

# Narcissistic students don't mind cheating their way to the top

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College students who exhibit narcissistic tendencies are more likely than fellow students to cheat on exams and assignments, a new study shows.

The results suggested that narcissists were motivated to cheat because their academic performance functions as an opportunity to show off to others, and they didn't feel particularly guilty about their actions.

"Narcissists really want to be admired by others, and you look good in college if you're getting good grades," said Amy Brunell, lead author of the study and assistant professor of psychology at Ohio State University at Newark.

"They also tend to feel less guilt, so they don't mind [cheating](#) their way to the top."

Narcissism is a trait in which people are self-centered, exaggerate their talents and abilities and lack empathy for others, Brunell said.

"Narcissists feel the need to maintain a positive self-image and they will sometimes set aside ethical concerns to get what they want."

The study appears online in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences* and will be published in an upcoming print edition.

The study involved 199 [college students](#). They completed a scale that measured narcissism by choosing statements that best described them.

For example, they could choose between "I am not better or no worse than most people" or "I think I am a special person."

The researchers also measured the participants' levels of self-esteem.

Students then completed a measure that examined how much guilt they would feel if they cheated under certain circumstances, or how much guilt they felt a typical student would feel under those same conditions.

Finally, the students indicated how often they had cheated on exams and assignments during the past year, and reported their grade point averages, gender and age.

While it was not surprising that narcissism was linked to cheating, Brunell said it was interesting what dimension of narcissism seemed to have the greatest impact.

"We found that one of the more harmless parts of narcissism -- exhibitionism -- is most associated with academic cheating, which is somewhat surprising," she said.

Exhibitionism is the desire to show off, to make yourself the center of attention.

The two other dimensions of narcissism -- the desire for power and the belief you are a special person -- were not as strongly linked to academic dishonesty.

"You would think that the belief that you are a special person and that you can do what you want would be associated with cheating," Brunell said. "But instead, we're finding that it is the desire to show off that really seems to drive cheating."

Results showed that students who scored higher on exhibitionism also showed lower levels of guilt, which could explain why they were more willing to cheat.

Importantly, those who scored high on exhibitionism didn't think other typical students felt a lack of guilt about cheating.

"That suggests narcissists don't have a lack of moral standards for everyone -- they just don't feel bad about their own immoral behavior," she said.

Moreover, narcissists were not more likely than others to believe that other students were cheating.

"One argument might be that narcissists are admitting to cheating, but saying that everyone else does it, too. But that's not what we found. Narcissists actually report more cheating for themselves than they do for others," Brunell explained.

While narcissism was linked to cheating in the study, self-esteem was not.

Results showed that students with higher levels of self-esteem also tended to have higher GPAs, and were less likely than others to perceive their classmates as cheating.

"People with higher levels of self-esteem are probably more confident in their abilities and don't feel any peer pressure to cheat," she said.

The only major gender difference found in the study was that men were less likely than women to feel guilty about cheating. Older students were less likely to report cheating, and more likely to anticipate feeling guilty about cheating.

These results correspond well with studies that have looked at [narcissism](#) in the workplace, Brunell said.

"It seems likely that the same people causing problems in the workplace and engaging in white collar crime are the ones who were cheating in the classroom," she said.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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