:40). Walt is asserting his unique characteristic of cooking meth, something that he is confident that he does better than anyone else. He uses the scientific facts that his product is purer than any of his competitors. With a background in science, it is clear that Walt uses these facts as a basis for his claims of importance. While most scientists are humble about their accomplishments, Walt makes sure that the people he is talking to know that they cannot outdo him in this area. He does, however, make an offer to the group of men saying, “if you agree to give up your cook and sell my product instead, I will give you thirty-five percent of the take” (5.7, 1:50). Walt wants to use this group of men in his operation because they are the same group that was previously associated with Gus. He does not care that they have a cook already, because he feels he is the best possible option for them. In essence, Walt now sees himself as the highest power in the game, with Gus dead, and is only willing to work with the people who previously worked for the original meth king. Beyond viewing himself as superior, Walt refuses to associate with anyone that he deems inferior. In this way, Walt fulfills the third trait defined in DSM-5 of believing that he is special and must only associate with people of high importance.

Walt also shows his need for a large amount of admiration when it is his birthday, and he expects his wife to throw him a big surprise party. Originally, Walt had claimed that he entered the meth business solely for his family. He did not need anyone else except for them. Therefore, when leaving the lab on his birthday he said to Jesse, "I probably have a birthday party waiting for me" (5.4, 17:45) only to arrive at a house with only his family, Walt should not have been disappointed. However, there was clear shock and dismay on his face at the unfilled house. He had expected a large number of people, even though he does not have many close friends outside his family and the people he works with. Walt felt as though he needed to be celebrated, even though he does not take the time to celebrate others. This directly points to an inherent need for Walt to be admired by all of those around him. When this admiration does not come, he becomes upset and confused by the situation. Walt is distinctly shown to encompass the fourth characteristic in DSM-5 of requiring excessive admiration.

A defining factor of narcissistic personality disorder is that the individuals have a sense of entitlement in which they assume that others will automatically comply with what they want to do. This trait is present in Walt when he decides that his opinion is best when talking to Saul, Mike, and Jesse. They are discussing whether to use the extermination company for their meth lab, an idea that Walt came up with, and Mike asks if they should vote on it. Walt says, "Why?" (5.3, 13:20), signifying that he does not necessarily care what anyone else in the group thinks of his idea. He assumes that because the idea was his, it is the best course of action, and the others should do as he says. This shows a large sense of entitlement in that, to Walt, nobody else should be able to argue against what he says. This is indicative of the fifth attribute outlined in DSM-5 of having a sense of entitlement.

An obvious trait in line with this diagnosis that Walt possesses is being manipulative of those close to him. Throughout the duration of the series, Walt manipulates Jesse into continuing to work in the meth business, even though he tries to leave and become a better functioning member of society. The most blatant example of this is when Jesse is upset over the fact that a child died because of them, and he does not want to continue in this business. Walt makes a long-winded speech, saying he is just as upset about the boy dying as Jesse is, but they have to go on (5.6, 18:00). However, it is known that Walt has no problems using children to his advantage because he poisoned Brock to get to Jesse. This speech was made, not to make Jesse feel better, but to get him to continue to cook, even though the entirety of the operation goes against his morals. Walt has had no issue continuing to keep Jesse in the meth business for the duration of the series, even though Jesse has tried to leave this life behind him many times. This is exploiting Jesse's devotion to Walt in a way that solely benefits Walt. The sixth element on the

DSM-5 diagnosis is seen here in that Walt is personally exploitive of those around him.

Walt is a man that lacks the emotional maturity to be empathetic to those around him. By season five in the show, Jesse is the closest thing to a friend that he has left, yet Walt still refuses to care about his life. When walking away with their share of the money Walt asks Jesse, “How are you feeling?” (5.3, 44:20). Jesse then responds that he had broken up with his girlfriend and was not doing well with the situation because he has to keep what he does for work a secret from those he loves. In the midst of Jesse sharing his struggles, Walt cuts him off and says, “I meant... how are you feeling about the money?” (5.3, 44:50). Walt does not have the emotional capability to empathize with Jesse’s situation, a situation that is largely Walt’s fault, to begin with. The only thing Walt is able to feel something for is money, not other humans. He is solely fixated on the money that they are making and does not express interest in Jesse’s life at all. This is characteristic of the seventh attribute of this diagnosis in DSM-5 because Walt lacks empathy and cannot understand the emotional needs of others.

Walt is also envious of people from his past that he feels did him wrong. Previously, he co-founded a company called Gray Matter that became very successful, but only after he sold his shares of the company for much less than it is worth now. Walt is bitter over this fact and resents those that are still involved in the company. When talking to Jesse, he says that the company is worth, “2.16 billion [dollars] as of last Friday. I look it up every week” (5.6, 31:05). Walt’s tone when speaks of the company is indicative of resentment. Each week he continues to look up the value of a company he left before Walt Jr. was born sixteen years ago because he is jealous of the success that his old partners are having without him. Walt continues to be greedy in his meth business as a way to cope with the envy that he feels of the first business that he was a part of creating. This envy points to the narcissism inherently inside of Walt that does not allow him to celebrate the successes of others but to resent them for it, the eighth characteristic outlined in DSM-5.

The final point of narcissism seen in Walt is his arrogance. This trait is most clearly shown when Mike is pointing a gun at Walt’s head, ready to kill him. Walt shows no fear at this moment but instead stares at Mike, confident that the plan he has formulated will get him out of this situation (5.6, 46:30). There is no horror on Walt’s face, there is only arrogance. He sees himself as indestructible. Walt has full confidence that nobody would ever dare to kill him, because he thinks that people are afraid of him. Though he has been threatened with death many times, Walt continues to escape it and thus feels as though he can survive anything. This arrogance is the ninth and final attribute in DSM-5, clearly present Walt’s attitude and the way that he behaves.

While it is only necessary to encompass five of the nine traits on the list from DSM-5 to be classified as having a narcissistic personality disorder, Walter White possesses all nine. It is obvious from this assessment that if Walt were to be examined by a professional psychologist, he would be characterized as having this disorder. With a typical onset in adulthood in line with Walt's timeline, his disorder may have been catalyzed by his meth business. His symptoms got increasingly worse as the series progressed showing that now, he would need treatment for this clinical diagnosis if he hopes to return to any form of a normal life.

It is no coincidence that Walt encompasses all nine characteristics of having a narcissistic personality disorder, as outlined in DSM-5. This shows that the more wealth he obtains, the further into narcissistic personality disorder he falls. The sum of these traits is shown in the final seasons of *Breaking Bad* when Walt is enjoying the peak of his wealth. The recognition of Walt's spiral into this diagnosis is vital in understanding those in our society that encompass a large percentage of the world's economic resources. Vince Gilligan uses Walt to criticize those who focus solely on themselves after amassing a large sum of wealth. Many millionaires and billionaires in the world continue to seek out more money at all costs rather than thinking of those who have not been as fortunate. Gilligan uses the development of Walt's narcissistic personality disorder as he gains more money as an allegory for those in society who are wealthy yet continue to be selfish.

WORKS CITED

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.).