

*NEW YORK*

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SOCIAL STUDIES

# They're Narcissists, and They're Proud

Diagnosed narcissists are discovering how to thrive — by doling out advice to other narcissists.

Illustration: Zohar Lazar

*This article was featured in [One Great Story](#), New York's reading recommendation newsletter. [Sign up here](#) to get it nightly.*

In the winter of 2017, Lee Hammock was at home in Durham, North Carolina, spending the evening blaming his failures and unrealized potential on his 7-month-old son. Hammock has an engineering degree, but, at 32, he was working on the floor in a warehouse. And what he actually wanted to be was an actor. As his son lay on the floor sobbing, Hammock told him, "See? This is why I'm not successful." Hammock's wife, Delaney, happened to walk in at that exact moment. She was appalled, which he considered another perfect example of how his family was holding him back. He shouted at her until she stormed out. She yelled from the doorway, "It's so hard living with a narcissist!" Later, Hammock Googled the word and found the symptoms for narcissistic personality disorder: a grandiose sense of self-importance and entitlement; preoccupation with fantasies of success, power, or beauty; demanding excessive admiration; envy; a lack of empathy. *Damn!* he thought. That described him pretty accurately. He Googled the cure. Therapy. *Damn!* he thought again.

Hammock had always felt he was different from other people: less emotional and empathetic. But he'd never thought that there was anything especially wrong with him. If anything, he believed his callousness made him exceptionally resilient. Over the following weeks, he began to question himself — looking over his past, his every word and decision — wondering if this strange force, narcissism, had been motivating him all along. Hammock found a Facebook group for people diagnosed with NPD where a few hundred users disclosed their outsize fantasies and chatted about the shame of discovering their condition. He recognized himself in these posts and felt for the members of the group something he rarely experienced, even for members of his own family: empathy. He decided to go to therapy after all, and soon after, he was officially diagnosed with NPD.

During the pandemic, he began posting videos on TikTok and then YouTube about his day-to-day experiences with the condition under the moniker "Mental Healness." His therapist suggested this might be a bad idea — a constant need for validation being his central problem — but he decided to ignore her. Which ended up being a wise decision in terms of raising his profile, at least. In 2021, he posted a video explaining why going "no contact" with a narcissist is the only way to effectively remove them from your life. It quickly hit 360,000 views.

Today, Hammock has around 3 million followers. He isn't the only professional or self-aware narcissist. In fact, he's on the front lines of a growing population. Influencers like "the Nameless Narcissist," "Recovering Narcissist," "SpiritNarc," and, more puzzlingly, "the Bat Wolf" have, through their narcissist-forward content, inspired others to proudly proclaim their NPD diagnosis and seek treatment. A sub-Reddit for people with NPD — similar to the group Hammock joined several years ago — currently has about 52,000 members. (It has nearly doubled in size in the past three years.) Across the world, diagnosed narcissists are sharing their stories and calling for compassion for those suffering from NPD.

Watch now

@thenamelessnarcissist ✓

My life doesn't sounds real to recite lol  
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Still, Hammock admits eight years of therapy, as well as relentlessly documenting his therapy, haven't exactly healed him. The core of his personality, he says, is essentially unchanged. He tells me, "My very first thought in any given situation, to this day, is *How does this serve me?*" But now, he says, "I've accepted the fact that it doesn't go away. What I can do is learn how to manage my behaviors better." Narcissism, he says, is like addiction: You have to learn your triggers. But it's also worse than addiction, he says, because you can't avoid the thing you're addicted to, which is yourself. He's like an anthropomorphic martini that is also an alcoholic.

Recently, and though he has no certificates or degrees in the field, Hammock has begun offering personalized coaching sessions to his followers. For \$75, anyone can video-chat with him for 30 minutes and pick his brain. Sometimes he talks to people who suspect they might have NPD, and he encourages them to go to therapy. More often, it's people who suspect their romantic partners are undiagnosed narcissists. Operating on the assumption all people with NPD think the same, they view Hammock as a kind of medium, capable of offering a glimpse into that agonizing black box: a lover's mind. He tells me about a woman he met with recently whose boyfriend wouldn't stop cheating on her. "She was boo-hoo crying," he says. Putting on his "narcissist hat," as he calls it, he imagined himself in the position of her boyfriend and told her what he would do. He would keep cheating on her, he said. "If it's so bad, why do you keep taking me back? It's like you're signing a permission slip for me to do it again." He tried to

help her understand that narcissists respond only to consequences. Forgiveness, he says, is actually a form of encouragement.

Hammock's content is controversial. Many people don't believe that narcissists deserve to profit from their condition. He understands that position, but he also feels there's a special stigma reserved for narcissists, an animosity directed at no other population of mentally unwell individuals. Healthy people hate them, and pop-science writers deride them in books like *Swimming With Sharks: Surviving Narcissist-Infested Waters*, *Divorcing a Narcissist*, *Becoming the Narcissist's Nightmare*, and *Dear Narcissist: F\*ck You*. In anti-narcissist rhetoric, there's a common refrain: Narcissists can't change. They're incurable, lifelong assholes, and if there's one in your life, run. Interestingly, the same idea percolates in narcissist circles to the opposite effect. If our condition is incurable, they reason, then how can we be punished for having it — or for profiting from it?

Lee Hammock may be the most famous of this wave of "self-aware narcissists," as they call themselves, but he's not the first. That would be Sam Vaknin, a North Macedonia-based psychology professor and a diagnosed narcissist who has 419,000 subscribers on YouTube. He "came out," so to speak, in the mid-'80s and ever since has been explaining NPD to the world via his books, recorded lectures, and confessional videos in which he investigates the intricacies of narcissism through the prism of his own disordered mind. Over the past 15 years, Vaknin has produced more than 1,900 videos, some focused specifically on the subject of Sam Vaknin. Many of his viewers are people who believe a loved one is a narcissist. But others are narcissists themselves who take comfort in his extended confessions.

Vaknin, who is 64, sounds and looks a lot like Count Chocula with dark nose-diving eyebrows and impressively lush gray hair. His epiphany that he likely had NPD came while serving an 18-month prison sentence for securities fraud. Like Hammock, he happened upon an article about NPD, and he then recognized its symptoms in himself. He recalls the realization in one of his many books: "The exact moment I found a description of the Narcissistic Personality Disorder is etched in my mind ... It was suddenly very quiet and very still. I met myself. I saw the enemy and it was I." Over a Zoom call from his office, he explains a critical difference between narcissists and everyone else: their experience of empathy. Narcissists, he claims, can experience only an impaired form called "cold empathy." "They can identify your state of mind, slap a label on it, and say, *He is crying, so, therefore, he is sad*," he says. And they can feel that they should care, "but they aren't going to experience your sadness."

What's more, Vaknin tells me, narcissists experience only a limited range of their own feelings. "They have no access to positive emotions," he says, "only negative ones. They have access to envy, anger, and hatred, but they don't have access to love. They never experience joy." (This is disputed among psychologists but true in his experience.) Instead, he claims narcissists experience joy's cynical, selfish cousin, "elation," which he says is what a young child feels when doted on by their mother. "It's a form of merging with another person, fusing with them," he says — in other words, it's parasitic rather than empathetic. "It has nothing to do with joy. It's a high induced by the drug of merger."

I ask if he thinks self-awareness might help mitigate narcissism. After all, the term *self-aware narcissist* strikes me as practically an oxymoron. If you understand that you have a delusionally inflated sense of self-worth, are you still delusional? Vaknin seems disappointed in me for having asked such a naïve question. “Narcissists engage in something called ‘external regulation,’” he says. “They outsource their internal psychological landscape. They allow other people to regulate their mood. The narcissist is completely controlled by the outside. An internal event, like self-awareness, has zero impact. Narcissism cannot be healed or cured — it’s irreversible. Narcissism is who you are.” Vaknin, who speaks in a baritone, emits a high-pitched giggle, as he often seems to do after saying something dire.

Vaknin says he is more interested in creating cautionary videos than relatable ones. He wants to help others avoid getting into relationships with people like himself. “I’ve leveraged my mental-health issue to help others. I’m incentivized to obtain attention and to self-enhance my fantastic, grandiose self-concept by affording succor, disseminating information, educating, and so on. It’s lucky. The alternative,” he says ominously, “of course, is less savory.”

I ask why he continues to explore NPD given that he believes he’ll never be cured. He explains that he’s captivated by the sheer mystery of the disorder. He can’t look away. “If extraterrestrials landed on Earth, wouldn’t you spend 30 years of your life studying them? You would. We already have an alien race among us,” he says. I’m lost and begin to open my mouth, but Vaknin continues. “There are good philosophical grounds to say that narcissists are not human. If you take away empathy, positive emotions, the ability to tell reality from fantasy, what is left that qualifies as human? I’m not quite sure.”

The term *narcissism* was coined in 1899 by the German psychiatrist Paul Näcke. He named the ailment after Narcissus, the handsome figure from Greek mythology who became infatuated with his own reflection in a pool of water. Näcke considered narcissism a sexual disorder afflicting people who were attracted to their own bodies. When Freud expanded the diagnosis in a paper 15 years later, including those with a greater interest in being loved than in loving, he suggested it was a natural and beneficial stage of development: Only by learning to love ourselves, he posited, do we learn to love others. He claimed that all children are narcissists — along with many cats, comedians, and beautiful women — and, in fact, that’s what we love about them. We envy their “blissful state of mind — an unassailable libidinal position which we ourselves have since abandoned.” In the standard order of things, Freud said, once people reproduce, their narcissism comes back full force, projected onto their kids. “The child shall have a better time than his parents,” he wrote. “Illness, death, renunciation of enjoyment, restrictions on his own will, shall not touch him; the laws of nature and of society shall be abrogated in his favour; he shall ... be the centre and core of creation — ‘His Majesty the Baby,’ as we once fancied ourselves ... Parental love, which is so moving and at bottom so childish, is nothing but the parents’ narcissism born again.”

Freud had doubts about whether narcissism could be treated. During the first half of the 20th century, the disorder developed a reputation as particularly treatment resistant, if not impossible to cure. Then, in the 1970s, along came a hotshot Austrian American psychoanalyst named

Heinz Kohut, who expanded upon Freud's idea that narcissism is a stage we all pass through. He posited that individuals stuck in love with themselves could be carefully guided, through psychoanalysis, toward developing a healthy sense of self. In other words, they could grow up.

Kohut's most famous case study, which is one of the most important papers in the history of narcissism, is called "The Two Analyses of Mr. Z." It chronicles Kohut's treatment of a handsome overachieving graduate student over the course of two periods of analysis totaling almost ten years. Mr. Z was an only child who lived with his mother and had trouble approaching women romantically but was otherwise self-righteous and demanding. He spent a lot of time with his mom and a lot of time masturbating to the idea of being humiliated by an insatiable, domineering woman modeled after slave owners he recalled from his mother reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to him. When Mr. Z was 3, his father fell ill, was hospitalized, recovered, and ran off with the nurse who treated him. He returned to the family two years later, at which point Mr. Z often witnessed his parents having sex, since he slept at the foot of their bed until he was 8.

Kohut's theory for the first four years of treating Mr. Z was that when his father left, the young Z had experienced an increase in love and attention from his mother, which he was forced to share when his father returned. The relationship with the father, Kohut deduced, was the problem that needed resolving. Mr. Z's narcissism was the result of feeling competitive with his dad — physically, sexually, intellectually — when he should have seen him as a mentor.

During the first phase of analysis, Mr. Z always described his mother as loving and considerate. During the second, however, his then-elderly mom began displaying odd, erratic behavior, which jogged Z's memory and brought earlier strange behavior to light. When he was a child, he now remembered, his mother had often walked into his room unannounced, was obsessed with his blemishes, and insisted on meticulously inspecting every shit he took until the age of 6. For Kohut, this new information changed everything. The problem wasn't that little Mr. Z wanted his amazing mother all to himself; it was that his mother wanted him all to herself. She was loving but only on the condition that he submit entirely to her will.

In the narrative arc of the paper, the recollection of the shit inspections is the mind-exploding realization, cast as a sort of *He was dead the whole time* twist. To Kohut, it was a powerful metaphor that explained why Mr. Z was obsessed with superficial things like his appearance and career but so repressed emotionally. His mother never cherished him for who he was but rather for what he produced — literally.

In the aftermath of these memories returning, Mr. Z's narcissism seemed to fade away. He developed a healthier relationship with work, dropped his arrogant shtick, started dating, and even later married and had a daughter. The analysis was a stupendous success and was seen as good evidence for future treatment of narcissists.

Methodologically, there was one problem, however. The paper is actually more similar to *Fight Club* than *The Sixth Sense*: Some scholars now believe that the mysterious Mr. Z was, most likely, Heinz Kohut himself.

There's a rich and unsettling history, then, of narcissists studying and treating narcissism. Is that a conflict of interest? Probably. Or maybe, as Sam Vaknin believes, the afflicted are the best people for the job. Some narcissism specialists, however, don't claim the privileged insight of being diagnosed narcissists themselves. Dr. Dan Neuharth is one such seemingly well-adjusted expert. A soft-spoken clinician in San Francisco, he writes a popular blog for *Psychology Today's* website called *Narcissism Demystified* and has appeared on *Oprah*.

"If you have NPD," he explains, "it's kind of like going through life like a bicycle tire that always has a leak." To pump themselves back up, narcissists seek validation and adulation, but it's only a temporary solution. To actually patch the leak, he says, "you have to be able to look within and admit that you have faults." But narcissists hate looking within; they interpret criticism as an existential threat.

"They don't want to go there," Neuharth says. "They'll do anything to avoid going there."

A narcissist in therapy, therefore, is a rare thing. Typically, when Neuharth finds himself sitting across from a narcissist, it's because some catastrophic event has compelled them — sometimes legally — to seek treatment. They're facing prison time or bankruptcy. Their spouse has threatened to leave them or their children have cut them off. About half of the time, the treatment stalls out almost immediately. Once the crisis passes, Neuharth says, the patient regresses to their old ways.

"Someone who's really narcissistic ..." he trails off melancholically. "I've never seen them change." He compares NPD to membership in a cult — a cult of one in which the narcissist is both devotee and guru. Someone with NPD is willing to suspend their disbelief and indulge their own grandiosity because the rewards are so compelling. Feeling special makes them feel safe. I ask Neuharth if NPD's intractability surprises him. After all, cult members are sometimes successfully "deprogrammed," and many people seemingly more dangerous than narcissists have had come-to-Jesus moments. As a culture, there's nothing we love more than a comeback story. "I'm a therapist," he says. "I want to believe that people can change. It is kind of mind-blowing."

Not everyone thinks narcissism is terminal. Wendy Behary firmly believes that narcissists can change and often do. The author of the best-selling *Disarming the Narcissist*, she's a narcissist whisperer of sorts, respected by her peers but known for employing unorthodox methods. Behary has treated some of New York City's toughest cases: corporate lawyers, surgeons, stockbrokers, CEOs, and tech gurus — almost all men. Narcissists often come to her after their wives read her book. They're used to dominating everyone around them. She surprises them by being extremely blunt. In the treatment approach she uses, called schema therapy, this is known as "empathetic confrontation." "Most therapists don't come from the 'school of realness,'" she says. "I look across at the narcissist sitting in front of me and say, 'Why would you talk to me like that? What's going on with you? What is it you want me to hear? Because I can't hear you. All I see is someone being kind of an ass.'"

Behary is a woman in her 60s with flawless skin, blazing blonde hair, and a penetrating, disciplinary gaze. She projects an aura of aplomb and competence, as though the only disruptive emotion she's capable of

experiencing is disappointment. Three conditions, Behary explains, must be met when treating a narcissist if change is to occur. “No. 1: You’ve got to have a therapist who has a sturdy spine.” She believes the primary reason that therapists claim NPD isn’t treatable is that they simply aren’t up to the task of contending with it. The narcissist’s grandiose behavior triggers them or his charm fools them into believing he isn’t narcissistic after all. “The therapist has to be really skillful,” she says, “and have their own psychology in check.”

“No. 2: leverage. If you have no leverage,” she says, “you have no therapy.” The patient has to feel pressure in the form of a credible threat. They need to believe that they might lose their partner, for example, or a lot of money. Eventually — and this is the pivotal moment, when many treatments fail — they need to fear losing the therapist herself. If that fear never materializes, the patient is still in control and won’t change. The therapist needs to become their “limited reparenting agent.” That is, their mom.

Thirdly, the treatment needs to be intensive. “This is not just talk therapy,” she says. She guides her patients through formative past experiences with the goal of reinterpreting them and generating new patterns of thinking. Like Freud and Kohut, she believes that NPD develops in childhood and adolescence as a compensation for “important unmet emotional needs.” That can mean abuse or spoiling. Via very different routes, a neglected child and a golden child might both end up as adult narcissists.

Controversially, Behary gets to know people close to her patients — spouses, friends, even parents — to garner a fuller understanding of their behaviors and their progress. Narcissists, she says, “have a lot of trouble with the truth.” They can’t be trusted to accurately represent themselves to her. Many of her clients resist treatment for practical reasons. They believe that NPD is the secret to their success and without it they’ll lose their edge. Behary sympathizes with this concern. Ultracompetitive environments, like Wall Street, reward narcissistic, cutthroat behavior. She aims to simply make her patients aware of the trade-offs and see if they can make small adjustments. “Is there room to carve out space for your children, for your relationships, for yourself?” she asks them. “How much of your soul do you want to sell? And for how long?” Often, she succeeds in convincing patients to slow down, take a vacation, or pass up a promotion. A small number of her patients have left their fields entirely.

Behary claims she succeeds in effecting change in 30 to 40 percent of her patients with NPD. Privately, I’m astounded that the number isn’t 100 percent; I’ve never met anyone I wanted to impress so badly. I ask Behary why she believes it’s such a popular idea — especially online — that treating NPD is impossible. She locates the problem in failed romantic relationships and posits that it’s comforting for scorned lovers to believe there is something deeply, irreversibly wrong with their exes so that they don’t have to shoulder any responsibility. “They don’t want to believe that there was a chance,” she says. And they certainly don’t want to believe that, in the future, their ex might treat another person better — that “somebody else is going to get the goodies.”

To certain participants of the raging narcissism debate, Behary’s optimism about treating narcissists is sacrilege. There’s a cottage industry of therapists and content creators who specifically target those who have

suffered “narcissistic abuse,” which typically includes gaslighting and projection. Their most famous champion is Ramani Durvasula. Dr. Ramani, as she’s known online, is a psychologist living in Los Angeles. She posts videos on YouTube with titles such as “The cult-like CONTROL the narcissist has over YOU” and “Is your best friend a narcissist?” She has 1.98 million subscribers. She’s also the author of the New York *Times* best seller *It’s Not You: Identifying and Healing From Narcissistic People*. Narcissists despise her.

Durvasula is an elegantly dressed 59-year-old woman with a folksy, dynamic voice and a perpetually incredulous expression, kind of like Tucker Carlson. When she began studying narcissism, back in 2003, she tells me, nobody cared about her work. It was only in 2016, with the presidential election, that interest in the field took off. But even then, the public’s attention centered on the narcissists themselves. The consequences of their actions, and their victims, were largely neglected. Durvasula’s content is about reversing that paradigm, and she has been hugely successful. These days, the internet is bursting with omnidirectional accusations of narcissism.

Many self-aware narcissists believe that they need to be treated with compassion in order to change. Durvasula does not agree. “This ‘Hold space. Help narcissists regulate’ — I’m like, ‘No. No more.’ You cannot ask someone who’s being abused to help the person abusing them,” she says. “That’s the most stupid thing I’ve ever heard in my life.” Since most people diagnosed with NPD are men — up to 75 percent — Durvasula believes that the recent anti-narcissist fury is part of a larger shift in societal expectations for men. “Women are starting to say, ‘We’re not doing this anymore,’” she says. “Women are pushing back.”

Durvasula treats narcissistic patients as well, but her success with them tends to be limited and temporary. She says, “The narcissist is the tightly coiled serpent. There’s a tension, a potential energy that you’re waiting to see turn kinetic. Maybe they’re just looking pretty in their basket, but they’re coiled up.” There’s something fundamental about the disorder, she’s come to believe. On the few occasions she was able to speak to the parents of narcissistic patients, they all told her, “That kid was always a handful.”

In comparison, Durvasula says, her own mother told her, “You were a sweet, sweet little girl from the day you were born.” By her own estimation, she has remained this way: “Personality is tricky to change in substantial ways. My personality is agreeable, conscientious, and maybe mildly neurotic. There’s no therapy in the world that’s going to make me less agreeable. I don’t think you’re ever going to make me less empathic.” She would actually be more successful if she were less empathetic, she says. Her team is always saying, “Oh my God! She’s going on the road again to speak for free!”

“That’s my agreeableness,” Durvasula says. “This is who I am.”

The largest online community of narcissists is the sub-Reddit r/NPD. The posts on r/NPD are characterized by a disorienting mix of low-stakes anecdotes and genuine despair. In one post, a user describes accidentally exposing their staggeringly large secret folder of selfies to a friend — doubly humiliating because they had recently complained about compulsive, self-

obsessed selfie-takers to that same friend. Another user admits to thinking about giving up on self-improvement entirely, to which a different narcissist replies, “People like us are broken, and can only shamle across the earth until death. At the risk of sounding grandiose, we are living proof the world is not fair. Somewhere along the way we were screwed, and for as long as we live afterwards, it is meaningless.” When someone happens to post about a good day they had, or an empathetic moment they experienced, they’re often met with a wave of skepticism and accusations of veiled egoism. After all, in a room full of narcissists, the most narcissistic person might be the one claiming to be the least. There’s an infinite, recursive suspicion to how r/NPD users regard one another, which mirrors the way narcissists regard themselves. Many members report finding the group after stumbling across content by people like Lee Hammock and Sam Vaknin, who function as a sort of narcissist pipeline, sweeping people toward diagnoses, treatment, or internet fame or some combination of the three.



[View this post on Instagram](#)

A post shared by Lee Hammock (@mentalhealness)

One of the strangest, most shockingly honest products of this pipeline is Sara Crouson, who makes content under the moniker “Cluster B Milkshake.” Crouson’s journey to self-awareness began several years ago. She was writing letters to an imprisoned serial killer. “He killed people, cut their calf meat off, cooked it, and sold it to people,” she tells me. She’d always suspected that there was something different about her — that there was an emptiness inside her that allowed her to deceive others easily — and she hoped that by corresponding with a very obviously disturbed person, she might come to understand herself better. Crouson was married at the time and flirting with numerous men online out of sheer boredom. She wasn’t interested in any of them but enjoyed the power trip of stringing

them along. Was her small-scale manipulation somehow analogous to calf meat selling? she wondered.

She never found out. She says, “I told my sister and my gay best friend — who are both pussies, by the way — who I was writing to, and they were like, ‘Nooooooo! Stop it!’ So I stopped.” Then she discovered Vaknin. Soon, everything started to click. Like Hammock, she joined a Facebook group, received a diagnosis, then started her platform. She says she was initially motivated by “Fame. Fame, fame, fame.” She was jealous when she saw other narcissists profiting from their condition. But then, through chatting with some of her new narcissistic followers, she gradually started to accrue other rewards. She began feeling shame for the first time.

It was a mixed blessing. “I used to push my feelings into a black hole inside of me,” she says, “and they would just disappear. If somebody tried to make me feel like shit, I just made them feel like shit. It was a perfect system.” Now, she sits with her feelings and processes them. She takes walks and tries to prevent emotions like guilt and shame from turning into rage.

Crouson often speaks in a slightly unsettling baby voice, which makes sense because she believes that her NPD began as a defense mechanism in her unstable childhood — she needed to numb herself to survive. It’s outdated now, but she can’t quite shake it. “We’re just toddlers inside,” she says of narcissists. “We’re just little kids throwing tantrums. Would you get offended if a little girl screamed and threw her doll at you? Or would you just ignore her and let her run off to her room?”

The stigma against narcissists, she says, is severe. “They think we’re black-eyed demons — vampires, descending with our rubber wings to suck their blood.” On her channel, she’s doing her best to provide a different image.

I ask Crouson what her relationship with her viewers is like and whether having an audience has impacted her NPD. “It’s simple,” she tells me in the baby voice. “I read books about narcissism and make videos. And you better fucking watch them ... and fucking like ... and fucking subscribe ... and” — transitioning out of baby voice, she turns deadly serious — “shut the fuck up.”

In late summer, I speak once more with Vaknin. In the weeks after our first conversation, I became obsessed with him, reading his books every night before bed and listening to his lectures as I washed the dishes and walked

to the store. His level of cognitive dissonance fascinates me — the way he poetically expounds upon what “the narcissist” does not know, what “he” could never understand. Somehow, he continues to think of new ways to describe the experience of describing his experience, a project that feels both endlessly deep and completely empty.

I ask Vaknin whether he believes that NPD is the result of childhood trauma, as Freud, Kohut, and Behary believe. He points out that I’m asking whether “hurt people hurt people.”

“Everyone hurts everyone,” he tells me. “Life is an inventory of losses.”

I ask, then, if he believes that narcissists are to blame for their behavior. He tells me they are.

“You make choices,” he says. “You design your own environment. You act in it — and on it. You respond to other people. You are sentient. It’s absolutely untrue, the mechanistic view ... ‘I am setting you in motion when you are born, like the famous rabbit Duracell.’ That’s not the case. Narcissists do control their behaviors.”

I tell Vaknin I’m surprised to hear him say that since last time we spoke, he told me that it’s impossible for narcissists to overcome their condition.

He considers this and revises his original statement. “They don’t dare to open themselves up,” he says, “because they perceive everyone and everything as hostile. Early on in life, they’ve learned to associate love with terror and pain. So they give up on positive emotions. It’s perceived as existential: *If I’m going to be vulnerable, I’m going to die.* This is a child.” He gestures to himself. “The narcissist, psychologically speaking, is about 3 years old. And you’re coming to a 3-year-old who has had a horrible experience with the only relationship that mattered — with his mother — and you’re saying, ‘Why don’t you risk another one?’ The offer of love is a major threat. It’s another mother. Why would anyone do that, let alone a child?”

It’s a vulnerable admission from a man who claims to be incapable of vulnerability. He could change, he seems to be saying — he just won’t. He’s too afraid. It makes me wonder: For all these self-aware narcissists have learned about themselves, and shared with the world, have they really just reduced themselves to their worst qualities and inspired others to do the same?

Vaknin concludes by explaining that, stunted and stripped of true feeling, a narcissist is the closest thing we have to true artificial intelligence. I respond that I don’t feel as if I’ve been speaking to an AI. I feel as if I’ve been speaking to him, a person.

“Mimicry,” he says, smiling sadly. “The key is mimicry.”

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By ERROL LOUIS

What he understands and they don't.

**5:00 A.M. HIGHER EDUCATION**

## U.S. Colleges Are About to See a Big Decline in Applicants

By JEFFREY SELINGO

Forget a lot of what you thought you knew about higher education.

**9/10/2025 EARLY AND OFTEN**

## Kamala Harris Accuses Biden's Team of Sabotaging Her

By ED KILGORE

In an excerpt from her upcoming book about the 2024 election, she is seething at what she says was disrespect in the White House.

9/10/2025 THE SWAMP

## Donald Trump Is Reminded Why He Doesn't Dine Out in D.C.

By MATT STIEB

If Trump expected a nice crime-free surf and turf without being called "the Hitler of our time," the people of D.C. were happy to disappoint him.

9/10/2025 EARLY AND OFTEN

## Epstein Files Will Turn the Shutdown Fight Into a Problem for Republicans

By ED KILGORE

A bill forcing their disclosure could split Republicans when they need to be united against Democrats.

9/10/2025 POLITICS

## New Poll Shows Mamdani Dominating the Mayoral Race — But With a Catch

By MATT STIEB

The poll published today suggests Mamdani has a double-digit lead against the crowded field, which would almost vanish if he faced only Andrew Cuomo.

9/10/2025 MAGALOPOLIS

## Barron Trump: A Short Guide to the President's 'Very Tall Son'

By MARGARET HARTMANN

Why is Barron moving back to the White House? Exactly how tall is he? Does he have a beautiful singing voice? Here's what we know about the First Son.

9/10/2025 ROUNDUP

## Has RFK Jr. Finally Gone Too Far?

By CHAS DANNER

His war on vaccines has provoked intense backlash, but that doesn't mean it will be his downfall, or at least not yet.

9/10/2025 SCREEN TIME

## Finally, a New iPhone That's Interesting

By JOHN HERRMAN

Apple ushers in the thin smartphone era.

9/9/2025 JEFFREY EPSTEIN

## The Epstein Birthday Book Is Somehow Creepier Than You Thought

By MATT STIEB

The book published by the House Oversight Committee features some horrific drawings and descriptions of Epstein's predatory behavior.

9/9/2025 THE CITY POLITIC

## Cuomo Throws 9/11 at Mamdani

By DAVID FREEDLANDER

Appearing near Ground Zero, he went after the Muslim front-runner with an unsubtle message.

9/9/2025 EARLY AND OFTEN

## Talarico Senate Bid Gives New Hope to Texas Democrats

By ED KILGORE

The young, media-savvy politician combines populism and Christianity in ways that could challenge the GOP's hold on Texas.

9/9/2025 EARLY AND OFTEN

## Epstein Letter Signature Actually Does Look Like Trump's

By MARGARET HARTMANN

The White House says the signatures don't match. Yet the president's book *Letters to Trump* shows many nearly identical examples.

9/9/2025 EARLY AND OFTEN

## Trump Bets He Can Have His Extremism — and the Midterms, Too

By ED KILGORE

Normally, second-term presidents decide between getting their agenda passed and building political capital for their party. Trump chose both.

9/9/2025 EARLY AND OFTEN

## Has Brett Kavanaugh Ever Hired a Day Laborer?

By CRISTIAN FARIAS

In allowing ICE to racially profile Latinos, the justice betrays his ignorance of immigration in the real world.

9/9/2025 SCREEN TIME

## The New Green Light for Google's Monopoly

By JOHN HERRMAN

For a while, it seemed as though Google's dominance might get reined in, but monopoly is now back on the menu.

9/9/2025 AMERICAN AFFAIRS

## Why Eric Adams Hates Andrew Cuomo

By ROSS BARKAN

The mayor seems to be considering a spite run just to derail Cuomo in the general election.

9/9/2025 SOCIAL STUDIES

## The Brain-Rotting Dystopia of Roblox

By SAM BIDDLE

What if the world's most beloved video-game app is turning children into mindless hyperconsumers?

**9/8/2025 TRUMP EPSTEIN FILES**

## Trump's Lewd Birthday Letter to Jeffrey Epstein Emerges

*By* CHAS DANNER

It's out, and it's gross.

**9/8/2025 EARLY AND OFTEN**

## What's Really Going On With Trump's Hand Bruise and Health Issues?

*By* MARGARET HARTMANN

Despite revealing Trump's chronic-venous-insufficiency diagnosis, the White House explanation is still odd and incomplete. Here's everything we know.

**9/8/2025 EARLY AND OFTEN**

## Supreme Court Green-lights Ethnic Profiling by ICE

*By* ED KILGORE

In another unsigned "shadow docket" order, the U.S. Supreme Court okayed the aggressive immigration-enforcement tactics that terrorized Los Angeles.



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