Don’t Feed the Narcissists!

The Mythology and Science of Mental Health
You’re so vain.
You probably think this song is about you.
—Carly Simon

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Kermit Press
PO Box 425
Chatham, NJ 07928

Cover and interior design, David Moratto

The cover image is from John William Waterhouse’s 1903 oil painting,
Echo and Narcissus. The painting illustrates a scene from
the Ovid’s Metamorphoses.

ISBN: 978-0-9968818-3-8
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For centuries, storytellers, theologians, and philosophers have warned us of the dangers of pride. Ancient Greek dramatists wrote comedies that poked fun at the vanity of powerful men. They wrote tragedies that warned of the dangers of a form of contemptuous behavior called *hubris*. In the Middle Ages, Roman Catholic theologians considered *superbia* (pride) to be one of the seven deadly sins. They thought that *humilitas* (humility) is one of the seven heavenly virtues. Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim theologians and philosophers teach surprisingly similar lessons. But in the 1960s, some prominent psychologists and educators in the United States started arguing that low self-esteem, or lack of pride, lay at the root of most of our social problems.

Some of the members of the self-esteem movement claimed that if we simply boosted children’s self-esteem, we could solve many of our pressing social problems, such as poor school performance, teen pregnancy, and crime. In 1985, Whitney Houston topped the charts with a song that summed up this idea: “Learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all.” However, since the rise of social media and the selfie stick, many people are starting to wonder whether too many people admire themselves too much. This problem of excessive self-love is called narcissism.

The word *narcissism* comes from the ancient Greek myth of Echo and Narcissus. Narcissus was a young man who was so handsome that many people fell in love with him. However, Narcissus cared nothing for them. One of his admirers was a nymph named Echo. She was so...
hurt by his callous rejection that she wasted away until there was nothing left but her voice. She could not even speak for herself. All she could do was repeat what someone else had just said.

Nemesis, who was the spirit of divine vengeance, was angered by how badly Narcissus treated others. As a punishment, Nemesis lured Narcissus to a pool. There, Narcissus developed a fatal attraction to his own reflection. According to some versions of the story, Narcissus drowned while trying to embrace his reflection. According to other versions, he starved to death because he could not stop gazing at his reflection. After he died, he became the flower that bears his name. Thus, people started to use the term narcissist to describe people who love themselves too much and other people too little.

Most fables teach a simple lesson about good sense or good morals. The fable of Narcissus and Echo teaches us two lessons. First, don't be Echo. If you dedicate yourself to someone who does not love you back, you end up losing yourself. Second, don't be Narcissus. If you care only for yourself, you deserve to come to a bad end.

In the 19th century, French people started using the word mégalomanie to refer to overly high self-esteem. The word was applied to people who thought that they were greater, more powerful, and more important than they really were. The word was derived from the Greek roots megalo-, which meant large or great, and -mania, which meant madness. Mégalomanie entered the English language as megalomania. However, psychiatrists in the United States now use the term narcissistic personality disorder to describe this mental problem.

As I will explain in more detail in later chapters, narcissism is a character flaw. If a case of narcissism is persistent and is serious enough to cause suffering or disability, it can be considered a mental illness. If your case of narcissism is worse than your psychiatrist would expect from someone of your social background, you would get a diagnosis of a personality disorder called narcissistic personality disorder. Mental health professionals may be startled to hear me describe narcissism as a character flaw. In general, mental health professionals are encouraged to view mental problems as illnesses, as opposed to moral failings. To their ears, the term character flaw sounds like a moral judgment, as opposed to a medical diagnosis. It sounds pejorative. The English word pejorative implies criticism, hostility, disregard, or disrespect. In contrast, mental health professionals are supposed to be welcoming, compassionate, and respectful. However, the English word pejorative comes from a Latin adjective pejoratus, which in turn comes from the Latin verb pejorare, which means to make things worse. The important question is whether the label makes people seem worse than they really are. Of course, a label can be accurate but not tactful. The word tact came from the Latin word for touch. In English, tact means the ability to do or say things without offending or upsetting other people. Unfortunately, some truths are bound to be offensive or upsetting, regardless of how they are phrased.

I am not sure that the term personality disorder is any more tactful than character flaw. Each of us has character flaws. Even famous diamonds like the Koh-I-Noor (one of the British Crown Jewels) have flaws. But to qualify for a diagnosis of a personality disorder, your character flaws must be serious enough to cause suffering (for yourself or for other people) or disability. In other words, your behavior could be causing other people to suffer. Some people with personality disorders actually enjoy making other people suffer. Others are simply indifferent to other people’s suffering: they do not care one way or the other.

I suspect that much of the caseload for mental health professionals consists of decent people who have been emotionally wounded, often by people with personality disorders. Meanwhile, the people with the personality disorders either would shun therapy or would seek out the kinds of therapy that would make them worse, not better. Thus, I would expect a narcissist to seek out therapy designed to boost his or her self-esteem, while shunning constructive criticism. In contrast, someone who seeks out or at least accepts constructive criticism from wise people would outgrow their narcissism.

With the rise of social media and the invention of the selfie stick, there has been increasing concern that we might be in the midst of an epidemic of narcissism. Even so, many people might be surprised to hear that abnormally high self-esteem could be a mental illness. For decades, we have been told to worry about low self-esteem.
In the mid-20th century, psychologists started to pay a lot of attention to self-esteem. In particular, they developed simple paper-and-pencil tests to measure it. However, self-esteem involves a complicated mixture of ideas and feelings. How can you collapse all of that information into a test score? What does the score of a self-esteem test really mean? How would those test scores relate to the things we really care about, such as whether a person is honest, kind, generous, productive, and happy?

Self-esteem is an idea that can include many different ideas and feelings. Some of these ideas and feelings might be helpful in some situations but harmful in others. This principle was dramatized in the television series The Sopranos. The attitudes and behaviors that helped Tony Soprano claw his way to the top of a criminal organization caused problems for him in his family life.

Starting in the 1960s, psychologists and educators in the United States started to pay a lot of attention to the concept of self-esteem. This concern arose in the context of social reform movements, especially the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement and the Gay Rights Movement. These movements promoted social equality for black people, women of any color, and gay people, respectively. Activists in these movements wanted black people, women, and gays to view themselves as worthy of the same civil rights as straight white men. These social reformers also wanted whites to accept blacks as equals and men to accept women as equals. For these changes to come about, the humble and meek would have to be exalted, while the mighty are put down from their seat. Yet because of the current emphasis on self-esteem, people are being encouraged to exalt themselves, even when they need to learn humility.

In the 1980s, a California state assemblyman named John Vasconcellos argued that low self-esteem was an important underlying cause of social problems such as poor school performance, teenage pregnancy, and crime. He believed that boosting children's self-esteem could make the children immune to such problems, just as a vaccine would make them immune to an infectious disease. But like the early 20th-century advocates of Prohibition, some of the members of the self-esteem movement were offering an overly simplistic solution to a large and complex set of problems. Predictably, the results of the programs they promoted were often disappointing.

Even within the self-esteem movement, there has been little agreement on what self-esteem is or how it should be promoted. Nathaniel Branden, who has been called the father of the self-esteem movement, advocated a tough regimen of training to boost skills. Branden's goal was to enable and encourage his students to take responsibility for themselves and their lives. In contrast, many public schoolteachers are being told to shield children from even constructive criticism. Instead, children are often being encouraged to brag about themselves. However, some critics fear that the techniques used in these programs might actually promote narcissism, anxiety, and even depression. Thus, there is clearly a need to think carefully about the concept of self-esteem, as well as to cast a critical eye on any program designed to promote self-esteem. Some of these programs may offer something useful, at least for some individuals. However, each program must be evaluated on its own merits.

By the 1990s, it was clear that low self-esteem, as measured by standard psychological tests, did not always go hand-in-hand with social problems. Even when the low self-esteem seemed to occur alongside some other problem, you could not always tell whether the low self-esteem was the cause of the other problem. Sometimes, low self-esteem could be an effect, as opposed to a cause. Sometimes, low self-esteem and some other problem, such as teenage pregnancy, could both be the results of some other cause, such as the humiliating experience of being sexually abused. Some results can have a feedback effect, which means that the result goes on to become a cause. As George Orwell noted in his essay Politics and the English Language, "A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks." Thus, it can be hard to figure out the role that self-esteem plays in other psychological or social problems.

Nevertheless, many psychologists are still quick to use low self-esteem as a catchall explanation. Many psychologists even insist that narcissists are suffering from low self-esteem. How could that be? The
word narcissism means that a person has abnormally high self-esteem, just as the word fever means that a person has an abnormally high body temperature. You cannot have a fever (abnormally high body temperature) and hypothermia (abnormally low body temperature) at the same time. However, many psychologists think that the narcissist’s apparently high self-esteem is just a façade. They believe that the narcissist’s apparent insecurity springs from low self-esteem that is carefully hidden. Narcissists often seem to be addicted to even meaningless praise, which psychologists call narcissistic supply. Narcissists may also seem to take offense (narcissistic injury) in response to any kind of criticism or even to imagined slights. Psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut called the resulting anger narcissistic rage.

Why might a person with overly high self-esteem come across as insecure and touchy? One simple explanation springs from a concept that is taboo for many people in the United States: the concept of social rank. Like many other social animals, from chickens to chimpanzees, human beings tend to organize themselves into dominance hierarchies. People who wish to rise within their social hierarchy are called ambitious. When people try to occupy a higher position than they can defend, their critics call them narcissistic.

Narcissists have an odd mixture of personal security and social insecurity. They are secure in their belief that they deserve a high social rank. Yet they find it hard to get other people to grant them the social position that they want to occupy. In other words, narcissists seldom get all of the admiration and special privileges that they feel that they deserve. As a result, narcissists continually feel that they are being unfairly disrespected and shortchanged.

Narcissists want other people to submit to them. The narcissistic supply that narcissists crave actually consists of signs of submission. If you express anything less than perfect submission, as judged by the narcissist, the narcissist may feel narcissistic injury, which is actually the narcissist’s perception that you are posing a challenge to his or her social rank. The narcissist may then go on the offensive, to try to bully you into submission. These aggressive outbursts are called narcissistic rage.

The narcissist’s rages can set off a vicious circle. The narcissist feels that other people do not respect him or her. In response, the narcissist throws tantrums, to try to bully the other people into submission. Yet such behavior does not inspire the admiration that the narcissist craves. Instead, it damages the narcissist’s reputation. As a result, other people lose respect for the narcissist. Their disrespect causes more narcissistic injury and triggers further narcissistic rages. Only the narcissist can break this vicious circle. The hard way would be for the narcissist to find some way to earn other people’s admiration. The easy way would be to accept a realistic, lower social rank.

Narcissists cannot achieve the social rank that they think they deserve, and they are unwilling to accept anything less. Of course, the question of what someone deserves implies a personal, social judgment. Thus, narcissism, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. How you make that judgment may say more about your own biases than it says about the person you are judging. A bigot would assign some people to a low rank simply because of their sex or ethnic background. Anyone who tries to rise above that assigned station may be punished for being “uppity.” Thus, the conclusion that another person is narcissistic is a subjective, social judgment with political implications. To understand narcissism, you must confront the question of how people are ranked within society.

By calling someone narcissistic, you express a harsh moral judgment. In contrast, you may use kinder words for people who are simply unskilled and unaware of their lack of skill. If someone attempts to do something that is impossible, you may call him or her a fool. If the person attempts something that is needlessly risky, you may call him foolhardy. However, you probably would not judge that person harshly unless he or she is taking the kind of damned fool chances that will get us all killed. When the person is simply wasting his or her own time and risking his or her own skin, you may feel pity or concern. When the person poses a threat to others, especially to you or your loved ones, you may start to get angry.

When low-ranking people are arrogant, we see them as narcissistic. Meanwhile, many high-ranking people often seem humble, usually because they have nothing to prove. Great people seldom have to boast;
other people sing their praises! For example, when Albert Einstein was a minor civil servant (a patent clerk) in Switzerland, he solved some of the biggest riddles in the history of science. As a result, Einstein quickly became a worldwide celebrity. His name became a metaphor for genius. Nobody would have considered Einstein to be arrogant or narcissistic if he thought that he was smarter than most other people. In contrast, narcissists want to be admired like Einstein even when they don’t know what they are talking about. In other words, narcissists want to be recognized as “the one who knows.” As a result, they tend to heap scorn on anyone who knows more than they do. For that reason, narcissists often appear to be shallow and anti-intellectual. By trying to look smarter than they are, they end up looking stupid.

After Einstein became famous as a scientific genius, he did not have to struggle to get his opinions taken seriously, even by the President of the United States. Once Einstein’s reputation as a genius was established, he had no further need to struggle to be taken seriously. That is why truly great people often seem humble. Unfortunately, many brilliant people are ignored, often because they are trying to convey messages that are unwelcome. Thus, they may be dismissed as narcissistic or as just plain crazy. For that reason, I try to judge people according to what they say and do, not according to what other people say about them.

Narcissists want other people to admire them for their brilliance, their beauty, and their possessions. Narcissists want to call the shots. They feel that they should be entitled to special privileges. However, not everyone is willing to give the narcissist the admiration and special privileges that the narcissist expects. As a result, narcissists may feel that they are continually being unfairly challenged, disrespected, and disobeyed. Thus, narcissists may feel that they have the right and even the obligation to discipline the lesser beings.

Narcissists are annoying because they think that they are smarter than they really are, better informed than they really are, and entitled to more special privileges than other people think they deserve. Thus, the diagnosis of narcissism is a social judgment that is based on personal opinion. Moreover, it is a judgment that is made from a particular point of view, often from a social rank that is roughly equal to that of the narcissist.

Narcissists are typically most obnoxious to people whom they view as potential rivals. In contrast, the narcissist may show fawning submission to his or her superiors. The narcissist may also be kind and generous to submissive underlings who provide narcissistic supply and never cause narcissistic injury. The narcissist may simply ignore insults from the people who pose no threat to the narcissist’s standing. In a business, a narcissist may try to curry favor with upper management, in the hopes of winning promotions. A narcissistic middle manager may be warmly supportive to his or her least capable subordinates, who reliably provide narcissistic supply and never cause narcissistic injury. As a result, the narcissist may enjoy some degree of popularity. Unfortunately, the narcissistic manager may ignore important input from brighter people on the lower rungs of the organization. Worst of all, narcissists may use dirty tricks to derail the careers of anyone they view as a potential critic or rival—usually their most capable peers and subordinates. Thus, narcissistic middle managers often make bad decisions and can cause a company to lose its most capable and most productive employees. Like termites, narcissistic middle managers can destroy a company from within.

Animals also struggle with each other for social rank. Animals fight over territory and food resources and mating opportunities. However, human beings have a lot more to fight about. Thus, narcissism is more than just a problem with social dominance. It has something to do with self-concept. At about the age of 6 months, human babies develop the ability to understand that their reflection in a mirror is a moving picture of themselves in real time, rather than being another baby behind a window. Only a few other species of animal, including chimpanzees and dolphins, seem to be able to recognize themselves in a mirror. Chickens can struggle ruthlessly with other chickens for dominance, but they lack the brainpower to recognize themselves in a mirror. Many behaviorists have concluded that chickens therefore lack self-awareness. Thus, many of a narcissistic human being’s dominance games might be propelled by primitive drives. However, the fact that
It is usually easy to tell when someone is having a psychotic episode. A psychotic person’s speech and behavior and even his or her facial expressions can be noticeably odd. You might also be able to tell when someone is suffering from a major mood disorder, such as depression or mania, just by watching his or her facial expressions and behavior. However, even a trained observer can easily miss even a severe case of personality disorder. Many people with a personality disorder seem to wear what psychiatrist Hervey M. Cleckley called the mask of sanity. At first, they may seem normal. They may even seem to be intelligent and charming. Some of them even seem to be remarkably calm and collected, even in stressful situations. Eventually, however, the mask may slip—to reveal serious flaws in character.

If someone’s character flaws are serious and persistent, are different from what society expects from that person, and are causing suffering or disability, the person would qualify for a diagnosis of a personality disorder. The DSM-5 defines personality disorders as “a class of mental disorders characterized by enduring maladaptive patterns of behavior, cognition, and inner experience, exhibited across many contexts and deviating markedly from those accepted by the individual’s culture. These patterns develop early, are inflexible, and are associated with significant distress or disability.” As I have explained in previous chapters, a psychological problem has to cause distress or disability to qualify as a mental illness. Also, psychiatrists do not consider a mental illness to be a mental disorder unless it is outside the range of what society expects from that person.
In other words, psychiatrists apply the label personality disorder only to cases in which the person's character flaws are particularly severe and particularly resistant to correction. Some researchers suspect that this resistance to correction means that the person has brain defects that cannot be fixed. Yet in some cases, the person might simply have failed to learn good problem-solving skills. Some people simply fall into the habit of using tactics that seem to work in the short run but are ultimately self-defeating. Perhaps all of us deal with both problems, to some degree. We all struggle against the limitations of our own brains, and we all are held back by the limitations of our knowledge and skills.

To receive a diagnosis of a personality disorder under the DSM, you have to be an adult, but your mental problem has to have begun early. For that reason, I view personality disorders as failures of normal development. It is normal for toddlers to engage in magical thinking or to throw tantrums when their wishes are not instantly fulfilled. Parents call that stage of development the terrible twos. But when grown-ups behave like toddlers, we suspect that they are mentally ill. For that reason, healthy people who are working on their own coming-of-age story arc can learn some important lessons from studying people with personality disorders.

Everyone has character flaws. So how is an ordinary person different from someone who would qualify for a diagnosis of personality disorder? Is it a difference of degree or a difference of kind? Or is it a difference of degree that is so extreme that it might as well be a difference of kind? Scientific studies of personality disorder often focus on individuals who are in prison because they have failed to meet even minimal standards of civilized behavior. In contrast, the Greek philosopher Theophrastus wrote about the commonplace character flaws and social gaffes that could make an ordinary person irritating.

Theophrastus wondered why individual Greeks could be so different from each other, even though they lived under the same sky and were educated alike. Even today's top psychiatrists are still puzzled by that question. However, they have come up with a few partial answers. One involves genetics. Some traits predictably result from the genetic hand of cards that the person was dealt at conception. Genetics explain why identical twins look and often behave so much like each other, even if they were brought up separately from birth. Yet even identical twins who were reared together can differ from each other in important ways.

Every human being has traits that are different from those of a chimpanzee or an elm tree. The differences between species are clearly the result of the genetic differences between the species. However, not all differences between individuals within a species are due, even in part, to genetic differences between those individuals. During the development of every individual, genes interact with environmental influences. Like a tree, each human being is nourished and held back by influences in his or her environment. A tree that is given the optimal conditions may develop into a magnificent, fruitful specimen. In contrast, a tree that is subjected to harsh conditions may end up stunted and twisted like a bonsai. It can be hard to tell whether the stunting and twisting of a personality resulted from a genetic flaw, a harsh environment, or some interaction of the two.

All mental illnesses involve some combination of problems with thoughts, feelings, and behavior. In a case of psychosis, the most obvious problem is in the domain of perception and thought. Yet a psychotic person may also have abnormal emotions and behavior. In a case of a mood disorder, the most obvious problem is in the domain of emotion. Yet a person with a mood disorder may also have problems with perception, thought, and behavior. In a case of personality disorder, the most obvious problem is in the domain of behavior. Yet the person may also have some serious problems with thoughts and emotions. To understand the abnormal behavior of someone with a personality disorder, such as narcissistic personality disorder, you need to understand how that person thinks and what (if anything) that person feels. From studying people with personality disorders, we may learn lessons about how to help them and how to keep them from harming others. We may even learn some lessons about how to help ourselves. To correct your own character flaws, you need to learn the lessons that people with personality disorders have somehow failed to learn.

The medical model often falls short when it comes to explaining
should be removed from the DSM because Western society has trained its young women to be histrionic. The media bombard young women with the message that they must be sexually attractive to gain men’s approval, and that men’s approval is the key to success. If seductiveness is not enough, a young woman may try theatrical behavior to attract attention. The goal is to be the leading lady in a great love story or at least a romantic comedy. As their looks fade, histrionic women may cast themselves in a motherly role. Thus, some histrionic behaviors are highly adaptive. Gay men may also internalize the same message. Thus, histrionic behavior would not violate a social norm for gay men and may not be maladaptive. Among gay men, such theatricality is called camp. Within the gay community, camp is a subversive form of artistic expression, not a personality disorder.

People with narcissistic personality disorder tend to regard other people as underlings. According to the DSM-5, individuals with narcissistic personality disorder have most or all of the following attitudes, typically without having the talents or accomplishments to back them up:

- Having an exaggerated sense of self-importance
- Expecting to be recognized as superior even without achievements that warrant it
- Exaggerating your achievements and talents
- Being preoccupied with fantasies about success, power, brilliance, beauty or the perfect mate
- Believing that you are superior and can only be understood by or associate with equally special people
- Requiring constant admiration
- Having a sense of entitlement
- Expecting special favors and unquestioning compliance with your expectations
- Taking advantage of others to get what you want
- Having an inability or unwillingness to recognize the needs and feelings of others
- Being envious of others and believing others envy you
- Behaving in an arrogant or haughty manner

All of these attitudes reflect excessive ambition. A person with narcissistic personality disorder expects and demands the power, property, and prestige that go along with a high social rank. The drama starts when other people do not provide the admiration and special privileges that the narcissist thinks that he or she deserves. Of course, if you really did have a high social rank, nobody would think you were crazy if you had such expectations or made such demands. They might think that you were a snob, but they would not think that you were nuts.

Histrionic people create drama because they love the attention. Narcissistic people create drama because they are continually battling unsuccessfully for social dominance. Narcissists are sensitive to real or imagined threats to their social rank. Like Snow White’s stepmother, they can become furious if someone is simply beautiful in their presence. The narcissist wants to be the beautiful one, the popular one, the rich one, the smart one, etc. Thus, narcissists can become filled with hatred for anyone who could outrank them in any way, even if that other person has no interest in competing.

Narcissists want to dominate other people, rather than connecting with them as equals. In other words, narcissists behave like an overly ambitious hen that is struggling to maintain an unrealistically high position within the pecking order. A powerful hen takes what she wants from the lower-ranking hens. The brain circuits that are involved in this kind of social competition are primitive. Chickens can fight for dominance. However, chickens cannot understand or apply philosophical concepts like truth, justice, or solidarity. Likewise, when narcissists are battling for social rank, they tend to act like birdbrains. They tend to ignore higher philosophical concepts—unless they can use those concepts to gain some advantage. As a result, narcissists often seem shallow, callous, and hypocritical.

People with narcissistic personality disorder want to occupy a high social rank, so that they can look down on most or all of the people they encounter. In other words, they are ambitious, yet their reach exceeds their grasp. As a fan of boxing might put it, narcissists often try to punch above their weight. Yet since narcissists often judge their own matches, they often declare themselves the winner, even if onlookers
would think that the narcissist has lost. Narcissists are regarded as mentally ill because their self-perceptions are inaccurate and because their strategies and tactics fail or even backfire.

Narcissists tend to have an unhealthy drive to win pointless victories. Many of their victories are pointless, and some may be pyrrhic. A pyrrhic victory means that someone won a battle but was damaged so badly in that battle that he ended up losing the war. As a result, the narcissist’s struggles for dominance can be ultimately self-defeating.

Narcissists may be poor at spotting situational irony, which means a mismatch between the intended result of an action and the actual result. Their interpersonal skills may be so poor that they cannot judge whether they have won or lost in a competition. Also, their reasoning skills may be so poor that they are simply not good strategists, even if they are reasonably good tacticians. Tactics are the actual means used to achieve an objective, while strategy is the overall plan of a campaign. In other words, effective tactics win battles, while effective strategy wins wars.

For a patient to qualify for a DSM-5 diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder, the attitudes described by the diagnostic criteria must be pervasive and persistent. In other words, the person must express these attitudes in many different situations over a long period. The attitudes must also be making it hard for the person to have meaningful relationships with others. Since narcissists insist on being treated as a superior, they cannot base their relationships on mutual respect. Instead, they seek out submissive followers (co-dependents) who will give them unearned praise.

Individuals are considered narcissistic when they expect or demand a higher social rank than other people are willing to give them. The diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder is a social judgment. Many people are distressed by the idea that the diagnosis of narcissism is a personal judgment made in a social context. They want psychiatric diagnoses to be more like an ordinary medical diagnosis. They want the diagnosis of narcissism to be based on some objective criterion, such as the result of some laboratory test. However, the fact that a diagnosis of narcissism is a personal, social judgment does not mean that the problem being judged is unreal or unimportant.

Narcissism, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. For example, Italian fascists supported Benito Mussolini because they considered “Il Duce” (the leader) to be a great leader, deserving of admiration and a position of public trust. His admirers and supporters considered him a great man. In contrast, his detractors thought that he was a narcissistic fool. (A fool is a person with bad judgment.) Unfortunately, his critics turned out to be right. Mussolini turned out to be one of the most dangerous fools of the 20th century. In June of 1940, he declared war on Britain and France. He reportedly told his Army’s Chief of Staff, “I only need a few thousand dead so that I can sit at the peace conference as a man who has fought.” Unfortunately, about half a million Italians died in the war, and the country as a whole suffered terrible destruction and hardship. When the war ended in 1945, Mussolini tried to escape to Switzerland. However, he was captured and executed by partisans, who then hung his corpse, alongside that of his mistress, upside down in a gas station in Milan.

Fools can be dangerous if they achieve political power. However, narcissistic people can be dangerous even if they remain on the bottom of the social pyramid. When the narcissist’s desire for power, property, and prestige is not met, the narcissist may lash out in anger. Because they feel that they are taking what is rightfully theirs, they seem to have no conscience. Because they feel that they are in the superior social position, they have no sense of shame. Shame is the emotion that corresponds to being in an inferior social position. (I will explain anger and shame in more detail in Chapter 11.) If narcissistic people fail in their attempts to gain status, they may do something appalling to make themselves infamous. That is how narcissism can motivate someone to commit murder in public, such as an assassination or a mass shooting. If the narcissist cannot gain respect, at least he can inspire fear.

Since narcissism is a problem related to social rank, it can occur only in a social context. As long as Robinson Crusoe is alone on his island, he cannot compete with anyone for social rank. Likewise, the diagnosis in a case of narcissism depends on which people the narcissist considers to be underlings. A man who considers himself superior to
Don't Feed the Narcissists!
Laurie Endicott Thomas

There is a problem to be corrected. Ambitious people may be horrid to the people who are at or below their social rank. However, they can show fawning submission to the people they wish to impress.

What causes narcissistic personality disorder? Nobody really knows. It seems to be more common in some families than in others. Studies of identical twins have shown that the underlying problem could be at least partly genetic, perhaps because an unusually powerful drive for social dominance could be partly genetic. However, researchers have not been able to link any particular genes to the disorder. Also, narcissistic personality disorder seems to be far more common in modern societies than in traditional societies. So I doubt that the genetic studies will reveal much. Personally, I suspect that narcissistic personality disorder results from a combination of overweening ambition and poor interpersonal skills. There are two possible solutions to this problem: either accept the social rank that other people are willing to give you, or find an effective way to rise in other people's estimation.

The features of narcissistic personality disorder overlap with those of antisocial personality disorder, which has sometimes been called psychopathy or sociopathy. A sociopath can be just as egotistical as a narcissist. However, there is a key difference. A narcissist may view you as an underling, but a sociopath views you as a thing. According to the DSM-5, antisocial personality disorder consists of disregard for and violation of the rights of others:

- Failure to obey laws and norms by engaging in behavior which results in criminal arrest, or would warrant criminal arrest
- Lying, deception, and manipulation, for profit or self-amusement
- Impulsive behavior
- Irritability and aggression, manifested as frequently assaults others, or engages in fighting
- Blatantly disregards safety of self and others
- A pattern of irresponsibility
- Lack of remorse for actions

All women is called a misogynist. A white person who considers himself or herself to be superior to all people of color is called a racist. A religious person who looks down on all who do not adhere to the One True Faith is called a religious bigot. A wealthy and privileged person who looks down on members of the lower classes is called a snob. A person who looks down on anyone with a superior education is called anti-intellectual. I consider each of these problems to be a serious mental defect. Yet if a person's superiority complex is restricted to these categories, he or she might not qualify for a psychiatric diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder. Because sexism, racism, religious bigotry, and anti-intellectualism are so commonplace in the United States, such biases by themselves do not even qualify a person for a psychiatric diagnosis of a mental disorder. To qualify for a diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder, a white man would have to consider himself superior to other white men—not just to women and people of color.

Many psychotic people suffer from delusions of grandeur, which means a false belief that one is famous, wealthy, and immensely powerful. Narcissists do not necessarily have delusions of grandeur. They may not believe that they are already famous, wealthy, and powerful. However, they do feel that they deserve more fame, wealth, and power than other people are willing to grant them. The solution to this problem seems straightforward. Teach the narcissistic person better strategies for achieving his or her goals, but make his or her status depend on good behavior. Ambitious people often respond well to this kind of carrot-and-stick approach. Unfortunately, narcissists may not take instruction from anyone whom they consider to be an underling. If you accept instruction from someone, you put yourself in a one-down position relative to that person. A narcissistic person may choose to remain ignorant, rather than humbling him- or herself in such a way. For that reason, a narcissist may seem to be as immune to reason as a delusional schizophrenic.

Theoretically, a narcissist's behavior could be corrected by someone whom the narcissist accepts as a superior. Unfortunately, the people who outrank the narcissist within the social hierarchy may not realize that there is a problem to be corrected. Ambitious people may be horrid to the people who are at or below their social rank. However, they can show fawning submission to the people they wish to impress.

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...
The diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder is reserved for adults who have been misbehaving since they were 15 years old and whose misbehavior is not the result of schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.

Sociopaths may seem at first to be charming, but they have no respect for other people and no concern for other people’s rights or feelings. Sociopaths may even seem to have reckless disregard for their own safety. Because of this lack of concern for other people’s feelings, sociopaths sometimes choose to break laws and violate other social norms. They can be manipulative or even predatory. They may lie, cheat, steal, rape, or kill—and feel no guilt or shame afterward. In rape, the rapist uses the victim’s body as if it were a thing that belongs to the rapist. Murder literally turns a person into a thing. Sociopaths feel no guilt or remorse over such actions because they regarded their victims as things to begin with.

Many of the studies of antisocial personality disorder have focused on convicted criminals. Yet not all sociopaths are criminals, and not all criminals are sociopaths. Sometimes, the pressures of war can cause a seemingly normal person to behave like a sociopath, at least to people who are classified as the enemy. Yet engaging in or even just observing such behavior can take a terrible emotional toll on someone who is not really a sociopath. Veterans in the peace movement have told me that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) actually represents a wounded conscience. As one combat veteran explained to me, “There are things you can’t undo and can’t unsee. You wrestle with them all night in your dreams.” A nurse practitioner who works at a Veterans Administration hospital once told me that the nicest patients are the ones with the worst PTSD.

A sociopath’s brain often fails to produce the normal kinds of emotional responses. For example, they may be capable of feeling fear, but they can be bad at judging threats. As a result, they may not feel fear in response to a physically dangerous situation. Sociopaths also lack empathy. For those reasons, sociopaths are not held back by feelings of concern for the wellbeing of themselves or other people. Nevertheless, many sociopaths are more or less law abiding.

Unfortunately, a sociopath’s brain can also have some trouble with some kinds of advanced mental processes, especially with respect to planning and self-control. As a result, sociopaths often fail to think ahead and make proper plans. They can also act impulsively. As a result, they often end up in legal trouble. Much of the research on antisocial personality disorder has involved men who were in prison for some criminal offense. However, not all criminals are sociopaths, and not all sociopaths are criminals.

Sociopathy is a medical/psychological concept, whereas crime is a legal concept. Criminals are people who have broken laws. Many things that are illegal are not particularly evil, and many evil things are condoned by law. Arlo Guthrie deals with this concept in his song Alice’s Restaurant. In the first part of the song, Guthrie tells the colorful tale of the Alice’s Restaurant Massacre (he pronounces it “massaCREE”), in which he got caught dumping garbage outside of the town dump on Thanksgiving Day. (For some mysterious reason, the dump was closed on Thanksgiving). The second part of the song recounts what happened when Guthrie went to the Army Recruitment Center on Whitehall Street in Manhattan in response to his draft notice. During the selection process, he was asked whether he had a criminal record. Guthrie explained that he had once been convicted of littering. He recounts that he was then handed a form that asked, “Kid, have you rehabilitated yourself?” The song goes on:

I went over to the Sargent, said, “Sargent, you got a lot a damn gall to ask me if I’ve rehabilitated myself, I mean, I mean, I mean that just, I’m sittin’ here on the bench, I mean I’m sittin’ here on the Group W bench, ‘cause you want to know if I’m moral enough join the army, burn women, kids, houses and villages after bein’ a litterbug.”
emotionally flat. He did show the occasional flash of anger in response to some questions. He also seemed to show genuine sadness when he reflected on his failure as a family man. Despite his criminal career, he had maintained a façade of normalcy at home. He had a wife and children, a nice suburban home with a pool. He sent his children to Catholic school, and he served as an usher at mass on Sundays. He took his kids to Disneyworld every year. In prison, he showed signs of genuine grief that his children no longer wanted anything to do with him.

I've never felt sorry for anything I've done, other than hurting my family. The only thing I feel sorry for. I'm not looking for forgiveness, and I'm not repenting. No, I'm wrong. [Sniffles] I am wrong. I do want my family to forgive me. Oh boy. I ain’t going to make this one. Oh shit. This would never be me. THIS would not be me. I feel for my family. You see The Iceman crying. Not very macho, but I've hurt people that mean everything to me, but the only people that meant anything to me.

Kuklinski was candid about his reasons for talking with Dietz. Kuklinski wanted to know what was wrong with him, why his life had turned out so badly. Park Dietz told Kuklinski that Kuklinski qualified for the diagnosis of two personality disorders: antisocial and paranoid. The sociopathy enabled Kuklinski to kill without remorse, and the paranoia helped him get away with murder. Because of his paranoia, Kuklinski kept his distance from other people, he was quick to anger, and he never forgave anyone who offended him. As a result, Kuklinski ended up killing most of the few people who knew about his criminal activities. Kuklinski was eventually caught because the police noticed that so many people around him were disappearing.

Dietz told Kuklinski that the sociopathy and the paranoia probably resulted from a combination of genetic and environmental factors. According to Dietz, the genetic aspect of Kuklinski’s mental problems was probably his lack of fear of physical injury. As Dietz explained to Kuklinski,

The fact that you are born with a genetic predisposition to fearlessness doesn’t mean that it’s inevitable for you to become a criminal, because some people who have that predisposition to fearlessness become pro-social risk-takers.

The environmental factor in Kuklinski’s case was brutal treatment by his parents. Kuklinski’s older brother Florian died at age 10. The official story is that the boy fell down the stairs, but Kuklinski claimed that his parents beat the boy to death. (The boy died many years before the medical profession started talking about battered child syndrome.) Kuklinski’s younger brother Joseph was convicted of raping and murdering a 12-year-old girl. As Dietz explained to Kuklinski,

The difference between the people who grow up to be risk-taking good guys with white hats and the people who grow up to be risk-taking bad guys with a long, long rap sheet and a lot of crimes has to do with how their parents raised them. If you raise a kid with love and kindness and affection, most of the time, you have a good shot at their growing up to be decent, caring, loving human beings and treating their own kids well. But if you raise a kid the way Stanley raised you: with no love, no affection, constant abuse, beatings for no reason, all you teach is hatred. You make it impossible for that child to grow up to form strong attachments and loving, caring relationships or to risk themselves to protect the world.

The other Cluster B personality disorder is borderline personality disorder. Borderline personality disorder is the hardest personality disorder to describe. The DSM-5 describes it as follows: “a pervasive pattern of instability of interpersonal relationships, self-image, and affects, and marked impulsivity, beginning in early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts.” People with borderline personality disorder want to have close personal relationships. In particular, they are terrified by the prospect of abandonment. Yet their impulsive and irrational behavior tends to drive people away.
Borderline personality disorder is classified as a personality disorder because people with the condition tend to have serious problems with interpersonal relationships. Yet these problems may stem from problems with thinking and with emotion. For example, people with borderline personality disorder are prone to black-and-white thinking. As a result, they tend to regard another person as either an angel or a devil, rather than as an imperfect human being. Some evidence suggests that these people have problems with the frontolimbic networks in the brain. These networks play an important role in allowing reason to help regulate emotions.

The most famous case of borderline personality disorder is probably Susanna Kaysen’s. Kaysen spent 18 months in a psychiatric hospital after she tried to commit suicide by swallowing 50 aspirin tablets. She described her experiences in her memoir *Girl, Interrupted*, which was adapted into a major motion picture in 1999.

The causes of borderline personality disorder are unknown. The problem seems to be more common among people who have a family history of other kinds of mental illnesses. It also seems to be more common among people who were abused or neglected in early childhood.

Borderline personality disorder is a life-threatening illness. Up to 10% of the people who qualify for this diagnosis eventually succeed in killing themselves. An even larger percentage of patients engage in other kinds of self-injury, such as cutting the skin on their arms and legs. So far, no drug treatments seem to be useful in managing the core symptoms of borderline personality disorder. The most promising approach for managing borderline personality disorder is called dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT). This approach is called dialectical because it is aimed at the middle ground between accepting the clients as they are and urging them to change. In its standard form, DBT consists of four components:

- **A skills training group**, in which a teacher provides lessons in a classroom setting and assigns homework in which the clients practice using their new skills in everyday life. The class usually meets once a week for two and a half hours. The course usually lasts 24 weeks.

- **Individual therapy**, which focuses on motivating the client and helping the client apply new skills to specific challenges. The client generally receives one session a week, to run concurrently with the skills training group.

- **Phone coaching** is available between therapy sessions. Clients can call their therapist between sessions to receive coaching when they need it the most.

- **The therapist consultation team** is intended to provide support for the therapists. The teachers and therapists usually meet once a week.

Dialectical behavior therapy is intended to teach four types of skills: mindfulness (being fully aware and present in the moment), distress tolerance, emotional regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness (how to negotiate effectively while maintaining self-respect and good relationships). DBT was developed in the late 1970s by Marsha M. Linehan, who was serving a clientele of women with repeated suicide attempts and nonsuicidal self-injury. These clients responded poorly to standard cognitive behavioral therapy. These clients had so many serious problems that the standard approach to cognitive behavioral therapy was impractical. Also, many of these clients would simply drop out of cognitive behavioral therapy. Others unwittingly trained their therapists to provide ineffective therapy. For example, the clients would throw tantrums if the therapists addressed uncomfortable topics but would engage warmly if the therapist changed the subject to a less-important topic. Like people with other personality disorders, people with borderline personality disorder tend to avoid the kinds of experiences that would help them outgrow their problem.

The Cluster C personality disorders are primarily problems in how the person responds to the environment. However, these problems can lead to conflicts with other people. There are three personality disorders in Cluster C: avoidant personality disorder, dependent personality disorder, and obsessive-compulsive personality disorder.

People with avoidant personality disorder have such poor self-esteem that they are shy and anxious in social situations, even though they have
professor David Mulroy explained these problems in his book *The War Against Grammar*.

Mulroy asked the students in his elective class on mythology to rewrite a complicated sentence in their own words. He chose the opening sentence of the Declaration of Independence:

> When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

Mulroy did not identify the source of the sentence, which none of the students seemed to recognize. To his dismay, only a small percentage of his class understood the gist of the sentence, which is that when people are breaking a political tie, they should explain why they are doing so. The students’ failure to understand the literal meaning of this sentence stemmed from their inability to identify the main clause in the sentence. In other words, the problem stemmed from their lack of understanding of English grammar.

Many of the students thought that the sentence was about a romantic breakup or about theology or the environment. Instead of rendering the actual meaning of the sentence in their own words, many students wrote elaborate essays that were actually just free-associations on some of the more colorful words from the sentence. To me, the students’ thought processes represented a loosening of associations, which is a key feature of schizotypal personality disorder and schizophrenia. These were normal college students. Yet because of their ignorance of grammar, many of them seemed downright schizotypal when confronted with a long sentence.

Grammar was one of the seven basic subjects that made up a well-rounded education for a youth in ancient Greece. The other subjects were logic, rhetoric, mathematics, geometry, music, and astronomy. The
apparition. Scientists used the word *spectrum* to describe the rainbow of colors that is produced when light passes through a prism. In a spectrum, visible light is displayed according to its frequency (red at the low end and violet at the high end). Light is a form of electromagnetic radiation. There are also invisible frequencies of electromagnetic radiation below red (infrared) and above violet (ultraviolet). Thus, the spectrum is a handy metaphor to describe any phenomenon that varies in degree when the differences of degree can seem to be differences of kind. Orange light may seem to be a different kind of thing from blue light. Yet they are both simply electromagnetic radiation and differ from each other only in wavelength. Likewise, the disorders that make up the autism spectrum may seem to be different diseases, but they are viewed as mild to severe forms of the same basic problem.

For a mental disorder, the spectrum can range from normal to severely distressing or completely disabling. For example, *arachnophobia*, which is the fear of spiders, could range from mild to severe. A person with a mild case might be only momentarily startled by seeing a particularly large spider unexpectedly. But for someone with a severe case of arachnophobia, just the sight of a spider web could trigger a full-blown panic attack. With spectrum disorders, it can be hard to decide where to draw the dividing line between normal and abnormal. How bad does your fear of spiders have to be before you are considered to be abnormal or in need of help? Likewise, how disordered does your personality have to be before you qualify for a diagnosis of personality disorder?

Each of the DSM-5 personality disorders seems to represent the moderate to severe portion of a spectrum that represents a challenge that everyone must face. Cluster A personality disorders represent the challenge of creating a reliable mental model of reality. All of our mental models are imaginary maps or stories that we use to make sense out of what we can see, hear, smell, feel, taste, and remember. Yet as you can learn from studying optical illusions, even a normal perceptual system is prone to making certain kinds of errors. Thus, even a normal person is faced with the challenge of compensating for the errors of their perceptual system and the biases in their thinking. Thus, normal people are at the mild end of a spectrum. The Cluster A personality disorders might represent the middle of the spectrum, while the psychoses such as *schizophrenia* might represent the severe end.

Most people manage to compensate reasonably well for the minor flaws in their perceptual system. The proper sort of education, especially training in logic, can improve their ability to reason. In contrast, the people in the middle of the spectrum may have a particularly flawed perceptual system and substandard aptitude for reasoning. Because of these problems, they are less able to develop reliable mental models of reality. Yet they can sometimes be talked out of their false beliefs. In contrast, people with a full-blown psychosis have problems in perception and reasoning that are too severe to be overcome through the use of the intellect. For this reason, an educational model might be useful for people on the normal end of this spectrum, while the medical model is appropriate for people at the severe end. For the people in the middle, the appropriate model might be special education: education specifically tailored to meet the needs of someone with a disability.

Cluster B personality disorders represent the challenge of getting along with other people. As social animals, most human beings are naturally prone to two conflicting impulses: the urge to dominate and the desire to connect. Histrionic behavior represents strategies and tactics that low-ranking people can use to win favors from high-ranking people. In contrast, narcissists are struggling ineffectively to be high-ranking people. The diagnosis of histrionic or narcissistic personality disorder is given to people who are using particularly undignified and often ultimately ineffective political strategies. Why are they using bad strategies? Perhaps they have simply failed to learn better strategies. Either they have never been schooled in the social graces or they simply have a lower aptitude for social learning. As a result, they may have poor social skills. Fortunately, their poor skills can be addressed through an educational model or perhaps a special education model. The same lessons might be useful for helping normal people, as well.

Antisocial personality disorder and borderline personality disorder represent a different kind of problem in getting along with others. Sociopaths view other human beings as things, and people with borderline personality disorder see other people as abstractions of good or evil.
Both problems seem to be related to the person’s emotional reactivity. Emotional reactivity may be abnormally low in sociopaths and abnormally high in people with borderline personality disorder. People with abnormal emotional reactivity are likely to have severe difficulties in understanding other people’s emotions. Thus, poor empathy is also a feature of antisocial and borderline personality disorders.

The underlying problem with emotional reactivity could be partly genetic. Yet not everyone who has a genetic predisposition to abnormal emotional reactivity goes on to develop a severe personality disorder. Also, it may be possible for a severe personality disorder to occur in someone who does not have that kind of genotype. Antisocial and borderline personality disorders seem to result when someone who is genetically predisposed to abnormal emotional reactivity suffers from abuse or neglect in early childhood. These early experiences may cause the brain to develop in ways that create problems in later life.

Although somatic problems (i.e., bad genes or damaged brain tissue) may be part of the cause of a case of antisocial or borderline personality disorder, medicine has little to offer these patients. Their condition does not seem to respond well to any available medication. However, some kinds of psychotherapy, which would represent a special education model, could be useful. However, the most promising approach is based on a public health model, to prevent brain injury and to prevent children from being abused and neglected.

From studying personality disorders, ordinary people can learn some important lessons. The first is that the strategies and tactics that you would use in dealing with someone who is basically sane will not work when you deal with someone with a serious personality disorder. Thus, it is important to be able to recognize these defects in character in other people, so that you can adjust your approach to dealing with them. The second important lesson is that even the severe personality disorders are just exaggerated forms of problems that even normal people may have. So instead of just asking what is wrong with other people, we all ought to think about what might be wrong with ourselves.

Chapter 11
The Seven Basic Emotions

All mental illnesses involve some combination of abnormalities in perception, thought, feelings, and behavior. For the mental illnesses that are classified as personality disorders, the most obvious abnormality is maladaptive behavior. Yet that maladaptive behavior springs from problems in what the person perceives, thinks, and feels. Some sociopaths do not seem to feel the full range of human emotions. Instead, they seem to have low emotional arousal, like a reptile. For that reason, sociopaths are often described as cold-blooded. In contrast, narcissists are quick to feel contempt and lash out in anger. One of the important goals of psychotherapy is to help patients recognize their own emotions and other people’s emotions, so that patients can learn to use their conscience as their guide, instead of being a slave to passion.

It is surprisingly hard to come up with a scientific definition of emotion. Some experts define emotion as a state of feeling that leads to changes in physiology or behavior. In the 1960s, psychologists tried to identify the core emotions, which represent the basic programs that guide behavioral responses. Psychologist Paul Ekman was able to identify seven basic emotions, each of which caused a human being to produce a distinctive facial expression. These seven were fear, surprise, happiness, sadness, anger, disgust, and contempt. People all over the world produce the same facial expression for each of these basic emotions. These expressions are produced involuntarily. You do not have to learn how to make them, and they are hard to suppress. Even if you try to keep a straight face, the telltale expression may flicker over your face in a fraction of a second. Ekman calls these fleeting expressions micro-
expressions. Ekman has also described some other emotions that are important but that do not produce a characteristic facial expression.

Fear is a primal emotion, which means that it arises out of brain structures that are practically the same in lower animals, such as reptiles, as they are in human beings. Animals show signs of fear in response to some threat of physical injury. Human beings can feel fear in response to some threat of physical or psychological injury (i.e., hurt feelings). Fear is part of an overall response that prepares the body to respond to the threat. That response could involve either fighting or running away. For that reason, this response is called the fight-or-flight response. Fear produces a characteristic facial expression in human beings (Figure 1). The eyes open wide, to take in as much information about the environment as possible. The lips stretch horizontally.

![Figure 1: Fear](image1)

*Notice that her eyes are wide open and her lips are stretched horizontally.*

Animals may be particularly fearful of something that is unfamiliar or something that has harmed them in the past. As the object of their fear becomes familiar or time has passed since the object caused any harm, an animal may become less fearful of it. This process of becoming less fearful of something through repeated exposure is called habituation.

Unlike other animals, human beings can use language. As a result, human beings can use logic and reason to deal with their fears. As you mature, you may get better at overcoming your fears. Meanwhile, you learn more about the potential dangers in your environment.

Surprise is the fastest emotional response. It is a response to the unexpected. Surprise produces a facial expression that looks a lot like fear because the eyes open wide, to gather as much information as possible (Figure 2). However, the jaw drops a little as the mouth goes slack. The surprise expression lasts for only about a second. It may then be followed by some other expression, such as fear or happiness.

![Figure 2: Surprise!](image2)

*Surprise looks a lot like fear, in that the eyes are wide open. However, the jaw is slack. Normally, the surprise expression is fleeting. It is quickly replaced by some other expression, such as happiness or fear.*

Happiness is the feeling that makes you smile. To get people in New Guinea to smile, Ekman asked them to imagine that friends had come to visit. The French anatomist Guillaume-Benjamin-Amand Duchenne de Boulogne noticed that when people produce a fake smile, such as when they are trying to be polite, they contract the zygomaticus major muscle, which people can do voluntarily (Figure 3).
Sadness is the emotional pain that we feel in response to loss (such as grief, sorrow, or disappointment) or disadvantage (helplessness or despair). In a sad facial expression, the corners of the lips are lowered, but the inner corners of the eyebrows are raised (Figure 5).

A person who is feeling sad may be quiet, lethargic, and withdrawn and may cry. *Homo sapiens* is one of the few species that produce tears in response to strong emotion. In fact, our eyes can produce three different kinds of tears. Basal tears are produced just to keep the surface of the eye moist. Reflex tears are watery tears produced when something irritates your eye. Lacrimation means the production of tears for non-emotional reasons, such as eye irritation. Emotional tears are the tears that are produced in response to some strong emotion. They contain hormones such as prolactin and stress hormones. Emotional tears also contain a natural painkiller, called leucine enkephalin. These hormones could help to explain why people often feel better after a good cry.

The tears themselves are also a powerful social signal. Tears can also be a way of expressing shared emotion, such as shared grief. Crying...
may be an expression of helplessness. Thus, tears serve as a sign of submission. The idea that tears represent a sense of helplessness could also explain why people cry when overcome by joy.

Anger is the emotion that you feel when you are not getting what you want or when someone has violated your boundaries. Anger can have good or bad effects, depending on what you want and how you try to get what you want. Anger is the emotion that leads to the cardinal sin of wrath. The corresponding heavenly virtue is patience.

Expressing anger can be a way to assert yourself socially: to take what is yours and to police your boundaries. Animals often signal dominance by trying to look larger, by staring, and by baring their teeth. The facial expression of anger in human beings involves lowered eyebrows, pressed lips, and narrowed or bulging eyes (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Anger

Anger is what you feel when someone or something is preventing you from getting what you want. In an angry expression, the eyebrows are lowered, and the eyes may be narrow and glaring. The lips are often tight, unless the person is yelling at you.

Disgust is a reaction to contamination. The disgust expression is a way of shutting off the eyes and nose to unpleasant sensory input. The upper lip and cheeks are raised and the nose is wrinkled (Figure 7). The contamination that evokes disgust can be real or symbolic. People feel disgust in response to bad sights, smells, and tastes. They can also feel disgust in response to injustice. Disgust is a powerful emotion that can have good or bad effects. Disgust causes us to shun things, such as cockroaches and rotting flesh, that could spread disease. Disgust can also lead to righteous indignation that inspires the struggle against injustice. Unfortunately, disgust can also fuel racism that leads to genocide. In particular, be wary of anyone who describes the members of some social group as cockroaches or other vermin.

Figure 7: Disgust

Disgust is a reaction to something rotten. The disgust expression is a way to block bad sights and smells and spit out bad tastes.

Contempt is the feeling that corresponds to being in the superior social position. It indicates that someone is somehow failing to meet your standards. As a result, you are looking down on them. The characteristic facial expression of contempt is a lopsided smirk (Figure 8). I think that this expression is related to the raised lip that a dog uses to threaten another dog.
Don't Feed the Narcissists!

Laurie Endicott Thomas

The documentary *Forgiving Dr. Mengele* tells Kor’s story. When Kor’s family arrived at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, she and her identical twin sister Miriam were promptly taken away from the rest of the family, whom they never saw again. Eva and her twin sister were then taken to Dr. Josef Mengele’s laboratory. Mengele would use pairs of twins as test subjects in cruel experiments. When one member of a twin pair died, the other twin would be immediately murdered, usually by an injection directly into the heart. Then, both bodies would be autopsied. Kor and her sister were subjected to dangerous and cruel experiments, but they survived until the Soviet Red Army liberated the camp. However, both of them had serious health problems in adulthood. Miriam died in 1993 of a rare form of cancer. Mengele escaped to Argentina, where he died of natural causes in 1979. Kor eventually settled in Terre Haute, Indiana.

Although Mengele died in obscurity, Kor had the chance to confront one of the SS doctors who had worked at Auschwitz: Hans Münch. However, Münch had refused to participate in the experiments and the mass murders at the camp, and he had been resourceful in finding ways to keep people alive and to make their lives more bearable. As a result, he was acquitted of war crimes after the war. When Kor interviewed Münch in 1993, she expected to find a monster. Yet he turned out to be a kindly old man who was suffering from depression and nightmares and remorse (remorse is anger directed at oneself). Kor then decided that she would write Münch a letter to express her forgiveness. But then she went further.

In January 1995, she and Münch took part in a ceremony at the site of the camp to mark the 50th anniversary of its liberation. At the ceremony, she read a letter from Münch. His letter was an eyewitness account of what had happened at the camp, and he expressed his sorrow that he had had any connection to it. Münch had joined the Nazi Party and the SS to further his career. Then, he found himself in a horrible nightmare that he could do nothing to stop and that haunted good thing. Solomon’s concept of resentment helped me understand why Eva Mozes Kor, a survivor of Auschwitz, decided to forgive Dr. Josef Mengele.

Contempt is the feeling that goes along with being in a superior social position. This feeling provokes a half-smile. Contempt is the only one of the basic facial expressions that is not symmetrical.

I first became interested in the study of facial expressions because I noticed that a famous political figure always seemed to be smirking. For that reason, he reminded me of some horrible people whom I knew personally. I suspected that the smirk was a sign of narcissism. Ekman has shown that the contempt smirk does indicate that a person is feeling superior to some other person. Since narcissists feel superior to such a large percentage of the population, they would smirk in practically any social encounter. Of course, not everyone who smirks at you is a narcissist. It could mean that you have just said or done something that they think is uncouth. You need to be receptive to this kind of feedback from other people if you want to get along with them.

Robert Solomon, a philosophy professor at the University of Texas at Austin, suggested that resentment, anger, and contempt are all part of a single spectrum of emotional responses. He suggested that contempt is anger directed at one’s social inferiors. He viewed ordinary anger as something that one directs at people whom one accepts as equals. Resentment is anger directed at the people whom one regards as socially superior. However, I regard contempt as the emotion that corresponds with being in a socially superior position. You do not have to feel anger to feel contempt. In fact, contempt without anger can be a
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family back. So Kor decided to replace her anger with compassion. The combination of contempt and compassion is called forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the nicest possible way to express contempt for another human being. By forgiving someone, you do not lessen the seriousness of his or her offenses. By forgiving them, you do not imply that they should not be held accountable for their wrongdoing. Instead, you are giving up the need for personal vengeance. In civilized societies, the state has the monopoly on violence. Thus, civilized people are supposed to allow the civil authorities to hold criminals to account. When you forgive someone, you discard the ugliness that that person has brought into your life. You may even try to ensure that more ugliness does not ensue. For example, Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights opposes the death penalty, which they view as simply a way of creating more victims. They do not want the offender's family to feel the same pain that they are feeling.

By seeking someone's forgiveness, you deliberately put yourself in the lower social position. In other words, you give up the deadly sin of pride and embrace the heavenly virtue of humility. By forgiving you, the other person takes the moral high ground. He or she gives up the deadly sin of wrath and embraces the heavenly virtue of patience. Yet even if people forgive you for hurting them, they may still be hurting because of what you have done. They have simply decided not to add to their own suffering by nurturing pointless anger. Whether or not you have been forgiven, you still need to work on your own redemption. Redemption is the act of making something better or more acceptable: acceptable to yourself, to other people, or perhaps to the Almighty. Unfortunately, narcissists view themselves as socially superior. As a result, they see no need to work on their redemption story arc.

Forgiveness and redemption can be part of a process called reconciliation. Reconciliation is the act of causing two persons or groups to become friendly again after an argument or disagreement. Of course, some people may not want to become friendly with you, even if they have forgiven you and even if you are working hard at redeeming yourself. The choice is up to them.

The seven basic emotions are hard-wired into the human nervous
A mentally healthy person would occupy the happy middle ground between narcissistic personality disorder (overly high self-esteem) and avoidant personality disorder (inappropriately low self-esteem). In other words, a mentally healthy person would have a realistic opinion about where he or she ranks in relation to other people, and how he or she fits into society. When individuals have a poor understanding of their own social rank, they can run into serious personal problems. If a large number of people within society have a poor understanding of how the social ranking system works, then the society is likely to be unjust. For this reason, we must think carefully about self-esteem. In particular, we must think carefully about what we are teaching children about self-esteem.

What is self-esteem? How is it measured? What relationship does it have to other phenomena, such as depression or academic success or good behavior or happiness? If someone has low self-esteem, is that low self-esteem a problem? Should we try to boost the person’s self-esteem, or should we help the person solve other kinds of problems and let the self-esteem problem sort itself out? These are all tough questions. I wish I could answer these questions. All I can do is explain how important it is to ask them.

You might expect that a mentally healthy person would be someone with reasonably accurate perceptions and more or less logical thought processes. However, some members of the self-esteem movement want you to hold an unrealistically high opinion of yourself. In other words, they want you to hold biased self-perceptions supported
by illogical reasoning. The underlying theory is that if you believe that you are smart, you will become smart. If you believe that you will be successful, you will become successful, and so on. However, this theory is an example of magical thinking. In particular, it is a form of sympathetic magic, which is the idea that like produces like.

In contrast, Aristotle thought that men ought to have accurate opinions of their own abilities and achievements. Aristotle thought that great men should have high self-esteem. The accurate high self-esteem of a great man was called megalopsychia (magnanimity, or greatness of soul). It represented the moderate middle ground between vanity and pusillanimité (timidity). In contrast, Aristotle thought that lesser men should have lower self-esteem. The goal was to have your vision of yourself match reality. However, that idea raises the question of how one should decide what is real. What standards should you use in evaluating yourself? Should you rely on other people’s opinions of you? Should popular people have high self-esteem and unpopular people have low self-esteem? Or should you use an academic standard? Should the valedictorian in the class have the highest self-esteem? Should other people have lower self-esteem, in accordance with their class rank?

From the dawn of civilization, philosophers have felt that it was bad to have too much self-esteem. Personally, I have serious doubts about self-esteem. By that, I don’t mean that my own self-esteem is too low or too high. I mean that I doubt the validity of the concept, as measured by psychologists and applied by many educators. When I try to take the standard tests of self-esteem, most of the questions seem illogical to me. The other questions seem to be about my views about human dignity in general, not about my feelings about myself.

Table 3 shows the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale, which is a standard measure of self-esteem. For each item, you are supposed to answer strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. Yet for many of these questions, I would either strongly agree or strongly disagree because of my political ideas. My answers would reflect how I feel about humanity in general, not how I feel about myself in particular. I find it impossible to answer some of the other questions because I think they are illogical or meaningless. As a result, I doubt that it is really testing what it is intended to test.

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**Table 3. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.** You are supposed to rate each one as strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>TEST QUESTION</th>
<th>MY RESPONSE</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.</td>
<td>What does worth mean? What plane are you talking about, and which others? If you believe in human equality, you will strongly agree with this statement because you consider everyone to be on an equal plane, as far as their basic human rights are concerned, so put me down for strongly agree, even though this test question would tell you nothing about how I feel about myself.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.</td>
<td>Zero is a number, and so is one, and who is to judge what is good? I imagine that everyone must have at least one quality that would be generally regarded as good, so I guess I strongly agree. However, that answer would tell you nothing about how I feel about myself.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.</td>
<td>This question commits the cognitive distortion of labeling. Since it is illogical, I strongly disagree. But I would also disagree with the statement, “All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a success.”</td>
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<td>4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.</td>
<td>What things? I did not think less of myself when I had a disabling illness than I do now. This question may measure disability rather than low self-esteem, and I don’t think that disabled people should feel bad about themselves for being disabled. On the contrary, I would want them to feel a gratifying sense of achievement (fiero) for accomplishments that would seem minor to most people. I cannot answer this question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.</td>
<td>I think that I have written some useful books, so I strongly disagree. However, that tells you how I feel about my work, not about myself. Also, note that depressed people are prone to the cognitive distortions of minimizing their accomplishments and discounting the positives.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. I take a positive attitude about myself.</td>
<td>This question is too vague for me to answer.</td>
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There are several ways to evaluate the validity of a test. One is to establish whether the test is reliable. An unreliable test cannot be valid. If a test yields random results, like having the person flip a coin or toss a pair of dice, then the results of the test cannot tell you anything about that person. There are several criteria for testing reliability. One is repeatability, which means that a person would get the same score if he or she took the test again. Inter-rater reliability means that different psychologists would come up with the same score if they gave the same test to the same person. But even if a test is reliable, it could still be invalid.

There are two basic kinds of criteria for evaluating the validity of a test: content-related validity and criterion-related validity. Content-related validity deals with questions about the content of the test. Content validity includes face validity and construct validity. Face validity deals with the question of whether the test seems to measure what it was intended to measure. Construct validity deals with questions of how the test relates to the underlying theory. Criterion validity relates to how the test relates to other tests that are designed for the same purpose. There are two kinds of criterion validity: concurrent and predictive. In other words, how well do the test results correspond with the results of other tests given at the same time (concurrent validity) and the results of other tests that will be given in the future (predictive validity)?

I have some serious concerns about the face validity and construct validity of self-esteem tests. In the United States, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale seems to correlate well with other measures of happiness or mental health. Of course, some of the questions in the test are about disability and common symptoms of depression. Depressed people tend to take a dim view of practically everything, including themselves. As a result, depressed people generally have low self-esteem scores. So even if low self-esteem scores correlate with depression, it could be because some of the items in the self-esteem tests are actually measuring symptoms of depression. Even if a depressed person has low self-esteem, we do not know whether the low self-esteem caused the depression or the depression caused the low self-esteem. It is possible that each reinforces the other, in a vicious circle.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale might not be useful for measuring self-esteem in patients who have had cognitive behavioral therapy. The goal of cognitive behavioral therapy is to correct the irrational thought patterns (cognitive distortions) that can lead to depressed mood. Depressed people often make some common errors in thinking about themselves and the world. These cognitive distortions include overgeneralization, labeling, and all-or-nothing thinking. Yet if you don’t allow yourself to have those kinds of irrational thoughts, you may be unable to answer many of the items of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

Depressed people tend to have low self-esteem, but people who are in the manic phase of bipolar disorder can have extraordinarily high self-esteem. During a manic episode, a person may have delusions of grandeur. These delusions are fantastical beliefs that one is famous,
wealthy, and/or enormously powerful. Often, the content of these delusions is based on religious, supernatural, or science fiction themes. Delusions are a symptom of psychosis. However, many people who do not qualify for a diagnosis of mental illness have grandiose thoughts that are not quite bizarre enough to be considered delusional. Thus, a high score on a test of self-esteem is not necessarily an indicator of mental health.

I suspect that Quakers and Buddhist monks (who tend to share my views about human dignity) and people who have taken at least an introductory-level course on logic would also have trouble in answering some of the questions on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. In fact, the self-esteem tests that seem useful in the United States do not seem to be useful in Japan. Studies in Japan consistently show that a large percentage of the respondents have low scores on the standard American tests of self-esteem. Yet Japan does not have high rates of the social problems that seem to go along with low self-esteem in the United States. This poor correlation suggests a problem with the validity of the self-esteem tests. At the very least, this poor correlation suggests that the self-esteem tests have problems with generalizability, which is the ability to be used for many different groups in different settings. However, the main problem may be the underlying theory.

The Japanese have a word for self-esteem: jisonshin. Yet like the word pride in English, it can have negative connotations. Jisonshin can imply vanity and vainglory. In Japan, jisonshin can imply that the person lacks modesty (kenson) and moderateness (hikaeme). These concepts correspond to the Roman Catholic concepts of humility and temperance. Psychologists are not sure why the self-esteem tests that seem useful in the United States do not seem as useful in Japan. The differences between the Americans and the Japanese who took the tests could reflect differences in how those individuals think about themselves. However, the differences might just reflect differences in what people in the two countries think is appropriate to say about themselves. The rules for politeness in self-expression are different in Japan than they are in the United States.

Love is a many-splendored thing. So is self-love. The concept of self-esteem has been stretched to cover many different kinds of ideas. So when several different people are talking about self-esteem, each of them could be talking about something completely different. So even if you are skeptical about some of the popular ideas about self-esteem, it would be silly to accept or dismiss every idea or intervention being promoted by people who are somehow allied with the self-esteem movement. To sort out the different definitions of self-esteem, we could start with the story of The Little Engine That Could.

Several versions of the story of The Little Engine That Could have been told. All of them involve a long train of freight cars that must be pulled over a big mountain. Several large locomotives are asked to pull the train; but for various reasons, each of them refuses. Finally, a small locomotive is asked. She replies, “I think I can! I think I can!” She keeps telling herself “I think I can” as she struggles to drag the train to the top of the mountain. As she descends the other side of the mountain, she rejoices by saying “I thought I could, I thought I could.” The story is used to teach children the value of optimism and hard work. It also shows that you can experience joy by doing something difficult to serve others.

Many people who are considered part of the self-esteem movement mainly want to urge people to tell themselves, “I think I can.” (This kind of encouragement may be particularly important to people who have been taught to underestimate themselves.) Members of the self-esteem movement also generally want to encourage people to feel that they have permission to succeed in life and to enjoy the fruits of their success. This is a message of not just “yes, you can” but “yes, you may.” The best of these programs also provide some sort of direct training in the skills that unsuccessful people seem to lack. So besides teaching someone to believe “I think I can” and “it’s okay if I do,” they show their students, “and this is how.” Practically any training program would meet that description.

Training programs can be judged by three criteria. The first criterion is whether the “yes, you can” message is realistic. Back in the 1970s, some proponents of Transcendental Meditation claimed that if you meditated hard enough, you could fly. Yogic flying meant that you
About the Author

Laurie Endicott Thomas has worked as an editor in various aspects of medical publishing for more than 25 years. She is the author of *Not Trivial: How Studying the Traditional Liberal Arts Can Set You Free* (www.nottypicalbook.com), which explains what has gone wrong in public education in the United States. She is also the author of *Thin Diabetes, Fat Diabetes: Prevent Type 1 and Cure Type 2* (www.thindiabetes.com) and *No More Measles! The Truth About Vaccines and Your Health* (www.nomeasles.com). She says that her political agenda is simple: “I’m against violence, ignorance, pestilence, and dangling participles—not necessarily in that order.” Follow her on Twitter: @LaurieEThomas.