

THE BIG IDEAS

Meet the Narcissist

Overconfidence + Vanity +
Materialism + Entitlement.

Sturdy Lads

vs. City dolls.

The Narcissist Triumvirate

Fame + Beauty + Wealth.

Materialism

Is eventually destructive.

The Perfect Relationship

Doesn't exist.

Gratitude

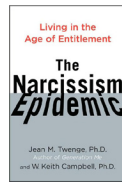
Just what the Dr. ordered.

Setting a Goal

And taking action.

Seeing the Connections

And slaying the narcissist gremlins.



The Narcissism Epidemic

Living in the Age of Entitlement

BY JEAN M. TWENGE & W. KEITH CAMPBELL · SIMON & SCHUSTER © 2009 · 352 PAGES

“Understanding the narcissism epidemic is important because its long-term consequences are destructive to society. American culture’s focus on self-admiration has caused a flight from reality to the land of grandiose fantasy. We have phony rich people (with interest-only mortgages and piles of debt), phony beauty (with plastic surgery and cosmetic procedures), phony athletes (with performance-enhancing drugs), phony celebrities (via reality TV and YouTube), phony genius students (with grade inflation), a phony national economy (with \$11 trillion of government debt), phony feelings of being special among children (with parenting and education focused on self-esteem), and phony friends (with the social networking explosion). All this fantasy might feel good, but, unfortunately, reality always wins. The mortgage meltdown and the resulting financial crisis are just one demonstration of how inflated desires eventually crash to earth.”

~ Jean M. Twenge, Ph.D. & W. Keith Campbell, Ph.D. from *The Narcissism Epidemic*

Twenge and Campbell are two of the world’s leading researchers on the science of narcissism and this is a really powerful, eye-opening book. (Especially if you notice some narcissistic tendencies you have as you read the book... Like I might have! :)

With a super smart, direct and funny style, the authors give us an overview of the narcissism epidemic in America. The book begins with “The Diagnosis” then describes the “Root Causes of the Epidemic” and “Symptoms of Narcissism” before wrapping up with “Prognosis and Treatment.” It’s densely packed with goodness.

In this Note, we’re going to take a quick look at the attributes and causes of narcissism then focus on what we can DO about it.

This is one of those books where, even with a 60-page Note we’d barely scratch the surface of all the wisdom. So, if you’re feelin’ it and are interested in really understanding this complex issue, I HIGHLY recommend the book.

For now, let’s jump in! We’ll kick it off by quickly defining narcissism:

MEET THE NARCISSIST

Meet your friendly neighborhood narcissist: “Narcissism is a psychological term, but even people who have never taken a psychology class know it when they see it. Other common names for narcissism include arrogance, conceit, vanity, grandiosity, and self-centeredness. A narcissist is full of herself, has a big head, is a blowhard, loves the sound of his own voice, or is a legend in her own mind. A lot of self-absorbed jerks are narcissists, but so are a lot of smooth, superficially charming, and charismatic people (who, unfortunately, are later revealed to be self-centered and dishonest). A narcissist has an overinflated view of his own abilities, similar to the kitten that sees himself as a lion on the popular poster. Narcissists are not just confident, they’re overconfident. In short, narcissists admire themselves too much.”

“ Five key causes of the rising narcissism in American culture: A focus on self-admiration, child-centered parenting, celebrity glorification and media encouragement, the attention seeking promoted on the Internet, and easy credit.”

~ Jean Twenge & Keith Campbell

"Our students might not be the brightest, or our poverty level the lowest, but Americans do just fine on narcissism tests."

~ Jean Twenge & Keith Campbell

We don't have the space to go into detail on it in this Note, but here are the "five key causes of the rising narcissism in American culture: A focus on self-admiration, child-centered parenting, celebrity glorification and media encouragement, the attention seeking promoted on the Internet, and easy credit."

Get the book to dive into a detailed look at the theorized causes and attributes of the modern narcissist. (You can even take a mini-test to see where you stand.)

For now, know that the symptoms of narcissism include vanity, materialism, uniqueness, antisocial behavior, relationship troubles, and entitlement.

STURDY LADS VS. CITY DOLLS

"The United States has also historically valued self-reliance, which is quite different from narcissism. In his culturally defining 1841 essay "Self-Reliance," Ralph Waldo Emerson argued that individualism must be grounded in effort and responsibility. He praised young people who chose to work hard rather than show off: "A sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont, who...always, like a cat, falls on his feet, is worth a hundred of these city dolls." In other words, repeated effort and hard work are what define you. If you are not successful, suck it up and try again. This would be a great public service announcement, but it is a little at odds with our current cultural values, which instead focus more on admiring yourself no matter how little effort you put in or however bad the result."

Hah. Well, there ya go. These guys don't mince their words. :)

"Narcissism is a great predictor of imaginary success—but not of actual success."

~ Jean Twenge & Keith Campbell

I'm a huge fan of Emerson and his classic essay *Self-Reliance*. Check out both the Notes on *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (where I share some of my favorite Big Ideas on various essays) AND the actual PDF of *Self-Reliance* we've got in the bonus section of the Library. I've read that essay dozens of times and it always inspires.

Here's a little fuller context for the Emerson quote: "If our young men miscarry in their first enterprises, they lose all heart. If the young merchant fails, men say he is ruined. If the finest genius studies at one of our colleges, and is not installed in an office within one year afterwards in the cities or suburbs of Boston or New York, it seems to his friends and to himself that he is right in being disheartened, and in complaining the rest of his life. A sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont, who in turn tries all the professions, who teams it, farms it, peddles, keeps a school, preaches, edits a newspaper, goes to Congress, buys a township, and so forth, in successive years, and always, like a cat, falls on his feet, is worth a hundred of these city dolls."

The important point here is that our individualism needs to be grounded in HARD WORK and RESPONSIBILITY.

Our modern society is filled with the "city dolls" of Emerson's era who thought they should succeed in their first try and would spend their lives complaining if they didn't. Entitlement mixed with an inflated sense of "specialness" without any sense of a classic work ethic is a recipe for narcissism.

We need more of what Emerson calls the "sturdy lads" (and gals). :)

For now, let's take a quick look at what our "city dolls" value.

THE NARCISSISTIC TRIMUMVIRATE

"An increasing number of Americans not only admire fame from afar but fervently wish to enter the circle of celebrity themselves. In 2006, 51% of 18-to 25-year-olds said that "becoming famous" was an important goal of their generation—nearly five times as many as named "becoming more spiritual" as an important goal. A 2006 poll asked children in Britain to name

"Self-esteem comes after success, not before, because self-esteem is based on success (whether that's academic success or simply being a good friend to someone)."

~ Jean Twenge & Keith Campbell

"the very best thing in the world." The most popular answer was "being a celebrity." "Good looks" and "being rich" rounded out the top three, making for a perfectly narcissistic triumvirate. "God" came in last. A friend of Jean's once asked a teenage girl, "What do you want to be when you're older?" "Famous," she replied. "For what?" the older person asked. "It doesn't matter, I just want to be famous," said the teen."

So, the Top 3 "very best things in the world" for our young narcissists are: "being a celebrity," "good looks" and "being rich."

Wow. The narcissistic triumvirate.

If that isn't shocking enough, how about this?

"Even being near fame is appealing: 43% of middle school girls said they wanted to become a celebrity personal assistant, twice as many as chose "the president of a great university like Harvard or Yale," three times more than chose "a United States Senator" and four times more than "chief of a major company like General Motors." So just being close to a celebrity is now considered more desirable than being a public servant, a successful businessperson, or a university president."

Yikes.

MATERIALISM IS EVENTUALLY SELF-DESTRUCTIVE

"Unfortunately, this type of materialism is eventually self-destructive; people who value being wealthy as an end in itself (rather than as an outcome of achieving other life goals) are less happy and more prone to depression."

They continue: "On average, materialistic people are less happy and more depressed. Even people who simply aspire to have more money suffer from poor mental health; they also report more physical health problems such as sore throats, backaches, and headaches and were more likely to drink too much alcohol and use illegal drugs. Striving for financial success, apparently, makes people miserable."

Edward Deci, one of the leading researchers on human motivation, goes into detail on this in his classic book, *Why We Do What We Do* (see Notes!).

He tells us: "The researchers found that if any of the three extrinsic aspirations—for money, fame, or beauty—was very high for an individual relative to the three intrinsic aspirations, the individual was also more likely to display poorer mental health. For example, having an unusually strong aspiration for material success was associated with narcissism, anxiety, depression, and poorer social functioning as rated by a trained clinical psychologist..."

In contrast, strong aspirations for any of the intrinsic goals—meaningful relationships, personal growth, and community contributions—were positively associated with well-being. People who strongly desired to contribute to their community, for example, had more vitality and higher self-esteem. When people organize their behavior in terms of intrinsic strivings (relative to extrinsic strivings) they seem more content—they feel better about who they are and display more evidence of psychological health."

To repeat: Unless you want to be psychologically unstable, pursuing the extrinsic goals of fame, wealth and beauty is a very bad idea.

The solution? Rather than chase fame, wealth and beauty, go after the INTRINSIC goals of developing closer relationships, growing as a person, and making a contribution to your community!!

P.S. Where are YOU focusing your energy?

"When children are overindulged, Kindlon argues, it leads to outcomes resembling the seven deadly sins: pride, wrath, envy, sloth, gluttony, lust, and greed. The seven deadly sins are, of course, a succinct summary of the symptoms of narcissism."

~ Jean Twenge & Keith Campbell

"Americans are obsessed with people who are obsessed with themselves. In this new world, being narcissistic is cool."

~ Jean Twenge & Keith Campbell

Really pay attention. Seriously.

You might just notice that when you're most anxious/depressed/stressed, you tend to be focused on the extrinsic madness of getting more money, looking hotter or becoming more famous/powerful. Solve it by moving your attention away from that to developing deeper relationships, becoming a more virtuous person, and making a positive difference in your community!!

NARCISSISM AND THE PERFECT RELATIONSHIP

"Our individualistic culture narcissistically teaches people not to compromise. "Whether we're talking about an eight-year marriage or an eight-week fling, you should never stick with someone you aren't 100 percent sure about just because you're afraid you won't do any better," writes former ABC TV Bachelorette Jen Schefft in her 2007 advice book, *Better Single Than Sorry: A No-Regrets Guide to Loving Yourself and Never Settling*. "If you're a self-assured woman with a lot to offer, there's no excuse for it. Low self-esteem is...one of the forces of evil that drives women to settle." In other words, you shouldn't put up with any flaws in your partner—you're too good for that. While some partners do have truly major flaws, anyone who's been in a relationship for more than a few months can tell you that there are always going to be times when "you aren't 100 percent sure" about your partner. No one is flawless, and if you expect perfection from a partner you are either delusional or narcissistic. Yet Schefft's statements are squarely in the cultural mainstream, with TV, movies, and magazines promoting very similar messages. "Many GenXers feel entitled to a relationship that is always fun and easy," notes Jillian Straus in her cultural analysis *Unhooked Generation*. "Many [of them] wanted to 'do their own thing' and expected love and relationships to be on their schedule, on their terms, and to come without too much personal sacrifice.... [There is] a 'What have you done for me lately?' attitude in relationships." And if the answer is "not enough," it's on to the next partner—after all, goes our narcissistic cultural patter, you deserve better."

Another yikes.

Twenge and Campbell go off on how the narcissist shows up in relationship and it's humbling to see a good chunk of my dating past wrapped up in the search for the perfect partner and the perfectionistic/narcissistic approach of "never settling."

Icky.

This is tied to Tal Ben-Shahar's ideas of the "Optimalist" vs. the "Perfectionist" that we explore in our Note on his GREAT book *The Pursuit of Perfect*. Basic idea: We've gotta deal with the constraints of reality and realize that nothing is EVER going to be PERFECT—especially not our partners and relationships.

As Twenge and Campbell tell us: "No one is flawless, and if you expect perfection from a partner you are either delusional or narcissistic."

Amen.

There's something so incredibly liberating when we move beyond the romanticized "falling in love" phase and into the "choosing to love" phase of a relationship. (It's certainly been a HUGE step forward for me!! We'll talk about this specific Idea some more when we explore *The Five Languages of Love* soon! :)

Alright. Time to explore some ways to deal with any pesky little narcissistic tendencies we might have. Here are some core practices the good Doctors recommend!

GRATITUDE: JUST WHAT THE DR. ORDERED

"One of the best ways to combat entitlement is to be grateful for what you already have. In one fascinating study, people were asked to list all the things they were grateful for once a week for

"Web 2.0, says Andrew Keen in The Cult of the Amateur, is 'ignorance meets egoism meets bad taste meets mob rule.'"

~ Jean Twenge & Keith Campbell

"In the late '90s Americans spent more on shoes, jewelry, and watches (\$80 billion) than on higher education (\$65 billion). An incredible 93% of teenage girls say that shopping is their favorite activity."

~ Jean Twenge & Keith Campbell

ten weeks. Compared to a group of people who did not do this task, those who thought about everything they were thankful for reported a greater sense of well-being, enjoyed better health, and exercised more. They were also more emotionally supportive to others. Gratitude is the opposite of entitlement: you think about what you already have, instead of what you deserve to have but don't.

Are you feeling grateful? ... Or entitled?

Check in on that. And know that focusing on the things we think we deserve to have but don't is a good way to get ourselves all tied up in a psychological knot.

We talk about the power of gratitude often (see the Note on *Thanks!* for more goodness) and I just love this: "*Gratitude is the opposite of entitlement: you think about what you already have, instead of what you deserve to have but don't.*"

So, let's roll up our sleeves and get to work, shall we?

Let's take a moment to really reflect on it.

For what are YOU grateful?!

I feel really grateful for:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Very nice. Now, let's make focusing on gratitude a regular practice!!

SETTING A GOAL

"The key to practicing personal change is to set a goal ("I want to put others first" or "I want to experience the world without always thinking about myself") and establish a set of action steps ("I will work in a charitable organization for two hours per week," "I will take up a sport that is so difficult that I cannot think about myself," "I will not interrupt others when they talk," or "No more shopping except for necessities"). If possible, enlist some social support toward this goal. It's more embarrassing to fail at self-improvement when your daughter or your husband knows about your goals—and, on the positive side, friends and family can encourage and support you. Stick with it, keeping a record of your efforts. This is not a quick fix, but it can be very effective."

If we want to change, we've gotta set a clear goal and define some action steps to get us there.

Seeing that we've got our sleeves rolled up from the last exercise, now seems like a pretty sweet time to do so, eh?

My #1 personal goal to deal with any potential narcissistic tendencies I have is: _____

Here's what I'm going to do to achieve this goal: _____

...

Sweet sauce! Time to rock it! :)

SEEING THE CONNECTIONS

“Another practice for minimizing narcissism is paying attention to the wider social connections in the world. No one can exist without massive amounts of support from others. Writer Rebecca Walker was mesmerized when she saw the Dalai Lama speak on this topic. As Walker relates, His Holiness “was talking about the myth of independence. If you are so independent, he asked, who grows your food? Who sews your clothes, builds your house, makes sure that water comes out of your showerhead? How were you even born? The fact is, he said, we have not done one single thing alone, without the help of a small army of others, and yet we walk around talking about the necessity and supremacy of independence. It’s completely irrational.”

The myth of independence. Powerful stuff.

Reminds me Einstein’s amazing wisdom: “From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we do know: that we are here for the sake of each other - above all for those upon whose smile and well-being our own happiness depends, and also for the countless unknown souls with whose fate we are connected by a bond of sympathy. Many times a day I realize how much my own outer and inner life is built upon the labors of my fellow men, both living and dead, and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give in return as much as I have received.”

So, who sews your clothes and grows your food and makes sure that water comes out of your showerhead?

Here’s to remembering the infinite connections we share with so many people around the world and battling the narcissistic gremlins by focusing on how we can give in return as much as we have received!

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

If you liked this Note,
you’ll probably like...

Me to We

Why We Do What We Do

Thanks!

The Pursuit of Perfect

The Selected Writings of
Ralph Waldo Emerson

About the Authors of “The Narcissism Epidemic”

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Jean M. Twenge, Ph.D., is a widely published associate professor of psychology at San Diego State University. She holds degrees from the University of Chicago and the University of Michigan.



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Brian Johnson is a lover of wisdom (aka a “Philosopher”) and a passionate student of life who’s committed to inspiring and empowering millions of people to live their greatest lives as he studies, embodies and shares the universal truths of optimal living. He harts his job.