



Narcissism: It's more Complex than High Self-Esteem

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Narcissism is often used synonymously with high or inflated self-esteem. Indeed, narcissism is illustrated by individuals with grandiose self-views and a need for admiration. The origins of the term stem from Greek mythology where a young man named Narcissus became enamored with his reflection. However, individuals with higher levels of narcissistic traits make up a unique combination of high and vulnerable self-esteem. Since narcissism is more complex than high self-esteem, individuals with higher levels of narcissism may not see the benefits typically rewarded to those with stable high self-esteem. In particular, narcissism is associated with maladaptive behaviors, fragile self-esteem, and impaired interpersonal relationships.

Although some researches suggest that high self-esteem is linked to aggressive behavior, these findings have been inconsistent [1]. A more thorough look at the literature may lead one to believe that narcissism, not high self, is linked to aggression. Stable high self-esteem is associated with better problem solving abilities and a decreased likelihood to attribute the motives of others as hostile. These factors actually help protect an individual from behaving in aggressive ways. Alternatively, fragile or unstable high self-esteem in the form of narcissism has been linked with aggression, a need for retaliation, and negative feelings after upward social comparisons.

In considering the differences in outcomes one must think of narcissism and high self-esteem as two related but unique constructs. High self-esteem is based on an individual's subjective view of themselves and their worth. Narcissism is based on an elevated view of self that stems from the approval, admiration, and acceptance of others. Henceforth, when an individual is not validated or viewed as superior by their peers they are more likely to respond in aggressive, antagonist ways. An individual with high self-esteem maintains their level of self-esteem despite the opinions of others. The self-esteem of individuals with higher levels of narcissism is fragile and reliant on power or exploitation of others to maintain status quo.

Another important difference to note between these variables is their impact on interpersonal relationships. Specifically, individuals with high stable self-esteem typically possess healthy, egalitarian social relationships. Individuals with higher levels of narcissism are plagued with strained interpersonal relationships that ultimately lead to the dissolution of the relationships. Some theorists suggest that narcissists' are initially liked for their confident, charismatic attitudes, but are subsequently shunned for ostentatious displays of these traits.

In summation, narcissism should be viewed as high, elevated, self-esteem that is also fragile and dependent on the opinions of others. If we categorize narcissism into its adaptive and maladaptive facets, one may see benefits associated with high self-esteem. However, narcissism in general is not associated with the positive consequences that have been linked to high stable self-esteem.

Reference

1. Kirkpatrick LA, Waugh CE, Valencia A, Webster GD (2002) The Functional Domain Specificity of Self-Esteem and the Differential Prediction of Aggression. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 82: 756-767.