

'Self-love' might seem selfish. But done right, it's the opposite of narcissism

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"To love what you are, the thing that is yourself, is just as if you were embracing a glowing red-hot iron" [said psychoanalyst Carl Jung](#).

Some may argue this social media generation does not seem to struggle with loving themselves. But is the look-at-me-ism so easily found on TikTok and Instagram the kind of self-love we need in order to flourish?

The language of positive psychology can be—and often is—appropriated for all kinds of self-importance, as well as cynical marketing strategies.

Loving yourself, though, psychological experts stress, is not the same as behaving selfishly. There's a firm line between healthy and appropriate forms of loving yourself, and malignant or narcissistic forms. But how do we distinguish between them?

In 2023, researchers Eva Henschke and Peter Sedlmeier conducted [a series of interviews](#) with psychotherapists and other experts on what self-love is. They've concluded it has three main features: [self-care](#), [self-acceptance](#) and self-contact (devoting attention to yourself).

But as an increasingly individualistic society, are we already devoting too much attention to ourselves?

Philosophy and self-love

Philosophers and psychology experts alike have considered the ethics of self-love.

Psychology researcher Li Ming Xue and her colleagues, [exploring the notion of self-love in Chinese culture](#), claim "Western philosophers believe that self-love is a virtue". But this is a very broad generalization.

In the Christian tradition and in much European philosophy, [says philosopher Razvan Ioan](#), self-love is condemned as a profoundly damaging trait.

On the other hand, [many of the great Christian philosophers](#), attempting to make sense of the instruction to love one's neighbor as oneself, admitted certain forms of self-love were virtuous. In order to love your neighbor as yourself, you must, it would seem, love yourself.

In the Western philosophical context, claim Xue and her colleagues, self-love is concerned with [individual rights](#)—"society as a whole only serves to promote an individual's happiness".

This individualistic, self-concerned notion of self-love, they suggest, might come from the Ancient Greek philosophers. In particular, Aristotle. But [Aristotle thought only the most virtuous](#), who benefited the society around them, should love themselves. By making this connection, he avoided equating self-love with self-centredness.

We should love ourselves not out of vanity, he argued, but in virtue of our capacity for good. Does Aristotle, then, provide principled grounds for distinguishing between proper and improper forms of self-love?

Bar too high?

Aristotle might set the bar too high. If only the most virtuous should try to love themselves, this collides head-on with the idea loving yourself can help us improve and become more virtuous—as [philosophers Kate Abramson and Adam Leite have argued](#).

Many psychologists claim self-love is important for adopting the kind and compassionate self-perception crucial for overcoming conditions that weaponise self-criticism, like clinical perfectionism and eating disorders.

More broadly, some argue compassion for oneself is necessary to support honest insights into your own behavior. They believe we need

warm and compassionate self-reflection to avoid the defensiveness that comes with the fear of judgment—even if we're standing as our own judge.

For this reason, a compassionate form of self-love is often necessary to follow Socrates' advice to "know thyself", says [philosopher Jan Bransen](#). Positive self-love, by these lights, can help us grow as people.

Self-love 'misguided and silly'

But not everyone agrees you need self-love to grow. The late [philosopher Oswald Hanfling](#) was deeply skeptical of this idea. In fact, he argued the notion of loving oneself was misguided and silly. His ideas are mostly rejected by philosophers of love, but pointing out where they go wrong can be useful.

When you love someone, he said, you're prepared to sacrifice your own interests for those of your beloved. But he thought the idea of sacrificing your own interests made no sense—which shows, he concluded, we can't love ourselves.

[He wrote](#), "I may sacrifice an immediate satisfaction for the sake of my welfare in the future, as in the case of giving up smoking. In this case, however, my motive is not love but self-interest. What I reveal in giving up smoking is not the extent of my love for myself, but an understanding that the long-term benefits of giving it up are likely to exceed the present satisfaction of going on with it."

We often have conflicting interests (think of someone who is agonizing over two different career paths)—and it's not at all strange to sacrifice certain interests for the sake of others.

This is not just a question of sacrificing short-term desires in favor of a

long-term good, but a matter of sacrificing something of value for your ultimate benefit (or, so you hope).

Self-compassion

Hanfling fails to consider the role of compassionate self-love. While we might understand it's in our interests to do something (for instance, repair bridges with someone we've fallen out with), it might take a compassionate and open disposition towards ourselves to recognize what's in our best interests.

We might need this self-compassion, too, in order to admit our failures—so we can overcome our defensiveness and see clearly how we're failing to fulfill [these interests](#).

Self-acceptance in this context does not mean giving ourselves license to run roughshod over the interests of those around us, nor to justify our flaws as "valid" rather than work on them.

Self-love, as promoted by contemporary psychologists, means standing in a compassionate relationship to ourselves. And there's nothing contradictory about this idea.

Just as we strive to develop a supportive, kind relationship to the people we care about—and just as this doesn't involve uncritical approval of everything they do—compassionate self-love doesn't mean abandoning valid self-criticism.

In fact, self-compassion has the opposite effect. It promotes comfort with the kind of critical self-assessment that helps us grow—which leads to resilience. It breeds the opposite of narcissistic self-absorption.

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