

The psychology of narcissism - W. Keith Campbell

Way before the first **selfie**, the ancient Greeks and Romans had a **myth** about someone a little **too obsessed** with his own **image**. In one telling, Narcissus was a handsome guy **wandering the world** in search of someone to love. After **rejecting** a nymph named Echo, he caught a **glimpse** of his own **reflection** in a river and fell in love with it. Unable to **tear himself away**, Narcissus drowned. A flower marked the spot where he died, and we call that flower the Narcissus.

The myth captures the basic idea of narcissism, **elevated** and sometimes **detrimental self-involvement**. But it's not just a **personality type** that shows up in **advice columns**. It's actually a set of **traits** classified and studied by psychologists. The **psychological definition** of narcissism is an **inflated, grandiose self-image**. To **varying degrees**, narcissists think they're **better looking, smarter, and more important than other people**, and that they **deserve special treatment**.

Psychologists **recognize two forms** of narcissism as a **personality traits**: grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. There's also narcissistic **personality disorder**, a more **extreme form**, which we'll return to shortly.

Grandiose narcissism is the most familiar kind, characterized by **extroversion, dominance, and attention-seeking**. Grandiose narcissists pursue **attention and power**, sometimes as **politicians, celebrities, or cultural leaders**. Of course, not everyone who **pursues these positions of power** is narcissistic. Many do it for very **positive reasons**, like **reaching their full potential** or helping make people's lives better. But narcissistic individuals **seek power for the status and attention** that goes with it.

Meanwhile, **vulnerable** narcissists can be **quiet and reserved**. They have a **strong sense of entitlement** but are **easily threatened or slighted**. In either case, the **dark side** of narcissism shows up over the long term. Narcissists tend to act **selfishly**, so narcissistic leaders may **make risky or unethical decisions**, and narcissistic partners may be **dishonest or unfaithful**. When their **rosy view of themselves** is challenged, they can become **resentful and aggressive**. It's like a disease where the **sufferers** feel pretty good, but the people around them **suffer**.

Taken to the extreme, this behavior is classified as a **psychological disorder** called narcissistic personality disorder. It **affects** one to two percent of the population, **more commonly men**. It is also a **diagnosis reserved for adults**. Young people, especially children, can be very **self-centered**, but this might just be a **normal part of development**.

The fifth edition of the *American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* describes **several traits** associated with narcissistic personality disorder. They include a **grandiose view of oneself**, **problems with empathy**, **a sense of entitlement**, and a need for **admiration** or **attention**. What makes these traits a true personality disorder is that they **take over** people's lives and cause significant problems. Imagine that instead of **caring for your spouse** or children, you used them as a **source of attention** or admiration. Or imagine that instead of **seeking constructive feedback** about your **performance**, you instead told everyone who tried to help you that they were wrong.

So what causes narcissism? Twin studies show a strong **genetic component**, although we don't know which **genes** are involved, **environment** matters, too. Parents who **put their child on a pedestal** can **foster** grandiose narcissism. And cold, **controlling** parents can **contribute to** vulnerable narcissism. Narcissism also seems to be higher in cultures that **value individuality** and **self-promotion**. In the United States, for example, narcissism as a personality **trait** has been **rising** since the 1970s, when the **communal focus** of the 60s **gave way to** the self-esteem movement and a rise in **materialism**. More recently, social media has **multiplied** the **possibilities** for **self-promotion**, though it's worth noting that there's no clear evidence that **social media causes** narcissism. Rather, it provides narcissists with **a means** to seek social status and attention.

Can narcissists **improve** on those **negative traits**? Yes! Anything that **promotes honest reflection** on their own **behavior** and caring for others, like **psychotherapy** or **practicing compassion** towards others, can be helpful. The difficulty is it can be challenging for people with a narcissistic personality disorder to **keep working at self-betterment**. For a narcissist, self-reflection is hard from an unflattering angle.