

# Narcissists may start out popular, but people see through them in the long run

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To build a following, narcissism works. Briefly.

But if, as they say in this electoral season, you're looking to "grow your base," exercising [emotional intelligence](#) - expressing empathy, checking your emotions in a bid to avoid conflict, and investing in personal relationships - is a strategy that beats [narcissism](#) over the long term.

A new exploration of how we make friends and influence people rigorously measured the emergence of popularity in small groups - first-year college students organized into 15 study groups of about 20 in Poland. In the first week of their assignment to a group and then again three months later, 170 of the freshmen named the person or people they most liked in their group. Upon recruitment into the study, each participant completed standard inventories assessing their narcissistic personality traits and gauging their emotional intelligence.

The findings: When a group of strangers is thrown together, individuals who score high on narcissism enjoy an early surge of admiration, recognition and friendship among their peers. But over time, their self-assurance and showmanship cease to build or sustain the growth of friendships.

Meanwhile, individuals whose strong social skills quietly reveal themselves over time build steadily on their modest base of initial admirers. In a popularity contest, the emotionally intelligent ultimately win.

"It seems that a quieter and less needy ego, coupled with abilities to perceive, understand, use, and manage emotions, ensure better relationships in the long run," write the authors of the study, published online Tuesday in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

This conclusion probably makes perfect sense to the emotionally intelligent, who, in any event, do not widely view making friends and influencing people as an end in itself. It may make less sense to a

narcissist, who, for instance, considers the admiration of others his due - or at least something he can engineer whenever he wants.

But being emotionally intelligent or a narcissist is not a strictly either/or proposition. Most of us have personalities that fall on a continuum in both domains.

Some narcissists have supreme confidence in themselves, and also have the emotional intelligence - the ability to read people and to act accordingly - to nurture lasting allies. At the extreme of both, such a person could be a presidential candidate or a manipulative sociopath - or both. (In the current study, the number of participants who scored very high on both measures was not large.)

Other people lack charisma, self-confidence and the skills necessary to make friends. These individuals may bear not a trace of narcissism. But they're emotionally tone-deaf as well.

Most of us fall somewhere in the middle. The authors of the new research found that the two behavioral characteristics were not inversely correlated.

The researchers aimed to gauge the power of narcissism and emotional intelligence not in a lab but in a setting that reflected the potential complexities of real-life social groups. The authors - psychology researchers from Poland, the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States - used network analysis to analyze the many variables that go into friendships and peer-group interactions. This allowed them to take account, for instance, of the fact that people can be influenced by who their friends like as well as by their own preferences.

Worst off at the end of three months were students who scored low in narcissism and also low in emotional intelligence - "a particularly

unfortunate combination," the authors said.

Those who scored high on narcissism and low on emotional intelligence had the advantage of a large initial following, even if their [poor social skills](#) slowed the influx of new adherents over three months. Averaged over three months, the popularity of these socially maladroit self-adorers was on a par with that of individuals with low narcissism but high emotional intelligence. People who fit into the latter group did not draw many early friends, presumably because they lacked the narcissist's charisma. But they steadily amassed a following on the strength of their emotional intelligence, ending up ahead in the friendship contest.

In the end, narcissists may just have a lot more "churn" in their friendships, and that may work for them: Their high self-regard initially draws lots of admirers, and it can withstand the eventual slowing of new friends or the lapse of existing friendships. Firm in the view that they are charismatic leaders, they seek out new audiences, and new admirers to supplement or replace the old ones.

The emotionally intelligent, by contrast, appear to be up-by-the-bootstraps keepers of friends. Starting from nothing, they earn their friends by doing the hard emotional work of friendship, and invest deeply to sustain those friends. Their following grows when friends of friends join their admiration society.

The researchers conclude that making and keeping friends is a better strategy for long-term popularity. But that suggests that emotional intelligence and the strength of one's self-image are matters of conscious choice. Whether we charm our friends with self-confident magnetism or win their allegiance with caring, sharing and loyalty, maybe we just get the [friends](#) and followings we deserve.

**More information:** A. Z. Czarina et al. Do Narcissism and Emotional

Intelligence Win Us Friends? Modeling Dynamics of Peer Popularity Using Inferential Network Analysis, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2016). DOI: 10.1177/0146167216666265 , <http://psp.sagepub.com/content/early/2016/09/19/0146167216666265.abstract>

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