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How Narcissism Hurts Us All

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September 17, 2016



There's no official equation that adds up human behaviors to equal a clinical diagnosis of narcissism. But if there were, taking 6,000 selfies over the course of a four-day vacation, as [Kim Kardashian](#) ^[3] recently did, just might qualify. This would seem over the top were we not talking about someone who released a collection of 300 selfies in a 2015 book titled, of course, *Selfish* ^[4]. If this is the Age of Narcissism (or more gravely, the [narcissism epidemic](#) ^[5]), as [so](#) ^[6] [many](#) ^[5] [sources](#) ^[7] have dubbed it, the selfie is our most representative medium and Kim Kardashian is the celebrity we deserve. A century from now, when Facebook pages are transformed into historical documents and smartphones are rendered artifacts, all those endless self-portraits will be a sign of the myopic times.

Cases like this contribute to the belief that the number of narcissists is on the rise. Despite the seeming swelling of their ranks, that's not exactly true. [Psychology Today](#) ^[8] notes that "true pathological narcissism has always been rare and remains so"; it afflicts just "1 percent of the population, and that prevalence hasn't changed demonstrably since clinicians started measuring it." Narcissism may appear to be increasing because its most recognized manifestations—vanity, braggery, a lack of empathy and self-absorption, for starters—are widely displayed via the devices that proliferate in our digitally connected world. Rapper and producer Kanye West, who also happens to be Kardashian's husband (the two probably yell out each other's Q ratings during sex), has been labeled a narcissist, with rambling, egocentric award show speeches and rambling, egocentric Twitter posts serving as evidence.

The non-famous live equally out loud, shouting carefully curated life stories through Instagram filters, "spontaneous" yet curiously posed Facebook shots, unsolicited YouTube diaries, and look-at-me Tumblr posts. Reality TV, a fad that should have disappeared in the early, then mid, and finally late aughts, is somehow still a thing. Among its most damaging byproducts is "Apprentice" star Donald Trump, the thin-skinned, race-baiting, misogynist pathological liar this close to being the next president of the United States, whom psychologist Ben Michaelis called a "textbook narcissistic personality disorder" and Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner labeled "remarkably narcissistic." Psychologist George Simon told [Vanity Fair](#) ^[9] that Trump is, "so classic that I'm archiving video clips of him to use in workshops because there's no better example of his characteristics. Otherwise, I would have had to hire actors and write vignettes. He's like a dream come true."

Trump practically begs for these kinds of diagnoses from a distance, by practitioners who've never personally treated him, because his public (and reportedly [private](#) ^[10]) behavior is essentially a caricature of a narcissistic personality. He belittles, he boasts, he bullies and he bloviates in the way we, including many trained and

respected therapists, expect a true-blue narcissist would. If put to the test—meaning the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, the most commonly used assessment tool for determining narcissism levels, with a range from 0 to 40—Trump would probably rank off the charts.

But a fair number of us might also rack up higher than expected numbers. The truth is, we're all a little bit narcissistic, and while a higher score indicates a greater degree of narcissism, even hitting 40 doesn't necessarily indicate psychopathy. (A diagnosis would require far more insight about one's life, behaviors, relationships and habits, in any case.) It's only when narcissistic tendencies are blown up to unhealthy proportions that those traits become a disorder with the potential to ruin lives. In the case of, say, a pathologically narcissistic president, it becomes a problem that threatens to ruin life as we know it.

"Narcissistic personality disorder is an extreme manifestation of the trait," psychologist Eddie Brummelman told [Psychology Today](#) [8]. "Narcissism is a continuum, and the disorder sits at the very end. A personality disorder is a pervasive disturbance in a person's ability to manage his or her emotions, hold onto a stable sense of self and identity, and maintain healthy relationships in work, friendship, and love. It's a matter of rigidity."

Healthy narcissism results in confidence and self-esteem, both of which are fairly fundamental to a satisfactory life. Scoring too low on the narcissism scale is a bad sign; without those traits, we'd never take chances, have faith in our abilities, or generally feel good about ourselves. But too much of any good thing can go really badly, really quickly. And too much narcissism essentially turns you into the worst.

The more well-known variety of narcissistic personality disorder manifests in the kinds of behaviors for which Trump is known, and among his base, beloved. Narcissists of the most commonly known order crave and work diligently to obtain and maintain control. They are incredibly self-centered, and have little real interest in others, a trait that results in a diminished capacity to empathize with those around them. Narcissists of this stripe wildly overestimate and often overstate their best traits, from intelligence to the ability to outperform pretty much anyone at pretty much anything. Citing UT Austin psychologist Anita Vangelisti, *Psychology Today* suggests that "tactics in the narcissist's toolbox include bragging, refocusing the topic of conversation, making exaggerated hand movements, talking loudly, and showing disinterest by 'glazing over' when others speak." Who has time to listen when you're just waiting for your turn to talk again, preferably about yourself? These are the kind of people you likely notice at a distance, because they make themselves conspicuous the moment they enter a room.

Grandiosity is the hallmark of the classic narcissist, and the most easily recognized of the afflicted will exhibit it in spades. In addition to going on and on about themselves, psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman points to [a tendency](#) [11] to "mention others mainly to name-drop" and to "put down other people." Narcissists are manipulative, a skill that lines up with their overwhelming concern for the self. They're likely to be overly invested in personal aesthetics and presentation, a tendency that often results in them being well dressed, obsessed with the trappings of success and deeply into conspicuous consumption (like, say, casting [every detail](#) [12] of their home in gold). [Studies have](#) [13] found that collectively, narcissists are regarded as better looking than their less narcissistic peers and fare better in—of all things—speed dating trials. They tend to come off as more charming and likeable, exuding a certain magnetic appeal, at least initially, before the facade falls away and the narcissistic core reveals itself for what it is. A narcissist may initially seem hyper-confident and self-assured,

neither of which is inherently bad, until pushed to a fault. Wade into the deepest waters of pathological narcissism and this level of self-regard and obsession becomes problematic.

Not every narcissist is as obvious as the stereotype suggests, and plenty of them may seem to possess traits that run directly counter to the popular idea of the self-focused, big-headed egotist. Unlike “overt” narcissists, “covert” narcissists are more likely ^[14] to be convinced that they are highly sensitive and self-sacrificing, and if they are charitable types, may even regard themselves as martyrs of a sort. Craig Malkin, the author of *Rethinking Narcissism*, warns that expecting a one-size-fits-all manifestation of narcissism is likely to cloud your judgment when you encounter one who runs against the popular grain.

"Not all narcissists care about looks or fame or money," Malkin told Psychology Today's Kaufman. "If you focus too much on the stereotype, you'll miss red flags that have nothing to do with vanity or greed."

For example, he suggests, some narcissists can be of the "communal" variety and actually devote their lives to helping others. They might even agree with such statements as "I'm the most helpful person I know," or "I will be known for the good deeds I have done." "Everyone has met grandiosely altruistic martyrs, self-sacrificing to the point where you can't stand to be in the room with them," Malkin says.

And there are highly introverted, or "vulnerable," narcissists. These individuals feel they are more temperamentally sensitive than others. They react poorly to even gentle criticism and need constant reassurance. The way they feel special might actually be negative: They may see themselves as the ugliest person at the party or feel like a misunderstood genius in a world that refuses to recognize their gifts.

While they differ greatly in how narcissism is expressed from their “overt” narcissist peers, this strain of narcissists—who may seem superficially kinder and gentler—also indulge in an overabundance of “self-enhancement.” In other words, they believe they’re exceptional and special. Again, neither of these is a bad thing to think about yourself some of the time, but everything in moderation. Imagining you are the most special, and very best snowflake in every room is something akin to delusion.

Researchers find that ^[15] compared to women, men “consistently scored higher in narcissism across multiple generations and regardless of age.” Speaking of which, the young tend ^[16] to express the most narcissistic behaviors, but do so less and less as they get older. (The Guardian ^[7] points to a 2008 survey which found “the self-esteem of nearly one in five college students could not get any higher.”) It makes sense that narcissists, always on the hunt for power, attention and praise, are particularly drawn to careers in politics and entertainment. They are more likely ^[17] to be promoted at work, most likely because they excel at self-promotion. One study ^[18], cited by Kaufman, suggests that women in the most fertile periods of their ovulation cycle experience an increase in their attraction to men who exhibit narcissistic qualities.

People of all genders should note that narcissists generally have wandering eyes, meaning they’re more likely to cheat than those who are less narcissistic, because, as Kaufman writes, they’re “always searching for a better deal.” Generally, narcissists do well in cities. Psychology Today contributor Rebecca Webber points out ^[8] that “lifetime rates of [narcissistic personality disorder] are about four times higher in notoriously competitive New York when compared with Iowa.” (I live in one of the five boroughs, and that sounds about right.)

Speaking to the question of whether narcissism develops or is innate, Malkin suggests that like so many other traits, the science leans toward ^[19] “50-50 nature versus nurture.” Freud posited that parenting which wavers wildly and unexpectedly from one emotional pole to the other, lavishing a child with praise and then suddenly being harshly critical, is one way to create the kind of insecurity that allows unhealthy narcissism to flourish. Kaufman points to more recent research that suggests unlike some of Freud's other theories (ahem, penis envy), this one seems to hold up:

[R]esearchers [Lorna Otway and Vivian Vignoles] argue that this “combination of childhood experiences may help to explain the paradoxical combination of grandiosity and fragility that is so characteristic of adult narcissists.” The narcissist who receives indiscriminate praise from his or her caregiver as well as signals of coldness and rejection may come to distrust the praise and exist in a perpetual state of insecurity. Back argues that peers also contribute to this dynamic, in that their positive first impressions fade: “Narcissists are popular so they get positive feedback, but are then devalued in the long term,” when people learn their true colors.

In the end, the thin veneer of exceptionalness the narcissist relies on slips away all too easily without constant adulation to keep it in place. Such precarious self-worth, propped up by the compliments of others, makes narcissists highly defensive, and they’re generally easily upset when things don’t go their way. Kaufman notes that rejection can leave them feeling flat-out dejected, and they are prone to “overreacting to small slights and punishing those who do not support their grandiose image of themselves.” Whereas an average person may have difficulty dealing with the challenges life throws their way—or criticisms from others—narcissists are utterly flattened when the wind is taken out of their sails. They may react with a vengeance. “One study,” Kaufman writes, “found that when spurned, highly narcissistic individuals ‘punished’ other research participants who had nothing to do with the rejection itself.”

That reflexively retaliatory behavior sounds a lot like what we’ve seen from public figures who are suspected of being narcissists. Who spends hours on Twitter going after people for any perceived slight, or calls on his attack dogs to go after anyone who lodges even a modest criticism, or calls people childish insulting names for repeating his own words back to him except someone who is so easily hurt that regaining his self-respect is rooted in attempting to destroy it in others? The irony of the narcissist is that he is the ultimate contradiction: the coupling of a massive ego with extraordinarily low self-esteem—and the latter secretly wins that tug-of-war much of the time. Zoe Williams, writing at the Guardian, points to this passage from Elan Golomb’s *Trapped in the Mirror*, which poetically sums things up:

“They unconsciously deny an unstated and intolerably poor self-image through inflation. They turn themselves into glittering figures of immense grandeur surrounded by psychologically impenetrable walls. The goal of this self-deception is to be impervious to greatly feared external criticism and to their own rolling sea of doubts.”

So why do we tolerate narcissists, when ultimately they show themselves for who they are? By now, most of us have met at least one narcissist and should recognize the red flags when they make themselves visible. Psychology Today’s Kaufman suggests that even when the seams show in the narcissist’s fabric, the initial lure of their early, intoxicating dazzle can make it difficult not to fall for the same old show, over and over again.

"When I eat chocolate cake, 20 minutes later I'm under my desk wanting to die," Campbell told Kaufman. "When I eat broccoli, in 20 minutes I feel good. But given the choice I always eat the cake."

So do a frightening number of us. Here's hoping it doesn't give us all a massive coronary.

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