

How many types of narcissist are there? A psychology expert sets the record straight

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

Our interest in narcissism has never been higher, with Google searches for the word "narcissist" [having steadily increased](#) over the past decade. This term has become part of everyday parlance, readily thrown around to describe [celebrities](#), politicians and ex-partners.

A byproduct of our growing interest in narcissism is a curiosity about what types of [narcissist](#) exist. But this is where things get tricky. A search for "[types of narcissists](#)" on Google returns wildly varied results. Some websites describe as few as [three](#) types. Others list up to [14](#).

What's going on here?

What is a narcissist?

The word "narcissism" comes from the Greek myth of Narcissus, a boy who falls in love with his own reflection.

Over the past century or so, conceptualizations of narcissism have evolved. It is now thought of as a collection of [personality](#) traits characterized by grandiosity, entitlement and callousness. "Narcissist" is the term used to describe someone who scores highly on these traits.

A narcissist may also meet the [diagnostic criteria](#) for [narcissistic personality disorder](#), a mental health diagnosis that affects about 1% of people. It's broadly described as a pervasive pattern of exhibiting grandiosity, needing admiration and lacking empathy.

Importantly, not all narcissists have narcissistic personality disorder.

How many types of narcissism are there?

There are two main types of [trait narcissism](#) (which are distinct from narcissistic personality disorder). These are grandiose narcissism and vulnerable narcissism.

Grandiose narcissism is associated with a grandiose sense of self, aggression and dominance. Vulnerable narcissism is characterized by

heightened emotional sensitivity and a defensive and insecure grandiosity that masks feelings of inadequacy.

[Recent models](#) have identified three core components of narcissism that help explain the similarities and differences between both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism.

1. **Antagonism** is common to both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. It's linked with traits such as arrogance, entitlement, exploitativeness and a lack of empathy.
2. **Agentic extraversion** is unique to grandiose narcissism. It's associated with traits such as authoritativeness, grandiosity and exhibitionism.
3. **Narcissistic neuroticism** is specific to vulnerable narcissism. It's associated with fragile self-esteem and a tendency to experience negative emotions and shame.

A person will likely meet the diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder when there is a convergence of high scores across each of these components.

Also, while diagnostic criteria emphasize the grandiose aspects of narcissistic personality disorder, clinicians report an [oscillation between](#) both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism in people with the disorder.

Vulnerable narcissism has a [considerable overlap](#) with [borderline personality disorder](#), particularly in terms of its causes and the displayed personality traits. A person who only scores highly for vulnerable narcissism is more likely to be diagnosed with [borderline personality disorder](#) than narcissistic personality disorder.

Are there other types of narcissists?

Given the consensus in psychology on the two main types of trait narcissism described above (which sit alongside the clinical diagnosis of [narcissistic personality disorder](#)), how can we account for the many sources describing other "types" of narcissism?

First and most concerning is the proliferation of pop psychology articles that describe types of narcissism for which there is no good evidence.

They feature terms such as "cerebral narcissist," "somatic narcissist," "seductive narcissist" and "spiritual narcissist." But searching for these terms in peer-reviewed academic literature yields no evidence that they are valid types of narcissism.

Some articles also use terms often considered synonymous with grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. This likely comes from early literature, which used a range of terms to describe types of narcissism. [One review](#) from 2008 identified more than 50 different labels used to describe types of narcissism.

Conceptually, however, each of these labels can be mapped onto either grandiose or vulnerable narcissism.

Often you will see "overt" and "covert" being described, sometimes alongside descriptions of grandiose and vulnerable narcissists. Some researchers have proposed overt and covert narcissism as being akin to grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. Others [argue they are](#) more appropriately considered expressions of narcissism present in both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism.

Lastly, a number of these articles describe narcissists by drawing on specific expressions of grandiose or vulnerable narcissism. For instance,

they describe "antagonistic narcissists," "[communal narcissists](#)", "agentic narcissists" and "[sexual narcissists](#)" alongside grandiose and vulnerable narcissists.

These descriptions imply each of these are mutually exclusive types of narcissism, when really they should be thought of as aspects of grandiose and/or vulnerable narcissism. In other words, they are examples of how narcissism might be expressed.

The danger of labels

Narcissism's multifaceted nature has likely contributed to the array of terms people use to describe narcissists.

Some of these are valid constructs. When used accurately, they can be useful for identifying the different ways narcissism is expressed—particularly in [intimate relationships](#), where high levels of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism are associated with perpetration of abuse.

However, online articles that inaccurately describe and categorize [narcissism](#) are anything but helpful. This content fuels armchair psychologists, who then jump to assign the label "narcissist" to anyone they think is displaying narcissistic traits.

Even when accurately applied in clinical settings, diagnostic labels aren't always useful. They may bring [stigma](#), which can discourage people from seeking mental health support.

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