

# Probing Question: Is American society becoming more narcissistic?

December 2 2014, by Melissa Beattie-Moss

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It has been exactly one hundred years since Sigmund Freud penned his pivotal essay "On Narcissism." It's easy to wonder how the father of psychoanalysis might react to society today, especially the millennials who came of age around the year 2000 and have been dubbed the "Me Me Me Generation." The social media-focused culture of selfies, Twitter, and Facebook is often criticized for making Americans, younger ones in particular, more self-absorbed and entitled.

But are we, in fact, more narcissistic than we were a few decades ago? Are millennials more narcissistic than previous generations? Or are we too lightly employing that word, which describes a mental illness diagnosis?

"I don't think people are usually referring to a person with Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) when they toss around the term '[narcissism](#)' today," says Aaron Pincus, Penn State professor of psychology.

"Narcissism has both normal and pathological forms of expression," he explains. "Most of the recent media coverage has focused on what I refer to as normal narcissism. It's normal for [individuals](#) to see themselves in a positive light and to seek out self-enhancement experiences such as successful achievements and competitive victories."

It's also normal to want to show off your accomplishments, he says.

"Some people are focused on these things more than others, and some

are self-centered to an annoying extent," but if they can generally manage these needs effectively and "seek out their gratification in culturally and socially acceptable ways, and regulate self-esteem and interpersonal behavior when disappointments are experienced, that's not pathological narcissism."

For instance, there are those who "think highly of themselves and will let you know it," says Pincus, "but in many cases such individuals are also highly accomplished. I think these are the folks most people are referring to when they toss around the term 'narcissism' today."

What of critics who point to the "Age of the Selfie" as evidence of a shift toward narcissism? [One study](#) suggests that narcissism in American college students is up 30 percent in the last 30 years.

"Research does show that normal narcissism is related to increased social media activity," Pincus says. "Certainly the explosion of social media created a meteoric rise in options to show off and sources to turn to for instant recognition, measured by how many likes your picture gets or how many views your video has. However, [recent research](#) also finds that if you ask people to increase their use of social media, this does not make them more narcissistic over time. So I think it makes sense that normal narcissism and social media are a good match for each other, but I don't view this as having much to do with pathological narcissism."

One thing people might not realize, adds Pincus, is that "the inflated self-image of individuals suffering from NPD is actually fragile and vulnerable." As years go by and grand ambitions fail to materialize, he explains, these individuals "can become quite depressed, ashamed, and suicidal." A pathological narcissist's needs "become all consuming and are pursued through behaviors such as perfectionism, cheating, lying, arguing and putting others down, and attention-seeking," he says. Often, those suffering from pathological narcissism cannot effectively work, go

to school, or even enjoy hobbies.

"One patient reported being fired over thirty times because he could not get along with employers whom he would inevitably find incompetent," says Pincus. "Another patient reported he could not attend university lectures because he could not tolerate being a nameless note-taker in a sea of note-takers. A third patient found no pleasure in hobbies he tried because he would ultimately find them all flawed in some intolerable way."

One way to differentiate between "normal narcissism" and NPD, says Pincus, is to realize that people with NPD try to protect themselves from uncomfortable feelings that most of us have learned to tolerate and cope with. "Most of us understand messages such as 'you can't win them all,' or 'I'm an average person.' But individuals with NPD are not only unable to tolerate failures and losses, they typically cannot tolerate feeling flawed in any way or even that they are just average."

In the face of perplexing [social media](#) phenomena such as bear selfies, daredevil selfies, and smiling selfies in solemn places (including Auschwitz) it's tempting to join those who blame our digital era for fostering an epidemic of reckless self-promotion and lack of empathy.

"It may very well be the case that American society is becoming more and more focused on individual accomplishment, outcompeting others, and obtaining recognition," agrees Pincus. "I think it's possible that this leads to individuals exhibiting more signs of normal narcissism." But he's quick to add that he doesn't necessarily think this means society is becoming more pathological. "From a cross-cultural standpoint, the U.S. is famous for being an individualistic society."

**More information:** Robert S. Horton, Chelsea A. Reid, Jessica M. Barber, Josh Miracle, Jeffrey D. Green, "An experimental investigation

of the influence of agentic and communal Facebook use on grandiose narcissism," *Computers in Human Behavior*, Volume 35, June 2014, Pages 93-98, ISSN 0747-5632, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.02.038](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.02.038).

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