

Here is the full transcript of social psychologist Keith Campbell's talk titled "What We Can Learn From Narcissists" at TEDxUGA conference.

Keith Campbell - TED Talk TRANSCRIPT

"Narcissism" is a word a lot like love: we use it, we talk about it, we don't really know what it means. And we never know if the person we're talking to has the same definition in mind that we do.

And narcissism is particularly complicated because of its strange history in Greek and Roman mythology. It comes from the story of a guy named Narcissus, who is this attractive young man who wandered the woods looking for the ideal partner. He had many suitors he rejected, the most famous being Echo, who repeated everything he said.

Eventually, Narcissus stumbled and saw himself in a pool of water. He immediately fell in love with his [reflection](#) and froze. He died there. And in this place a flower grew, a daylily which today we call the narcissus.

The term *narcissism*, or [self-love](#), came to psychology in a couple ways. It was first used by somebody named Havelock Ellis, who was a British sexologist who talked about self-love in a very sort of graphic and physical way — that I won't talk about.

But then, Sigmund Freud borrowed the term and used it in several ways. He talked about this sort of fundamental love or [self-esteem](#) that a child would have for him or herself.

Our [connection](#) or our attachment to our own ambitions, he even talked about it as something linked to leadership. Today in psychology, we use the term "narcissism" in three different ways or to describe three different forms of narcissism. And this is where a lot of the confusion comes from.

When most of you think about narcissism, you are probably thinking about what we call grandiose narcissism. This is somebody with an inflated self-concept, maybe a bolder sort of [personality](#), somebody who might be charismatic or extroverted, but also somebody who might be callous, have a strong sense of entitlement, maybe manipulative or well into, you know, use or hurt people.

When you think about sort of the classic narcissistic actor, you know, politician or leader, you are probably thinking about grandiose narcissism.

The second form of narcissism, which most of you probably don't think of unless you are in

the clinical psychology business, is vulnerable narcissism. These are folks that have some of that same sense of entitlement and the same sense of self-focus, but are relatively shy. And in fact, they can be [anxious](#), have low self-esteem and be hypersensitive to criticism.

So we talk about these sometimes as covert narcissists because they are hard to spot, you don't really see them out there. Sometimes, we talk about them as shy narcissists because they are shy; sometimes as basement narcissists, as in living in your mom's basement, spending all your time on the internet and wishing you got the [attention](#) that you so rightly deserved while being too scared to go outside and meet people.

Finally, both of these forms of narcissism are personality traits, meaning we all sort of vary on them, we all have some level of both of these. And you can be both grandiose and vulnerable, but the challenge with narcissism, or one of the challenges, is if you become so narcissistic that it sort of pervades all aspects of your life, it can lead to some real problems.

So, imagine you go to work, and you are like: "Everybody suck up to me, high-five! I am [awesome](#)."

You might get away with that, but then at home, you are like: "Hey kids, daddy is awesome. High-five daddy!"

And then, you are like, "Hey, honey! You want to hear about how awesome I am?"

If you do that and you can't really control it, it can damage your love [relationships](#), damage your performance at work, and eventually be diagnosed as a clinical disorder, a narcissistic personality disorder, which is the third form of narcissism. And this is relatively rare, we are talking about one or two percent of the population at any one time.

So when you talk about narcissism today, when I talk about it today, I want to talk mostly about the grandiose form because this is generally what we think about when we talk about narcissism. It's what we have most of the research on, and also grandiose narcissism has some real benefits as well as costs in life.

Most of us think of narcissism as something bad; nobody is like, "Hey, I am a narcissist!" or "Hey, meet my new boyfriend. He is really narcissistic!"

You know, it is generally considered sort of pejorative, but in the case of grandiosity, it can really help. So, grandiose narcissists are really good at starting relationships.

You go to a bar and somebody approaches you and they seem really confident and

charismatic — Red flag! You know.

But these same people, once they are in relationships, have problems because they are more likely to cheat, more likely to be a little manipulative, they are more likely to be controlling. Same thing with leadership.

Grandiosity is really good for becoming a leader whether in an organization or in politics. The problem is once you are in that leadership role, people who are narcissistic take big risks, they do things to get attention, they have ethical challenges or problems that end up bringing them down.

One place where we see this benefit of narcissism most clearly is in media and especially [social media](#). We've done about 10 years of research on narcissism and social media, and what we have found is: it sort of works.

People who are narcissistic have more friends or followers or links in social media. They tend to be more active. They take more selfies. They take more selfies with their whole body, not just their face. They do that.

They do very well in media, and if you think about social media without narcissism, it would be kind of lame. I mean, it would be like cat videos and — somebody saying, like, "Hey Keith, how are you doing, bro?" and you are like, "Fine," and that's it.

And where this really struck me — I was teaching a seminar on narcissism, and like most of my classes, the students were watching their phones the whole time. And so I walked over to one of the students as I wanted to see what she was looking at, and it was Kylie Jenner, one of the Kardashian gals, driving a Ferrari in Los Angeles.

And it kind of blew me away. One, because she wasn't doing anything, she was just driving a Ferrari. And then I thought about it, and I thought, "Oh, my God. She is a genius!"

She basically disintermediated the entire media structure in society. So, in the old days, if you wanted to do the Kylie Jenner reality show, you needed to get a bunch of people, and have some scripts or at least a producer, and have grips and best boys and all those things you don't know what they mean at the end of a movie.

And then you'd put it together, and you send it to a network, and the network will distribute it to everybody else, to your fans.

Kylie got rid of all that. She just got on her phone, filmed herself, sent it right to her fans,

which is just amazing, it's an amazing change. And so you might say, "Well, gee, that's a little shallow." I mean, it's not the most important thing in the world.

But others have used this to really positive ends. So, a recent application of this was the ice bucket challenge, which probably you are aware of or even participated with.

And the idea was to raise money and awareness for ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease, which is really a terrible, debilitating illness. And the idea was you had to give money, or you had to dump a bucket of ice water on your head or have your friend do it or whatever.

And this really worked with narcissism because, like, who else is wanting to do this? "Hey, look! Check me out, I got my ice bucket, it's great!" It is not just narcissism, it is also fun.

I think I did it with my kids, you know, "Hey, dump water on dad." It got a lot of people involved, but narcissism was an important piece of it, and it really worked.

So, there are ways we can use some of this narcissism to very positive outcomes or very positive ends. I am not the first person to figure out that in the modern economic or social world a little bit of narcissism helps, but I think we need to have a careful balance.

So right now we have mentors and teachers or professors like myself telling kids "Hey, you have got to be a thought leader. You have got to build your brand."

Yeah, maybe, but maybe, you know, have some thoughts, and at the end of that, you can be a thought leader. You know, maybe build your reputation, like "I am a good person who does good work," and then focus on the brand and the turtleneck and everything.

So I think there is sort of a process we can use. And where this really struck me was, my daughter was in kindergarten, and one of her teachers gave her this "all about me" assignment. And the idea was "write your special talent."

So she was at home, and she said, "Well, daddy, what is my special talent?"

I said, "Yeah, I don't know. I don't have a special talent."

And my wife said, "I don't have a special talent."

I said, "Why, the only kid I have ever met with a special talent was a two-year-old reincarnated Lama in Tibet who blessed me with a Buddha statue, which is pretty cool. But other than that, most kids don't have that."

So she wrote she was “nice,” which isn’t really special, and it is not really a [talent](#), but it’s still pretty important, you know. I mean, it’s better than, like, “I am evil” or whatever. So, I felt good about that.

I think the point is we can learn a lot from narcissism, from understanding narcissism, from narcissistic individuals in our lives, about what to do and what not to do.

And what we can learn is how to put ourselves out there, be assertive, don’t be afraid to dump a bucket ice on your head for a good cause, to push yourself and build sort of a broader social network than you might be comfortable doing.

But what we can also learn is how not to let our ego take over our life; we’re not the same thing as our ego. And in fact, I mean, the best way I think about ego is it’s a tool in your tool box: you want to use it, and then you want to put it away and go enjoy the rest of your life.

Thank you very much.