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- Find a Therapist
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- Tests
- Psych Basics
- Experts



“Our lives are increasingly organized around data, but the average person is largely innumerate.”

Arthur Dobrin, D.S.W.

Fulfillment at Any Age

How to remain productive and healthy into your later years
by Susan Krauss Whitbourne, Ph.D.

Get in Touch With Your Hidden Narcissist

How to make your implicit self-esteem work for you.
Published on May 29, 2012 by Susan Krauss Whitbourne, Ph.D. in Fulfillment at Any Age



When we think of narcissism, we think of the clinical condition in which people show excessive levels of such qualities as self-love, grandiosity, and entitlement. Many true narcissists become enraged when other people fail to recognize and admire them because they expect that everyone thinks as highly of them as they do of themselves. However, some people with narcissistic personality disorder base their desire for attention on an overly low sense of self-esteem. Though the causes are different, the results are the same in that these individuals constantly seek attention, have overly shallow relationships, and exploit the people they know.

Narcissism can stem from a number of sources, particularly when it's of the non-pathological form. Egocentrism, the tendency to see things from your own point of view, can lead you to engage in narcissistic behaviors in which you develop blinders to the needs of other people. Apart from this cognitive distortion, we also have a biased tendency to value the things that are ours more than the things that belong to other people. This bias leads us to engage in the irrational behavior called the endowment effect in which you place greater value on things you already own than the things you don't have in your possession. Experiments on buying and selling behavior show that people will demand a higher price from a buyer for, say a CD they already own, than they're willing to pay to purchase the exact same CD to add it to their collection. This is an example of the more general mere ownership effect. We value the things we own because we see them as an extension of our own identity.

The fact that we endow our possessions with greater value because they're ours is just one example of everyday, healthy narcissism. A little bit of self-love is good for our self-esteem. Loving the things we own is one form of this expression of healthy self-esteem. Often, we're not even aware of just how much we hold these inherently positive views of ourselves. These unconscious views, known as implicit self-esteem, often differ radically from our explicit self-esteem, in which we state outright how we feel about ourselves. People may rate their self-esteem as average or even low on a standard self-rating questionnaire with questions such as "On the whole, I feel satisfied with myself." However, their implicit self-esteem may reveal quite a different picture.

Try this out for yourself.

The following 10 questions are from one of the most widely-used self-esteem tests currently in use, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (R-SES). Rate each question on a 4-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree:



Susan Krauss Whitbourne, Ph.D., is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her latest book is *The Search for Fulfillment*. [more...](#)

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1. On the whole I am satisfied with myself.
2. At times I think that I am no good at all.
3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.
6. I certainly feel useless at times.
7. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least the equal of others.
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.
9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.
10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.

Now you're going to take another test. This one measures your liking of certain letters. To take the test, please get out a new sheet of paper and follow these instructions:

1. Write down all the letters of the alphabet vertically in a column on the left of the sheet of paper.
2. Next to each letter, provide a rating of 1 to 4 with 1= dislike very much and 4= like very much.
3. Now write across the top of your paper the letters "IYFN," "IYLN," "NIYFN," and "NIYLN" creating four columns. These letters stand for "In Your First Name," "In Your Last Name," "Not in Your First Name," and "Not in Your Last Name."
4. Compute your average letter ratings for the four columns.

DON'T READ FURTHER UNTIL YOU'VE COMPLETED BOTH TESTS




To score yourself on the R-SES, add the ratings you gave to Items 1, 3, 4, 7, and 10, and add the opposite of the ratings you gave to Items 2, 5, 6, 8, and 9 (in other words 4=1). In a study conducted in my lab using the R-SES on a sample of approximately 150 adults, **the scores of the best-adjusted individuals in the sample was about 35, and those with the least favorable self-esteem averaged about 29** (Whitbourne, Sneed & Skultety, 2002).




Now score yourself on the second test. If you're like most people, you'll show a variation of the self-ownership effect by giving higher ratings for the letters in your name than the letters not in your name. This is a paper-and-pencil version (Lipsitz & Gifford, 2003) of a test normally done experimentally known as **the name-letter effect** (Nuttin, 1985). In the experimental situation, respondents have no clue about the test's true purpose, whereas here you may have had a sneaking suspicion (given the topic of this blog). However, **you should have shown some of the effect and rated letters in your name higher than those which aren't.**

Research findings on both of these measures support the idea that the average person has a robust sense of self and maybe even a fair degree of narcissism. Average scores on the R-SES are, as you just saw, relatively high with an average only a few points away from the maximum score. If we take the statements on this test quite literally, we could even go one step further and say that the items, as worded, sound quite similar to the traits we associate with people high in narcissism: "I feel that I have a number of good qualities." "I am a person of worth, at least the equal of others." These are exactly the types of self-statements that narcissists make. There seems to be a fairly high degree of narcissism in the average person's explicit self-esteem score.

The name-letter test is a far better-disguised way to test self-esteem because participants aren't aware of what it is testing. People's scores on this test reflect how well they unconsciously regard themselves. The higher the ratings of the letters in their own name, the higher their implicit self-esteem.

For the average individual, we would assume that implicit and explicit self-esteem would be fairly strongly connected. However, some people may score much higher on the explicit than on the implicit self-esteem scale because they don't want to, or can't, acknowledge their feelings of

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inadequacy. Their high explicit self-esteem scores are due to their feelings of defensiveness, not due to a truly positive sense of self. For these individuals, we would expect their implicit self-esteem to be low and their explicit self-esteem to be high. Conversely, some people may score high on the implicit self-esteem measure but have low explicit self-esteem scores. For these individuals, their high intrinsic self-esteem may reflect an unduly high set of expectations for their ideal self. Their lower extrinsic self-esteem may be an expression of feelings that the reality of who they are doesn't match the idea of who they would like to be.

In a study comparing depressive symptoms, suicidal ideology, and loneliness between the so-called "defensive" (low implicit-high explicit) with "damaged" (high implicit-low explicit) groups, Dutch researcher Daan Creemers and his colleagues (2012) found that indeed the damaged group was higher on all three indices of psychological difficulties than the defensive group. The findings support the idea that a little narcissism can be healthy. People who tune out to their shortcomings are less likely to feel the pain of disappointment when the reality of their accomplishments doesn't match the dreams of their aspirations.

The existence of the name-letter effect in and of itself shows that we carry within our cognitive biases a considerable degree of narcissism. Evidence accrued over the past 10 years shows that people have an unconscious bias toward making important life choices based on a variation of the name letter effect. **Implicit egotism is your tendency to gravitate toward people, places, and things that resemble the self**, including the letters in your name. The original study by Brett Pelham at the University of Buffalo provided compelling data to show that, for example, men named Dennis are more likely to choose careers in- say- dentistry rather than law.

Despite some criticisms of the original study, the findings remain robust, as reported by [Pelham and colleagues \(2005\)](#). Ironically, I think I was drawn to the article by the fact that Pelham is at my undergraduate alma mater, the University of Buffalo. Also, the title of the original article was "Why Susie Sells Seashells by the Seashore." Obviously I would be more likely to be interested in an article that had my first name, right?

Though impressive, findings on implicit egotism have met with challenges from other researchers who believe that the appropriate statistical controls weren't sufficiently invoked. Ghent University researchers Anseel and Duyck (2008) set out to test the predictions of implicit egotism using data from the files of over 582,000 Belgian workers in the private sector industries. As predicted by implicit egotism, people were in fact more likely to work in companies that contained the initial letter of their last name. Even our choice of companies, not just occupation, seems influenced by an unconscious favoritism we have toward the letters in our own names.

Our unconscious attraction toward the mere letters of our name supports the idea that each of us carries an inherent degree of narcissism. Whether or not we realize it, our self-esteem has a strong favorable grounding. However, **it's also important to adjust your implicit self-esteem so that it matches your explicit.** Being too harsh on yourself (low implicit self-esteem) is as detrimental as shielding yourself from your limitations (high implicit self-esteem). Build a reasonable, but not excessive, narcissism into your personality and your self-esteem will flourish.

Follow me on [Twitter @swhitbo](#) for daily updates on psychology, health, and [aging](#). Feel free to join my [Facebook group](#), "[Fulfillment at Any Age](#)," to discuss today's blog, or to ask further questions about this posting.

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