

# STUCK ON

# YOURSELF

COVER

ARE MILLENNIALS REALLY MORE INDIVIDUALISTIC?

BY STEPHANIE KRAMER



■ The traditional image of a narcissist is familiar: someone gazing at themselves in the mirror and falling in love with their own reflection. But narcissism is a bit more complex than mere vanity. It can be a serious psychological issue, and those affected might not always be readily willing to seek help. So, what actually makes a narcissist? The word is used so often nowadays, you might think they are all around us.

Is narcissism really on the rise? Judging by the number of books written on the topic in recent years, it's hard to resist the idea. Some psychologists say that millennials (those born between 1981 and 1996), influenced by cultural changes like the rise of the Internet, are more self-obsessed and narcissistic than previous generations. They say that 20-somethings are more individualistic and concerned with themselves than any generations before them.

Others, just as strongly, oppose the view that millennials are individualistic. Millennials are more diverse, more educated, and more single than earlier generations. But are they also more narcissistic? If they are, what does that mean for the future of society and the world?

#### ME, ME, ME?

The alarm sounded more than a decade ago by some researchers about "millennials being narcissistic" has long since become mainstream. Among them is Dr. Jean Twenge, a psychologist at San Diego State University, who has published several books on the subject.

Twenge claims that modern culture is moving toward greater individualism and has produced a generation of young people with over-inflated egos. On NPR's "Hidden Brain" podcast, Twenge argues that social media is a driving force behind the trend, as it encourages constant self-promotion and enables people to broadcast every detail of their lives. At the same time, parenting styles have fostered increased levels of self-esteem and the sense of specialness.

Everyone belongs to his or her generation. The culture you grow up in, along with economic and world events as well

as behavioral norms, shape your worldview. In general, says Twenge, millennials see themselves in a more positive light, have high expectations, and are less attuned to global events.

Her observations are largely founded on evidence that millennials tend to score higher on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. The NPI, which contains 40 pairs of questions, asks people whether they agree with statements such as "I would prefer to be a leader" versus "It makes little difference to me whether I am a leader or not."

In a 2008 article published in *Journal of Personality*, Twenge conducted a meta-analysis of 85 studies that pooled the results from surveys done on undergraduates using NPI results between 1979 and 2006. A total of 16,475 students were included in the analysis. The results showed a significant increase in NPI scores over time, a pattern that continued in later studies. As Twenge states in a 2013 paper, the combined results "point toward 'Generation Me' and away from 'Generation We.'"

But not all psychologists are convinced. Many critics question the use of studies on college students who represent only a fraction of the U.S. population. Some also wonder whether the NPI is a reliable test for gauging narcissism.

"The main flaw is in the way narcissism is measured," says Dr. Jeffrey Arnett, a research professor in psychology at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. "[The NPI] includes things that could arguably be considered healthy self-esteem, such as asserting your point of view," he says. "Some of the items are narcissism and some are definitely not."

because people in the latter category are more likely to experience greater anxiety and depression.

Narcissists are generally known for lacking empathy, but recently several studies have challenged that assumption. In a 2014 review in *Personality Disorders*, Dr. Arielle Baskin-Sommers and colleagues suggested that narcissists are actually able to feel what another person is feeling when they're asked to imagine it. These results could have implications for treating certain subtypes of narcissism. In general, however, pathological narcissism is not curable, although it can be treated.

**"YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL CONFIDENT ABOUT BEING ABLE TO MAKE A PLACE FOR THEMSELVES IN THE WORLD. IT'S NOT NARCISSISM. IT'S JUST A HEALTHY SELF-BELIEF THAT IS NECESSARY IN ORDER FOR YOU TO MAKE A LIFE FOR YOURSELF."**

#### WHAT DOES THE NPI MEASURE?

The NPI is the most commonly used test of narcissism. But because it measures narcissistic behavior in a general sense, it includes positive traits, such as assertiveness, along with harmful ones. This makes it difficult to differentiate between pathological symptoms and what is considered normal narcissism.

Even items like "I am a born leader" raise questions. Is the person who says "yes" to that truly a narcissist? Does envisioning oneself in a leadership role indicate a preoccupation with one's outward appearance?

Indeed, many psychologists say that millennials are exceptionally considerate and generous toward others. They are more accepting of ethnic diversity, more open to same-sex relationships, and are more likely to choose marriage partners from different backgrounds than their own.

Some researchers dispute that view, however, citing studies that show that millennials are less

involved in politics and global affairs. They argue that millennials place more emphasis on their own achievements and are less civic-minded.

But this trend is open to interpretation. While millennials may be less interested in politics, they are interested in finding new ways to bring about social change and make a difference. Perhaps millennials are not less engaged, but rather are engaging in different ways.

#### WHAT'S NEW?

Social media has undoubtedly given people of all ages a platform for endless self-promotion. But does this trigger narcissism? The correlation seems unlikely, although it's possible that narcissists might be more drawn to social media in the first place.

Additionally, many researchers say that those in their teens and 20s don't actually differ much from same-aged people of previous generations. Social media may prolong the transition to adulthood, but any grandiosity tends to decrease once people make their way into the real world. Everyone still needs to get along with others at work, maintain their friendships, and form and maintain a romantic partnership.

So are millennials really more narcissistic than previous generations? According to Arnett, believing you can create your own future has more to do with hope and self-assurance.

"Young people feel confident about being able to make a place for themselves in the world," says Arnett. "It's not narcissism. It's just a healthy self-belief that is necessary in order for you to make a life for yourself." ■

#### HERE ARE SOME TYPICAL QUESTION PAIRS FROM THE NPI:

"I find it easy to manipulate people."  
"I don't like it when I find myself manipulating people."

"Compliments embarrass me."  
"I like to be complimented."

"Leadership is a quality that takes a long time to develop."  
"I am a born leader."

"I am more capable than other people."  
"There is a lot I can learn from other people."

"I am much like everybody else."  
"I am an extraordinary person."

"I expect a great deal from other people."  
"I like to do things for other people."

## TYPES OF NARCISSISM

In everyday speech, people often use the term "narcissism" to describe any number of behaviors: from obsession with one's appearance to behavior that is rude, inconsiderate, or self-centered.

But in psychology, narcissistic personality disorder (or NPD) is characterized by extreme selfishness, sense of grandiosity, lack of empathy, and craving for admiration. NPD is a pervasive pattern of behaviors that affects many areas of someone's life. To be medically diagnosed as a narcissist, a person's actions must disrupt their work, social, or personal life.

Within pathological narcissism there are two main types: grandiose and vulnerable narcissism.

Grandiose narcissists have a strong sense of entitlement and constantly need admiration. They are typically exploitative, envious, and domineering. Grandiose types are motivated by what others think of them and "looking out for number one."

In contrast, vulnerable narcissists appear to be shy, frequently needing validation from other people. But underneath the surface they also have grandiose fantasies and a sense of entitlement. One reason the distinction is important is