

Can narcissists be moved to show empathy?

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Researchers at the University of Surrey and the University of Southampton have investigated whether narcissists can elicit empathy for another person's suffering. It has been well documented that narcissists lack empathy, but why is that the case, and do they have the capacity to change that behavior? The research is published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

When we think of narcissism most of us can all think of a colleague, friend, or former significant other that would fit the description; "A bit full of themselves, self-centered, and don't seem too concerned about the effects they have on other people," says lead researcher, Erica Hepper. This lack of [empathy](#) has a detrimental effect on interpersonal relationships, social bonding and prosocial behavior.

For the purposes of this research, the researchers focused on individuals who exhibit subclinical narcissism, rather than a clinical diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). Dr. Hepper explains that this distinction was made because "people high in subclinical narcissism are psychologically healthy and well-adjusted, often even very successful, whereas people with NPD are inflexible and volatile, and don't manage day-to-day life well." Subclinical narcissism is also more common, and the number of people exhibiting narcissistic traits in our society continues to increase. The participants were broken down into two categories, 'low narcissists' and 'high narcissists,' which identifies participants as being less narcissistic or more narcissistic than the average person.

Results of the research

The researchers examined whether narcissists are capable of empathizing with another person in distress by having participants read a vignette describing a recent relationship break-up. Regardless of how mild or severe the scenario was, high-narcissists did not show empathy for the subject. The results pinpoint the role of narcissism as driven by its maladaptive components such as entitlement, exploitativeness and exhibitionism. Furthermore, narcissists lacked empathy even when the scenario was relatively severe (i.e., the subject was overwhelmed with depression).

The researchers then tested whether narcissists are capable of showing empathy when they are instructed to take the perspective of the target person. Female participants were shown a 10-minute documentary describing a woman's experience with domestic violence. Participants were prompted to "imagine how she feels" while watching the video. Low-narcissists were unaffected by the cognitive-perspective taking, implying they were already taking the woman's perspective. High-narcissists reported significantly higher empathy for the woman in the video when they had been instructed to take her perspective, versus not being prompted with that suggestion.

Lastly, the researchers tested whether narcissists can be moved, not just emotionally, but also physiologically. Previous studies have shown that increases in [heart rate](#) reliably indicate empathetic response to another's emotions or suffering. High-narcissists had a significantly lower heart rate when exposed to a target character's distress, illustrating that their lack of empathy is also physiological. However, perspective-taking led high-narcissists to respond to another's distress with the same level of autonomic arousal as low-narcissists.

The findings suggest that narcissists do have the capacity to empathize

with other people's needs given the right conditions. "If we encourage narcissists to consider the situation from their teammate or friend's point of view, they are likely to respond in a much more considerate or sympathetic way," Dr. Hepper says. This is an encouraging result and suggests that relatively anti-social members of society can be empathetic, which would improve their long-term relationships.

Dr. Hepper is extending this research to on-line social interactions and ongoing relationships, in an effort to observe whether [narcissists](#) can respond in an empathetic way when speaking with someone who is distressed, or with existing friends and romantic partners.

More information: Hepper, E. G., Hart, C. M., and Sedikides, C. (2014). Moving Narcissus: Can Narcissists Be Empathic?. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 40(8).

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