



Are narcissists born or made? The answer might surprise you

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[Narcissists are everywhere these days](#). Narcissism has become a social media buzzword, with [checklists of traits to cross-reference](#) and tools to help you manage the [narcissist](#) in your [family](#), friend group – or relationship.

But while received wisdom is that it's a [trait that is produced largely by parenting](#), a new report has found that [narcissism](#) is, in fact, 50 per cent [genetic](#), with the other half attributable largely to environmental experiences that aren't shared within [families](#). In fact, the report "Narcissism Runs in Families Due to Genetics: An Extended Twin Family Analysis", [published](#) in *Sage Journals*, found that parenting styles may have no impact on whether you, or your [children](#), end up as narcissists.

If you, [like me](#), suspect quite a few narcissists are lurking in your extended family tree, then this news might send you into a tailspin. If you had a difficult, manipulative [parent](#) with narcissistic traits, you might now worry that you will be the same or that - worse - your children will be, even if you parent them lovingly and listen to them and their feelings.

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Does narcissism run in families, as seen in HBO's *Succession*, in which the Roy family is headed by a ruthless patriarch, Logan (Brian Cox), who showcases narcissistic traits of grandiosity, lack of empathy, and intense manipulation on a constant loop, as do his children?

In which case, what power do we have over stopping the family dysfunction?



Miranda Priestly in 'The Devil Wears Prada' exhibits strong traits of grandiose narcissism that is studied in the new report (20th Century Studios)

Most of us carry some traits of narcissism, including a need for admiration, self-centredness, and sensitivity to criticism and empathy.

But a narcissistic personality, in which narcissistic behaviours are commonly seen on a daily basis, is something different. On a more extreme end of the

spectrum is Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), in which narcissism is ever-present, incurable – and intolerable.

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A 2014 study of 304 twin pairs found that "grandiose narcissism" was about 23 per cent heritable, and "entitled narcissism" about 35 per cent heritable, with most of the rest linked to life experiences and environmental influences that were unique to each person.

This new study offers vastly stronger evidence on the influence of genetics, despite previous theories placing most of the emphasis on parenting and family environment.

Dr Claire Hart is Associate Professor of Social and Personality Psychology at the University of Southampton, specialising in quantitative research on interpersonal relationships, empathy, and narcissistic dysfunction. She explains that although there does appear to be a substantial genetic component to narcissism, it's important to understand what that 50 per cent figure in the new study means.

"It doesn't mean that half of an individual's narcissism comes from their genes," she says. "Or that a narcissistic parent has a 50 per cent chance of having a narcissistic child. Instead, when we look across lots of people and ask why some people are more narcissistic than others, genetic differences appear to explain around half of that variation."

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In other words, there isn't a single narcissism gene that you either inherit or don't. "Lots of genetic influences are likely to be involved, alongside our experiences and environments," she says. "Genes can influence our predispositions towards certain personality traits, but they don't determine an individual's personality."

But where the new research is especially interesting, she says, is that parents and children in the study were similar in their levels of narcissism, but that similarity appeared to be explained by genetic rather than shared environmental transmission.



Dr Claire Hart: 'Genes can influence certain personality traits, but they don't determine an individual's personality' (Supplied)

"That challenges the simple idea that narcissistic parents necessarily 'make' their children narcissistic through the way they parent."

That is not to say that parenting doesn't matter. "Previous longitudinal research has found that parental overvaluation – seeing and treating a child as more special or entitled than other children – predicts increases in children's narcissistic traits over time."

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She also makes the point that children growing up in the same family don't necessarily experience the same parenting. "If parents treat their children differently, parenting can actually form part of the 'non-shared' environment rather than the environment siblings have in common," she says.

Dr Craig Malkin is a lecturer in Psychology at Harvard Medical School. He is also the author of 2015's *Rethinking Narcissism*, in which he defines narcissism as running along a spectrum from healthy to unhealthy. "This new study puts another nail in the coffin of the idea that parenting style alone creates extreme narcissism," says Malkin, who has been giving a rough estimate of the 50/50, genetics and environment for years. "The genetic evidence is now impossible to dismiss."

While some people seem to be born with more of a tendency toward narcissistic traits and are more attention-seeking, dominant, dramatic, or difficult to manage from an early age, there's still "a tremendous amount" we can do as parents, he says.

"We don't have complete control over who our children become, but how we respond to more difficult temperaments can help determine whether a child gets knocked further up the narcissism spectrum or stays in a healthier range."



Mad (narcissistic) Men: Don Draper is a textbook example of a man with a grandiose idea of himself (AMC)

He cites [research](#) by psychologist Phoebe Crane that showed that early narcissistic tendencies are less likely to develop into unhealthy narcissism when parents are warm and responsive while also providing structure and limits; something psychologists refer to as authoritative parenting.

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"They were instead more likely to develop healthier forms of confidence and self-regard," says Dr Malkin. "Giving children healthy limits ... and combining those expectations with warmth, support, and empathy may be the best protection we can provide against a child with a genetic vulnerability moving toward destructive narcissism."

He adds that research contradicts the popular idea of "once a narcissist, always a narcissist".

"Longitudinal studies find that narcissistic traits change over time and, on average, decline with age, even though people who are more narcissistic than their peers tend to remain relatively more narcissistic than their peers."

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Dr Ramani Durvasula, author of 'It's Not You: Identifying and Healing from Narcissistic People'

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Dr Ramani Durvasula – a leading expert on narcissism and author of *It's Not You: Identifying and Healing from Narcissistic People*, says the new study is flawed and "may not be as much doom and fatalistic gloom" as it first appears to be.

"The way they measured narcissism is really focusing on a relatively narrow band of the construct," she says. "I do appreciate the authors doing this work; personality does have a genetic element, but complex constructs like narcissism take in more territory than just a handful of the components."

While it does appear that traits like status seeking, attention seeking, perception of one's own specialness, and capacity to control others has a heritable component, she says, we need replication science and broader measures of narcissism to say narcissism is inherited.

"This study does not necessarily support that other key elements of narcissism, such as low empathy and selfishness, as well as the associated behaviours, are heritable," she says, pointing out that it only focuses on grandiose traits and not vulnerable/covert ones. "More research would be needed."

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When it comes to recovery from narcissistic parenting, she says that genetics don't really matter. "Selfish, manipulative, invalidating, emotionally harmful parents do real damage to their children – and you recover by fostering other healthy relationships, seeking out therapy, doing the hard work of breaking out of self-blame and guilt cycles."



Professor Sam Vaknin introduces the concept of 'healthy narcissism', a building block of self-worth in early life (Supplied)

Professor Sam Vaknin is the author of *Malignant Self Love: Narcissism Revisited*, the first book on narcissistic abuse published in 1999. He agrees that the report

doesn't add up. "[It] absolutely fails to establish that genes cause narcissism, parenting doesn't matter, and narcissism is genetically predetermined," he says.

He explains that narcissism is a cluster of traits, and, like all psychological traits, it is hereditary. "This includes 'healthy narcissism', an integral part of personal growth and maturation and is at the core of self-esteem, a stable sense of self-worth, and even social functioning."

However, environmental factors may mutate healthy narcissism into the pathological or even the malignant kind. "It is very likely that certain people have a genetic predisposition to develop pathological narcissism given a dysfunctional environment, a specific life history, and certain adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). However, at this stage, we have no body of rigorous, serious studies in any field to support such a claim."

How we respond to more difficult temperaments can help determine whether a child gets knocked further up the narcissism spectrum or stays in a healthier range

Craig Malkin, author of 'Rethinking Narcissism'

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On the other hand, he says there are "thousands upon thousands of rigorous studies", which highly correlate childhood abuse and trauma with later-life pathological narcissism.

"There is childhood abuse or trauma in the personal histories of literally all people diagnosed with NPD. 'Abuse' and 'trauma' in this context is any disruption to the formation of an individuated, separated, integrated, and constellated self. An overprotective or smothering parent is therefore being as abusive as an incestuous or bullying one."

Psychologist Kathleen Saxton and author of 2025's *My Parent The Peacock: Discovery and Recovery From Narcissistic Parenting* says that while the genetic evidence in the new study is important, there is no way on earth that your parental upbringing does not impact the way that you are shaped.

"Genes may create vulnerability or temperament, but relationships help shape how that vulnerability is expressed," she says. What she repeatedly sees in her

consulting room is that children adapt to narcissistic environments in very different ways.



Psychologist Kathleen Saxton says there is no way parental styles don't impact narcissism (Supplied)

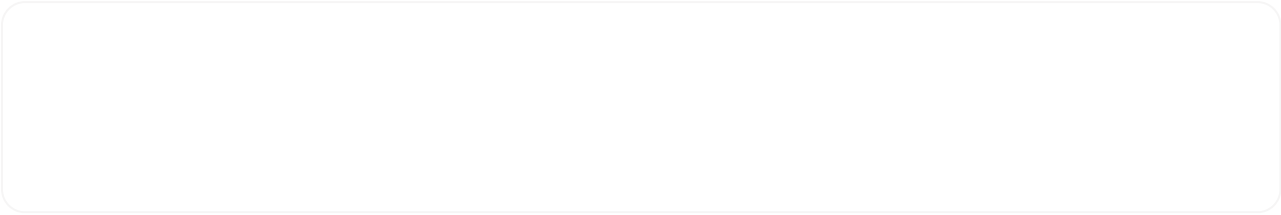
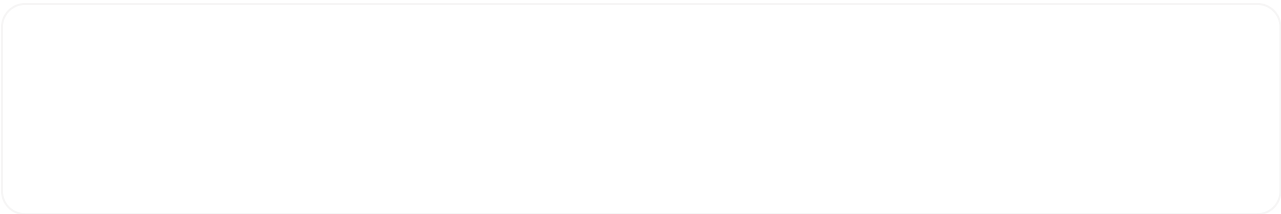
"One may become perfectionistic, another invisible, or highly anxious and people-pleasing, while another may replicate some of the narcissistic defences themselves," she says. "So the question is not simply whether narcissism is inherited, but what happens to a child who has to organise themselves around a narcissistic parent."

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The take-home message from the new research is that narcissism can run in families, but genes are not destiny. That is a huge relief. "I think the most useful message is therefore not to worry about trying to eliminate narcissism in a child because it exists somewhere in the family," adds Dr Hart.

"Instead, focus on the things that support healthy development more generally: warmth, empathy, responsiveness, appropriate boundaries and recognising the child's needs as distinct from the parent's own needs."

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