

Don't Feed  
*the*  
Narcissists!

*The Mythology and Science  
of Mental Health*

ALSO BY  
LAURIE ENDICOTT THOMAS



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# Don't Feed *the* Narcissists!

*The Mythology and Science  
of Mental Health*



LAURIE ENDICOTT  
THOMAS



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*You're so vain.  
You probably think this song is about you.*

—CARLY SIMON



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## Chapter 1

# The Greatest Love of All?



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 19<sup>th</sup> century, French people started using the word *mégalo-* *manie* 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 mental 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



can overpower a narcissist. Never try to play any sort of game against someone who has an unhealthy need to win. If you play, you will probably lose. Narcissists think that winning is everything. They do not care about rules. They often rewrite the rules in the middle of the game. Unlike the narcissist, you will be held back by common decency and even basic sanity. At best, you will simply lose the game. At worst, you will become as emotionally unbalanced as the narcissist. As a result, you could lose your dignity or even your job. In short, you have nothing to gain and everything to lose when you tangle with a narcissist.

In many social settings, someone has the power to get the narcissist to behave. For example, upper-level managers could discipline or even fire a narcissistic middle manager. Unfortunately, the upper-level managers seldom see that the narcissistic middle manager is causing problems. Upper-level managers typically have an unrealistically rosy view of the narcissist. Narcissists are often good at self-promotion. They can also be ruthless in suppressing any information that would make them look less than perfect. This can be a serious problem in settings where upper management ignores all information that does not flow through “proper channels” (i.e., through the narcissist). The process of 360-degree assessment, or multi-rater feedback, was developed to get around this problem. In that process, an individual is reviewed by peers and subordinates, as well as by his or her supervisor. On the plus side, this process provides a way for people to alert upper management to the bad behavior of a narcissist. On the other hand, it gives the narcissist a chance to attack his or her peers and supervisor. Thus, the reports that come in through this process should be evaluated cautiously.

Whether or not you are in a position to discipline narcissists, you need to understand them. Narcissists can be dangerous, for two basic reasons. One reason is their overconfidence. They are the sort of fool who rushes in where angels fear to tread. The other reason is the pointless conflict they create. Narcissists seldom work or play well with others. A sane person would not want to hire a narcissist or work for one. If you want to have a happy marriage, you would certainly want to avoid marrying a narcissist. If you cannot avoid narcissists, you may

need to tiptoe around them. Thus, narcissists can waste your time or sap your energy, even if they do not directly attack you.

An understanding of narcissism can help you recognize and avoid narcissists, at work and in your personal life. It can help you avoid promoting narcissism in your children. It can even help you recognize and correct your own narcissistic tendencies. As parents and as citizens, we must all think about how the schools are shaping young people's character. We do want our schools to teach young people how to earn a living. However, we also want young people to become wise and good—to become happy and healthy members of a just society. Before we can achieve those goals, we must think about what good character is.

# 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**

*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.

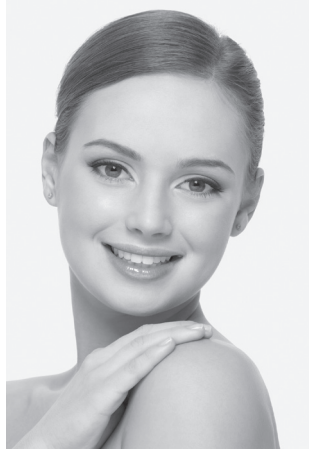
Surprise is the fastest emotional response. It is a response to the unexpected. Surprise produces a facial expression that looks a lot like fear because the eyes open wide, to gather as much information as possible (Figure 2). However, the jaw drops a little as the mouth goes slack. The surprise expression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



**Figure 2: Surprise!**

*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).



**Figure 3: Social Smile**

*A social smile is produced by contracting the zygomaticus major muscle.*

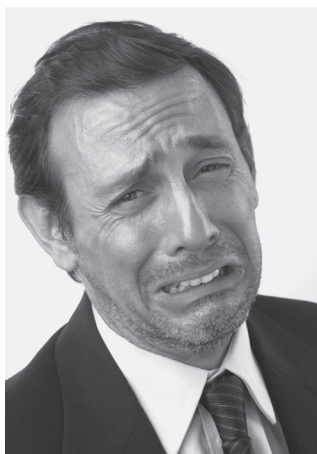
But when people are expressing true happiness, they also contract the orbicularis oculi muscle around the eyes, which happens involuntarily. Thus, the genuine smile that reaches clear to the eyes is called a Duchenne smile (Figure 4).



**Figure 4: True Smile**

*A true smile of happiness (Duchenne smile) is produced by contraction of both the zygomaticus major muscle and the orbicularis oculi muscle. Notice the crinkling around the eyes.*

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).



**Figure 5: Sadness**

*Sadness is what you feel when you have lost something you wanted.*

*In a sad expression, the corners of the mouth turn down, but the inner corners of the eyebrows are often raised.*

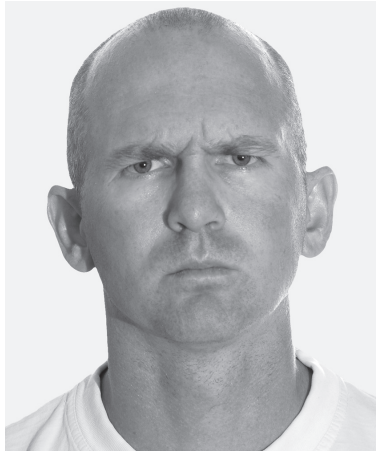
A person who is feeling sad may be quiet, lethargic, and withdrawn and may cry. *Homo sapiens* is one of the few species that produce tears in response to strong emotion. In fact, our eyes can produce three different kinds of tears. Basal tears are produced just to keep the surface of the eye moist. 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.



**Figure 8: Contempt**

*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

good thing. Solomon's concept of resentment helped me understand why Eva Mozes Kor, a survivor of Auschwitz, decided to forgive Dr. Josef Mengele.

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 experimentations 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 50<sup>th</sup> 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

## 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.notrivialbook.com](http://www.notrivialbook.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](http://www.thindiabetes.com)) and *No More Measles! The Truth About Vaccines and Your Health* ([www.nomeasles.com](http://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.