

# Narcissists: Why we need to take better care of them

November 15 2019, by Kostas Papageorgiou

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Narcissists, like sharks, get a bad press. Both are generally seen as menacing, negative forces to be feared and avoided.

But as any biologist will tell you, sharks play a vital role in the marine ecosystem. And it may be that narcissists also have a necessary part to

play in [human society](#).

This of course, goes against the widely accepted perception of personality traits—that it is good to be agreeable and outgoing, and bad to be narcissistic.

After all, [narcissistic people](#) engage in risky behavior, hold an unrealistic superior view of themselves, are overconfident, show little empathy for others, and have little shame or guilt. But if [narcissism](#) is so socially toxic, why does it persist and why is [it said to be](#) on the rise in modern societies?

The answer is that human nature is complex. And while narcissism is often associated with "dark traits" like psychopathy and sadism, it [also has aspects](#) which are widely considered to be positive, such as extroversion and confidence.

In saying this, I do not mean to defend or excuse the worst examples of narcissistic behaviour. Instead, I want to highlight the potentially beneficial elements—which could then enable society to harness the positive potential of "dark" personalities while also curtailing their potential for harm.

## **The best kind of narcissist**

There are two main types of narcissism: "grandiose" and "vulnerable." Vulnerable narcissists are likely to be more defensive and view the behavior of others as hostile, whereas grandiose narcissists usually have an over inflated sense of importance and a preoccupation with status and power.

The results [from our studies show that](#) grandiose narcissism correlates with highly positive components of mental toughness. These include

confidence and a focus on achieving goals, which help protect against symptoms of depression and stress.

The association between narcissism and mental toughness may help to explain the variation in symptoms of depression in society. If a person is more mentally tough, they are likely to embrace challenges head on, rather than viewing them as a hurdle.

So while not all dimensions of narcissism are good, certain aspects can lead to positive outcomes. And a little bit of narcissism can be a useful tool when faced with stressful situations, providing that extra bit of mental toughness we need to get through.

It's a bit like having the ability to run when walking is not enough. The idea is that people need to be flexible. They need to walk when that's all that is required, but run when that's what's necessary. Likewise, the ability to call on a little bit of narcissism when faced with a challenge, socially or professionally, is a useful skill.

## **A bridge to the other side**

[Recent research](#) from [our lab](#) suggests that narcissism may act as a bridge connecting the "dark" (anti-social) and "light" (pro-social) sides of the human personality. Put simply, individuals can cross that bridge to use their dark traits when facing a challenge, and pro-social characteristics when in a [safe environment](#).

Our work suggests that instead of perceiving human personality as a dichotomy (narcissistic versus agreeable) we should treat it as a constantly changing spectrum.

It is not about promoting grandiosity over healthy self-esteem and modesty. Instead it is about promoting diversity of people and ideas by

advocating that dark traits, such as narcissism, should not be seen as either good or bad. They are products of evolution, and expressions of human nature that may be beneficial or harmful depending on the context.

This may help to reduce the marginalization of individuals that score high on dark traits, and work out how best to cultivate some manifestations of these traits, while discouraging others, for the collective good.

It is too simplistic to say that personality traits like narcissism, which help individual empowerment, are socially toxic. People are trying to adapt, survive and succeed in a social, political and [economic environment](#) that promotes the "self-made man or woman," and if they exhibit antagonistic traits such as narcissism they receive negative attention. Yet grandiose narcissism may be the key to protecting individuals from such needless pressure.

Nor do I think there are individuals who live without narcissism. In common with other psychological traits, it exists on a spectrum, with some individuals scoring higher than others.

Elsewhere in the natural world, a human fear and distrust of sharks has led to widespread attitude of "us" versus "them." After the movie [Jaws](#) was released, [according to one conservationist](#) there was a "collective testosterone rush" which led to thousands of anglers targeting and killing sharks off the American coast.

Shark numbers have dropped dramatically (by up to 92%) in the past half century. So just as we are starting to understand the importance of sharks for the marine ecosystem, we have run out of sharks to study.

We should not let narcissists be similarly marginalized just because we

don't understand them. Instead of demonizing parts of our personality, we need to celebrate all of its aspects—and work out how best to use them, for our own benefit and the benefit of society.

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