

Vulnerable narcissists more susceptible to eating disorders

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Danushika Sivanathan, a PhD Scholar from the Research School of Psychology.
Credit: Australian National University

Vulnerable narcissists are more likely to develop eating disorders, according to a new study from The Australian National University (ANU).

Lead author, Danushika Sivanathan, a Ph.D. Scholar from the Research

School of Psychology, says developing vulnerable narcissism—a [narcissist](#) subtype—is linked to how you were raised.

"Narcissism has two subtypes—grandiose narcissism and vulnerable narcissism," said Miss Sivanathan.

"My research found that if you are a vulnerable narcissist, you are more likely to get an [eating disorder](#)."

Miss Sivanathan says "everyone" has traits on the spectrum of a vulnerable narcissist, but consistent parental invalidation may lead to developing this martyr-like personality condition.

"Parental invalidation, which has also been shown to be linked to eating disorders, can set you up temperamentally as a vulnerable narcissist," said Miss Sivanathan.

"It is not abuse or neglect. It is the kind of parenting when a child's inner feelings and thoughts are consistently minimised.

"For example, when a child tells a parent; 'I am really sad' and the response is, 'Just get over it'."

The online study, published in *Eating and Weight Disorders*, focused on women aged 18-30 because of a higher prevalence of eating disorders with women.

The study found people displaying vulnerable narcissism characteristics, rather than grandiose, had a stronger risk factor for developing eating disorder symptoms—such as binge eating, purging, and over-concern with body shape and weight.

"People with this personality type are more susceptible to eating

disorders because they have a high focus on receiving validation from others to maintain a positive sense of self.

"However, at the same time they are not very good in situations with others, which makes them unable to receive this validation.

"This means they can't maintain their positive sense of self and they have additional negative feelings which they manage through some of these eating disorder symptoms."

The Ph.D. scholar says grandiose narcissism has familiar traits like entitlement, grandiose fantasy and charisma.

"These people are manipulative, domineering, vindictive and lack empathy," said Miss Sivanathan.

"But vulnerable narcissists are easy to miss. Despite some shared traits, like the unrealistic sense of superiority, their narcissism is internal. They are avoidant in [interpersonal relationships](#) and they don't have the same charisma.

"Vulnerable narcissists need to be externally validated but they are shameful about it."

Although research shows parental invalidation underpins the development of vulnerable narcissism, eating disorder symptoms can exist without narcissistic traits.

"You can have an eating disorder without being a vulnerable narcissist and that might be a bit easier to treat," said Miss Sivanathan.

"Eating [disorders](#) are complicated, difficult to treat and poorly understood. Personality conditions are also very difficult to treat.

"This research highlights vulnerable [narcissism](#) as another risk factor that psychologists can consider and hopefully help inform treatment options."

More information: Danushika Sivanathan et al. Vulnerable narcissism as a mediator of the relationship between perceived parental invalidation and eating disorder pathology, *Eating and Weight Disorders - Studies on Anorexia, Bulimia and Obesity* (2019). [DOI: 10.1007/s40519-019-00647-2](#)

Provided by Australian National University

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