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Narcissism Is a Trait That's Hard to Shake, Study Says

Here's how to recognize it and cope with the narcissist in your life.

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If you're hoping that the narcissist in your life will change, [a new study](#) suggests that you may have to wait a very long time. And even then, you might see only a small difference.

The research, which was published in the journal *Psychological Bulletin* on Thursday, analyzed 51 studies with more than 37,000 participants — mostly from North America, Europe and New Zealand — to explore how narcissism changes over a person's life span.

Although the researchers found that, on average, narcissism gradually declined as people aged, "the results show that this decline is not as large as one might hope," said Ulrich Orth, the lead author of the paper and a professor of developmental psychology at the University of Bern in Switzerland.

The declines in narcissism took place over the span of decades.

"When you look back at how a close friend behaved 20 or 30 years earlier, you might notice the change," Dr. Orth said. "Still, the average decline was at most

of moderate size, so you wouldn't expect that people's level of narcissism changes fundamentally."

The study also found that if people had higher levels of narcissism than others when they were children, then this was also usually true when they reached adulthood.

The research featured subjects who were mostly white and lived in Western cultures, and a number of the studies included in the analysis had low numbers of adults who were 65 or older, all of which makes it difficult to generalize the results.

Even so, the study illustrates that narcissism doesn't just magically go away on its own, said Craig Malkin, the author of "Rethinking Narcissism."

"When left to their own devices, people who are extremely narcissistic in this unhealthy way are not going to change," said Dr. Malkin, a lecturer at Harvard Medical School who was not involved in the research.

So what do you do if someone close to you is a narcissist? We asked several experts to help explain what narcissism looks like and how to cope with people who display high levels of the trait.

First, what is narcissism?

In short, narcissism is a drive to feel special and unique.

To some extent, narcissistic traits exist in all of us, and a little narcissism isn't a bad thing. In fact, research has shown that viewing ourselves through rose-colored glasses, a concept known as [self-enhancement](#), can help us cope with adversity.

Narcissism is most problematic when people become dependent on the feeling of superiority and seek it at all costs, displaying what Dr. Malkin calls the "triple E": entitlement, exploitation and a lack of empathy.

A clinical diagnosis of [narcissistic personality disorder](#) can occur when those symptoms become fixed and persistent — they do not come and go. In addition, the disorder causes distress or interferes with relationships, work or other domains.

Christine Louis de Canonville, a recently retired psychotherapist in Dublin who has written extensively about narcissism, said that in her experience, the higher the levels of narcissism, the more people became “desperate, deluded, paranoid, angry, abusive and isolated.”

This makes it harder for the narcissist to “charm and impress others,” she said, which then makes it difficult for that person to elicit admiration.

What does narcissism look like?

Mental health experts have worked to develop a more nuanced understanding of narcissism, breaking it down into three main dimensions: agentic, antagonistic and neurotic.

Agentic narcissism is what most people think of when they imagine a narcissist. Those who score highly in this dimension are focused on status, power and success.

“They see themselves as superior to others, crave admiration and have an inflated sense of self-importance,” Dr. Orth said. “They are typically very confident, assertive and want to be in leadership positions.”

Neurotic narcissism is characterized by hypersensitivity. Those who score highly in this dimension “constantly need validation and are very sensitive to criticism and rejection,” Dr. Orth said. “They often experience significant shame, anxiety, emotional instability, insecurity and self-doubt.”

Those with **antagonistic narcissism** often view others as rivals. They tend to be competitive, hostile toward others and willing to put them down to feel superior, Dr. Orth said. They also lack empathy and are exploitative.

It is “the core of pathological narcissism,” Dr. Malkin said. “These are bullies.”

The studies in Dr. Orth’s analysis used a variety of scales or interviews to measure the three aspects of narcissism, and all three declined with age.

It’s unclear why narcissism would reduce over time, but Sara Konrath, the director of the Interdisciplinary Program for Empathy and Altruism Research at Indiana University, has found in her own research that [empathy increases as we grow older](#).

As people age, they are more likely to grow in maturity and responsibility for others through being a partner, a parent and an employee, she said.

“People are also more likely to value positive and close relationships,” Dr. Konrath added.

How do you cope with a narcissist?

Narcissists are unlikely to improve much in the short term unless they pursue intensive treatment, the experts said, which can put a burden on their friends and family.

“Unfortunately, managing a difficult relationship is the best someone intimately involved with most narcissists can hope for,” said Elinor Greenberg, the author of “Borderline, Narcissistic and Schizoid Adaptations: The Pursuit of Love, Admiration and Safety.”

One strategy is to try what Dr. Malkin calls “catching good.” Narcissistic people are often looking for recognition, so he suggests praising them when they are being more cooperative or caring. By the same token, he said, in situations where you have to maintain contact with a narcissist — for example at family get-togethers or at work — you can punish negative behavior by withdrawing or remaining silent.

An approach that has gained popularity online, [known as gray rocking](#), involves dealing with difficult people by limiting engagement and, essentially, becoming as dull as a gray rock. Try to stay neutral, keep your interactions brief and avoid sharing information that could potentially be turned against you, said Ramani Durvasula, a clinical psychologist and the author of “It’s Not You: Identifying and Healing From Narcissistic People.”

If someone is abusive, however, it may be best to leave the relationship — and depending on the situation, one may need to seek help to do so.

Narcissism can be like a fire, Dr. Malkin said: “The longer it burns, the more it destroys. If you want to avoid damage, there has to be some intervention.”

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/11/well/mind/narcissism-age-empathy.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare&sgrp=c-cb>

Psychopathy declines with age, generally—but this doesn’t mean trust the older psychopath. He or she might just be smarter at it and less obvious. TJB