

SUMMARY

RETHINKING

NARCISSISM

CRAIG MALKIN



Summary of “Rethinking Narcissism” by Craig Malkin

Written by Lea Schullery

The Bad - And Surprising Good - About Feeling
Special

Introduction

5

The Problem of Narcissism Has Been Around For Centuries

6

Narcissism is a Spectrum We All Fall On

8

Narcissism Comes in Three Different Forms

10

Nature and Nurture Play a Role in Creating Narcissists

12

How to Spot the Warning Signs

14

How to Combat Narcissism

16

Final Summary

18



**DO YOU WANT THIS BOOK
AS AN 20-MINUTE AUDIOBOOK?**



**Get the key insights of non-fiction books
in minutes instead of hours. Listen to
our free audiobooks while you workout
or on your commute to work.**



**DOWNLOAD
OUR FREE APP**



Introduction

It wasn't until author Craig Malkin was attending college that he first saw the term *narcissism*. As he read the accompanying description, he felt relieved and horrified all at once as he realized the term perfectly captured the personality of his mother. She was a shining figure in his life, incredibly outgoing, infectiously funny, and wonderfully caring. She made connections everywhere she went, she was devoted to friends, and was dedicated to improving her community. As a wife to his father and a mother to Malkin and his brother, she was always there. However, as they all grew older, Malkin became aware of her constant bragging, name-dropping, and boasting. She grew obsessed with her looks and interrupted people when they spoke, even when they were sharing pain or anxiety. For instance, once when Malkin was telling her about a painful breakup, she simply muttered, "I never had any trouble finding dates." Malkin was stunned and questioned what was happening to his mother. So when he learned about narcissism, he frantically began exploring more. Was she always a narcissist? Or is narcissism something that appears later in life? Malkin dedicated himself to finding answers. It was during his exploration that Malkin discovered the roots of his mother's narcissism. In fact, he even recognized that narcissism isn't always a bad thing. In some cases, narcissism is essential for us to lead happy, fulfilled, and productive lives. When we feel special, we make better lovers, courageous leaders, and intrepid explorers. We become more creative and we may even live longer!

As Malkin continued his research, he eventually began to look at narcissism in a new light. When his mother passed away, he was able to say goodbye to her with love in his heart despite the many difficult years of his childhood. It is this new perspective that Malkin aims to share with his readers in hopes of bringing them the same clarity and hope that he has found in his own life. When dealing with narcissism, it is difficult to overcome the bad and embrace the good; however, hopefully through *Rethinking Narcissism*, you can learn how to do both.



GET THE FREE AUDIOBOOK IN OUR APP: [QUICKREAD.COM/APP](https://quickread.com/app)

The Problem of Narcissism Has Been Around For Centuries

Long ago in Ancient Greece, there lived a boy named Narcissus. His divine origin blessed him with equally divine looks, he had wavy locks that tumbled over his forehead and a body sculpted by years of climbing trees and scrambling over rocks to hunt. As he grew older, he quickly amassed an army of admirers. People of all ages and genders fell for him instantly, and as he walked through the thick forests, he always drew a crowd as people were eager to catch a glimpse of him.

Eventually, Narcissus became accustomed to this admiration, yet he continually turned away potential lovers who mustered the courage to approach him, including the mountain nymph Echo who was shunned by Narcissus and refused to move, eat, or drink and eventually withered away. Soon after, Narcissus stumbled upon a cool, clear spring and caught a glimpse of his face. Instantly, he fell in love with his own reflection; however, each time he went in for a kiss, his reflection disappeared! He waited for hours and then days, yet his lover never reappeared. Finally, he dove into the water and plunged deeper into the darkness, disappearing from sight, never to surface again.

As you can see, the concept of self-love has been a controversial topic for centuries. In fact, in 350 BC, Aristotle posed a question: “Who should the good man love more? Himself, or others?” He then answered this question with, “The good man is particularly selfish.” Yet just two centuries earlier, the Buddha spread a different message: The self is an illusion, a trick our minds play on us to make us think we matter. Instead, the illusory self should never be our primary focus. But it wasn’t until 1914 when the founding father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, made the word *narcissism* famous in his paper *On Narcissism: An Introduction*. In it, Freud theorized that narcissism is a necessary developmental stage of childhood.

As infants, we fall in love with ourselves in a stage he called “primary narcissism,” and not only is it a healthy stage, but it is also necessary for us to form meaningful, close relationships. You see, the passion we find for ourselves gives us the energy to reach out to others. So while it is necessary for development, Freud determined that narcissism in adults is much different. He cautioned that it could lead to vanity, mental illness, and turn us into delusional megalomaniacs. However, Heinz Kohut, an Austrian psychoanalyst opposed this idea. According to Kohut, humans are driven by our sense of self. Furthermore, love and admiration are the driving forces behind what makes us feel special. And when we feel special, we grow into confident, self-loving people. In other words, narcissism is critical to our well-being and happiness.



GET THE FREE AUDIOBOOK IN OUR APP: [QUICKREAD.COM/APP](https://quickread.com/app)

Narcissism is a Spectrum We All Fall On

So what exactly is narcissism? Vanity? Attention-seeking? In the psychological community, narcissism can simply be an obnoxious yet common personality trait or a rare and dangerous mental health disorder. Despite the ambiguity, each view shares a single assumption: narcissism is *wholly* destructive. But according to Malkin, this assumption is all wrong. Yes, narcissism can be harmful, and yes, the internet is filled with articles and blogs written by people who have suffered at the hands of narcissists. But these stories are just a small part of narcissism. Instead, narcissism requires a bigger picture.

More than just a stubborn character flaw or a severe mental illness, narcissism exists on a spectrum. On one side, you have those who have zero sense of self-worth. They have no desire to feel special and even believe themselves unworthy of love, success, or happiness. On the other side of the spectrum, you have those that must always feel special and validated. These people are arrogant and are constantly seeking validation and for others to recognize their importance. Of course, life on either side of the spectrum is unhealthy. Either extreme can be detrimental and unstable; instead, those who find themselves in the middle of the spectrum are perhaps the most stable and happiest of all.

In moderation, narcissism can inspire our imagination and provide a spark or passion for life, it can open up our experience and expand our sense of potential. It can even deepen our love for family, friends, and partners. In fact, studies have found that those with a slightly outsized ego are happier, more sociable and often physically healthier than their humble peers. Studies have also shown that those who consider themselves better than average are in better shape to survive traumatic events than those with a more humble or realistic view of themselves. Feeling special seems to help survivors of tragedy face their future with less fear and greater hope.

Psychologists Benjamin Le and Natalie Dove once reviewed more than 100 studies involving nearly 40,000 people in romantic relationships and found the key to happiness and long-lasting relationships was whether one or both people held *positive illusions*. A positive illusion is when you view your partner as smarter, more talented, and more beautiful, so when you believe that you are in a relationship with the most amazing person in the room, you feel more special.

Lastly, we've mistakenly believed that our degree of narcissism is fixed throughout our lifetime. In reality, healthy narcissism ebbs and flows. For instance, when we're sick, we normally move up the spectrum and feel we are more deserving of others' time and care. Similarly, our narcissism spikes at work where we feel the need to be admired, recognized and appreciated. Even certain life stages make us feel special, such as pregnancy or adolescence. Ultimately, narcissism is a scale that can change throughout our lifetimes. But most importantly, moderation is key.



GET THE FREE AUDIOBOOK IN OUR APP: [QUICKREAD.COM/APP](https://quickread.com/app)

Narcissism Comes in Three Different Forms

One common misconception many of us have about narcissism is that narcissists are always easy to spot. We see loud, vain, and self-aggrandizing people who flood our television screens and social media feeds. They stick out. And while this may be true, an even truer reality is that narcissists are all around us and are less easy to spot than we think. Not all narcissists advertise themselves so shamelessly. Many of them aren't even flashy or outgoing, which means recognizing them becomes a lot harder. In fact, there are three types of narcissists: extroverted, introverted, and communal narcissists.

The extroverted ones are the ones we discussed above. The easy-to-spot narcissists who are flaunting their money and possessions and scrambling to be the center of attention. But introverted narcissists are a bit harder to spot. They too are just as convinced that they're better than others, but they fear criticism so shy away from, and even become panicked when they feel all eyes on them. On the outside, they seem timid; however, these people can be quite dangerous. They believe they harbor unrecognized intelligence and hidden gifts and feel as if they are different from most people. These people often come off as bitter and angry as they seethe over the world's "refusal" to recognize their special gifts.

Communal narcissists are perhaps the "newest" type of narcissist. These are the ones that aren't focused on standing out, they don't care to be the best at their job like the extrovert and they don't feel misunderstood like the introvert. Instead, they proudly announce how much they give to charity or boast about how little they spend on themselves. These are the ones that trap you in a corner at a party and whisper excitedly about how thoughtful they've been to a grieving friend. They believe they are better than the rest of humanity and crave the status of a giver, not a taker.

As you can see, not all narcissists fit in the same category, they don't always look and sound alike. And while each narcissist is different, they all share one motivation: the *need* to feel special. They just do it in different ways.



GET THE FREE AUDIOBOOK IN OUR APP: [QUICKREAD.COM/APP](https://www.quickread.com/app)

Nature and Nurture Play a Role in Creating Narcissists

Many people believe that narcissism develops over time. Parents are often blamed for giving their children too much attention or spoiling them, resulting in a constant need for attention and validation - or narcissism. However, this isn't necessarily the case. In fact, nature also plays a major role in how much or how little self-worth we have. We don't arrive on earth as blank slates. Instead, we are born with biological tendencies that result in many different characteristics, and one of the most heavily researched trait is that of introversion and extroversion.

While some might naturally crave becoming the life of the party and seek new adventure, others naturally prefer quiet time alone. Similarly, narcissism can be naturally stronger in some people. In other words, nature sets us up to lean on one side of the spectrum or the other, but we all have a chance to live in the center of the spectrum. Of course, nature alone isn't to blame. How we are raised and what culture tells us can swing us into unhealthy territory on the spectrum. While many experiences can push us too high or too low on the spectrum, there is one key childhood experience that is to blame: *insecure love*. To stay in the center of the spectrum, children need to feel that no matter what they do, they can still count on the people who raise them for comfort. Yet when children don't receive that secure love, they'll shape their behavior to try and earn love in unhealthy ways.

For example, Jean, age 62, grew up in a household where his father taught her that it was arrogant to talk about yourself. Her parents instilled in her the idea that pride is harmful. At night, her father would sit by her bed and say things like, "Never get a big head - it's a sure path to trouble." Such rules led Jean to feel ashamed for having any aspirations at all, she couldn't even recall a single moment when she felt comfortable sharing an accomplishment. Even her mother shared similar sentiments and told her she needed to keep her feet on the ground. So even when Jean dreamed of

becoming a dancer, she never pursued it for fear she would lose the love of her parents. As she grew older, she never focused on herself, only on the needs of her children, so when she became an empty nester, she had no idea what to do with herself.

Jean's story shows what happens when we are not allowed to dream or enjoy pride. The reality is, we all need dreams. They motivate us and lift us up when life becomes hard. Jean, however, was taught to feel ashamed of her dreams, so any thought of expecting or asking more filled her with shame. Chad's upbringing, however, was quite different from Jean's. At the age of 27, Chad was single and working as a cashier. When he was a child his father would sit him on his lap and say things like, "Son, you're sure to do amazing things, You've got an incredible mind. Just keep it focused." While his parents gave him constant praise and became his biggest cheerleaders, they never allowed him to talk about his emotions. Instead, they would say things like "You worry too much" or "Great men don't complain." As a result, Chad grew up to be vain, arrogant, and deeply sad and isolated.



GET THE FREE AUDIOBOOK IN OUR APP: [QUICKREAD.COM/APP](https://quickread.com/app)

How to Spot the Warning Signs

Deep down, narcissists are extraordinarily insecure people, which is why they often lash out in anger when they feel hurt by something you've said or done. But they don't just stop at yelling in anger. Instead, they combine it with a show of superiority and become condescending and point out all your faults and flaws. This is what they call *emotion phobia*. Since narcissists lack true self-confidence, they become sensitive to criticism. And the only way to make them feel better about themselves is to make others feel worse.

Emotion phobia isn't always lashing out in anger, however, it can also be far quieter. Because narcissists attempt to avoid feelings of vulnerability, sadness, and fear, they often become uncomfortable when others begin to feel these emotions too. As a result, they'll change the subject or fall completely silent. Perhaps you've found yourself in a similar situation. For instance, whenever Mark begins talking about his fear of graduate school, Mia falls quiet. Such conversations remind Mia of her own insecurities, which she doesn't want to share. So as soon as Mark begins to voice his fears, Mia's mind floods with thoughts of her own and quickly commandeers the conversation and talks about some exciting future plans.

Emotion phobia is a deep discomfort with feelings, but there is another warning sign that narcissists use as a way of getting rid of those emotions. Instead of simply changing the subject or falling silent, some narcissists play emotional hot potato. This is a more insidious form of projection, in which they deny their own feelings by claiming they belong to someone else. For example, a friend who hasn't returned your calls and texts in a few days might suddenly ask, "Are you upset at me or something?" Given that she was the one ignoring your calls and texts, odds are she is the one feeling angry about something. But instead of recognizing the feelings as her own, she accuses you of harboring a grudge.

Emotional hot potato can become much more dangerous as narcissists oftentimes have the power to coerce you into experiencing the emotions they're trying to ignore. For example, a spouse might begin an argument and accuse you of "being angry all the time." By the time he's done hurling insults, you probably *will* feel angry even if you didn't at the start. That is the essence of hot potato. Your partner is getting rid of his anger by passing it along to you. It's almost as if he's saying, "I don't want this feeling. Here, you take it."



GET THE FREE AUDIOBOOK IN OUR APP: [QUICKREAD.COM/APP](https://www.quickread.com/app)

How to Combat Narcissism

As you read the previous chapter, you might've realized that maybe you are in a relationship with a narcissist. Many people face this very problem. They question if they should just let go and wonder if it's ever worth staying. As a whole, we are often told that narcissists can't change. They think they're perfect in every way and they will never think otherwise, so why even try? Well, there is good news. Recent studies show that the "once a narcissist always a narcissist" view isn't always true. There are ways to combat narcissism, but it will take a bit of vulnerability and patience.

In a study completed by psychologists from the University of Surrey and the University of Southampton, researchers attempted to enhance empathy in narcissists. In the study, they showed narcissists a video of a domestic-abuse survivor as she described her experience and tried to relate her feelings. As it turns out, narcissists weren't callous or indifferent towards the woman's situation; instead, they were quite moved by it. And no, they weren't just acting either. They showed signs of empathy that could not be faked - their heart rate increased. Dozens of other studies that explore whether or not narcissists can change all share the same conclusion: encouraging narcissists to feel more compassionate and caring reduces their narcissism.

So how can you use this information when dealing with a narcissist? How can you tell if there's hope in your relationship or if you should leave? Simply put, you'll need to see if your narcissist can come out of hiding. In other words, if your partner can tolerate sharing and feeling some emotions like insecurity, fear, sadness, shame, and loneliness, then there's still hope. Of course, the only way to do this is by sharing your own vulnerabilities. While this might sound simple, it's not as easy as it seems. That's because we, as humans, try to mask our true feelings when we feel threatened. So if a loved one is exhibiting narcissistic behavior by becoming condescending and angry toward you, then you tend to react with similar anger and frustration.

If you can stop yourself in these moments and prompt empathy from your partner, you can begin to uncover the hidden narcissist within your partner. For example, imagine that you and your partner are discussing graduate school options and he responds by telling you that you should choose schools with less qualifications that are easier to get into. In this moment, you might feel hurt, but instead of responding in anger, you should calmly explain how their words make you feel and why. Say something like, “Your opinion means everything to me. When you suggest I only apply to easier schools, I’m afraid you don’t think much of me.” When you are prompting emotion, it’s important to convey the softer feeling. Many narcissists will feel love, empathy, and compassion in this scenario, allowing you both to heal and build a stronger foundation.

It’s important to remember that this type of response may not happen immediately. This may take patience, and if it doesn’t happen at all, it may be time to seek professional help.



GET THE FREE AUDIOBOOK IN OUR APP: [QUICKREAD.COM/APP](https://quickread.com/app)

Final Summary

Narcissism is a trait that has long tormented humanity, beginning with the ancient Greek story of Narcissus. And while many of us believe that narcissism is a negative trait that people are doomed to suffer with forever, narcissism is a spectrum that fluctuates throughout our lifetime. In fact, a healthy amount of narcissism can make for stable lives and healthy relationships. Unhealthy levels of narcissism, however, can be detrimental and toxic. To spot a narcissist, there are some telltale signs like emotion phobia and emotional hot potato. If you find a loved one exhibiting these signs, there are ways to curb narcissistic behavior by being vulnerable and telling them that you need them to care and love you the way you care for and love them.



GET THE FREE AUDIOBOOK IN OUR APP: [QUICKREAD.COM/APP](https://www.quickread.com/app)



**DO YOU WANT THIS BOOK
AS AN 20-MINUTE AUDIOBOOK?**



**Get the key insights of non-fiction books
in minutes instead of hours. Listen to
our free audiobooks while you workout
or on your commute to work.**



**DOWNLOAD
OUR FREE APP**

