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# Narcissism Is Increasing. So You’re Not So Special.



[Arthur C. Brooks](https://www.nytimes.com/column/arthur-c-brooks) FEB. 13, 2016 – **New York Times**

MY teenage son recently informed me that there is an Internet quiz to test oneself for narcissism. His friend had just taken it. “How did it turn out?” I asked. “He says he did great!” my son responded. “He got the maximum score!”

When I was a child, no one outside the mental health profession talked about narcissism; people were more concerned with inadequate self-esteem, which at the time was believed to lurk behind nearly every difficulty. Like so many excesses of the 1970s, the self-love cult spun out of control and is now rampaging through our culture like Godzilla through Tokyo.

A [2010 study](https://www.psychologytoday.com/files/attachments/4330/npitimeupdatespps.pdf) in the journal Social Psychological and Personality Science found that the percentage of college students exhibiting narcissistic personality traits, based on their scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, a widely used diagnostic test, has increased by more than half since the early 1980s, to 30 percent. In their book “Narcissism Epidemic,” the psychology professors Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell show that narcissism has increased as quickly as obesity has since the 1980s. Even our egos are getting fat.

It has even infected our political debate. Donald Trump? “Remarkably narcissistic,” the developmental psychologist Howard Gardner [told Vanity Fair magazine](http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/11/donald-trump-narcissism-therapists). I can’t say whether Mr. Trump is or isn’t a narcissist. But I do dispute the assertion that if he is, it is somehow remarkable.

This is a costly problem. While full-blown narcissists often report high levels of personal satisfaction, they create havoc and misery around them. There is overwhelming evidence linking narcissism with lower honesty and raised aggression. It’s notable for Valentine’s Day that narcissists struggle to stay committed to romantic partners, in no small part because they consider themselves superior.

The full-blown narcissist might reply, “So what?” But narcissism isn’t an either-or characteristic. It’s more of a set of progressive symptoms (like alcoholism) than an identifiable state (like diabetes). Millions of Americans exhibit symptoms, but still have a conscience and a hunger for moral improvement. At the very least, they really don’t want to be terrible people.

To solve the problem, we have to understand it. Philosophy helps us do so every bit as well as psychology. The 18th-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote about “amour-propre,” a kind of self-love based on the opinions of others. He considered it unnatural and unhealthy, and believed that arbitrary social comparison led to people wasting their lives trying to look and sound attractive to others.

This would seem to describe our current epidemic. Indeed, in the Greek myth, Narcissus falls in love not with himself, but with his reflection. In the modern version, Narcissus would fall in love with his own Instagram feed, and starve himself to death while compulsively counting his followers.

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If our egos are obese with amour-propre, social media can indeed serve up the empty emotional carbs we crave. Instagram and the like doesn’t create a narcissist, but studies suggest it acts as an accelerant — a near ideal platform to facilitate what psychologists call “grandiose exhibitionism.” No doubt you have seen this in others, and maybe even a little of it in yourself as you posted a flattering selfie — and then checked back 20 times for “likes.”

A healthy self-love that leads to true happiness is what Rousseau called “amour de soi.” It builds up one’s intrinsic well-being, as opposed to feeding shallow cravings to be admired. Cultivating amour de soi requires being fully alive at this moment, as opposed to being virtually alive while wondering what others think. The soulful connection with another person, the enjoyment of a beautiful hike alone (not shared on Facebook) or a prayer of thanks over your sleeping child (absent a #blessed tweet) could be considered expressions of amour de soi.

Translating Rousseau’s wisdom into a master plan to rescue our culture may itself seem grandiose. But it can help each of us shed the traits of the narcissist. Here is an individual self-improvement strategy that combines a healthy self-love (for Valentine’s Day) with a small sacrifice (possibly for Lent).

First, take the [Narcissistic Personality Inventory](http://personality-testing.info/tests/NPI/) test. If you got a “great score” like my son’s friend, perhaps it’s time to reflect a little. Ask, “Is this the person I want to be?”

Second, get rid of the emotional junk food that is feeding any unhealthy self-obsession. Make a list of opinions to disregard — especially those of flatterers and critics — and review the list each day. Resolve not to waste a moment trying to impress others, but rather to treat them (and yourself) with kindness, whether it is earned or not.

Third, go on a social media fast. Post to communicate, praise and learn — never to self-promote. What have you got to lose? Only your distorted, reflected self.

Are these practices easy? Of course not. But I know you can do it. After all, you’re the best.

**Correction: February 21, 2016**

A subheading last Sunday for an essay about narcissism incorrectly described a figure of Greek mythology. Narcissus was a mortal, not a god.

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