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Untitled
Clay, matte vinyl paint, red thread

The inspiration for my sculpture piece, *Narcissism*, has to do with the connection between someone who expresses narcissistic tendencies and how it affects the relationships they have. I aimed to illustrate the imbalance in these relationships. While one person craves something more fulfilling, unknowingly drawing the energy and emotion out of their partner at no expense to themselves, the other gives until they have nothing left to give, they are left feeling used and manipulated. Both feel incomplete. It will always be about one, never the other.

To execute this idea, I sculpted a large head and five smaller sculptures— two headless figures, a small face, an arm, and a leg— out of clay, and two life-sized arms with hands out of plaster with a mold. I specifically chose to use clay because it is the perfect medium to replicate human flesh and bones. I then painted all of the sculptures matte, bright blue. The head and hands symbolize someone with narcissistic tendencies and the smaller sculptures symbolize the relationships that they have. Red thread is wrapped around each of the small sculptures and attached to the hands. This visually expresses the one-sided connection between both people in the relationship. The narcissist is draining all of the energy from their partner and absorbing it for themselves.

Self-Love is not Narcissistic



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Writer's Note: This paper addresses themes of narcissism, self-love, and how the two are different. It explores the questions– When does self-love turn into narcissism and what is the difference between self-love and narcissism? As well as, can we love others before we love ourselves? The goal of this paper is to educate people on narcissism and show that self-love is far from narcissistic. It is important to realize that self-appreciation and the ability to care for oneself appropriately are completely different from this personality disorder.

Relationships are a major part of human life; relationships with family members, friendships, and romantic relationships. We are surrounded by relationships our whole lives. Typically, each person in the relationship contributes and receives. Most of the time, they are all recognized as equals. It is incredibly difficult to be in a relationship where you are giving your all to another person and they do not reciprocate. It is even more difficult when you ask, beg, for reciprocation but you still do not receive it. Then, they distance themselves from the relationship. One begins to wonder– how can I give my all and it still not be enough? Why is it that I am the one to lose this person when I gave everything to them and received nothing in return? It's truly draining; from both ends. While one person craves something more fulfilling, unknowingly drawing the energy and emotion out of their partner at no expense to themselves, the other gives until they have nothing left to give, they are left feeling used and manipulated. Both feel incomplete. It will always be about one, never the other. From an outsider's perspective, the only purpose of the latter is to inflate the ego of the former, to better their image and reputation. The latter is not seen as a person at this point; only an asset. Or a weight– what weighs them down must be discarded. While they may be giving everything, it will never satisfy. So they are set aside, no longer a priority, only an afterthought. The lack of empathy, complete unawareness, the need

to always be right, to be at the top, and constant “delusions of grandeur” suggest that they may have narcissistic personality disorder (Burgemeester).

Narcissism is a personality disorder that consists of excessive ego and self-image, with obsessive traits and a lack of empathy. People with narcissistic personality disorder believe themselves to be better than everyone else in an extreme way. They think they are gifted and indulge themselves in intense fantasies of power and success. They typically define themselves by their “ability to associate with the best people” (Strickland). Almost all aspects of life are centered around maintaining a positive self-image because the cause of these behaviors is usually due to insecurity and low self-esteem. They typically respond to criticism with anger and aggression. They cannot cope with defeat so they avoid putting themselves in a situation where defeat is a possibility. It is considered normal during childhood but when these attributes intensify and don't seem to go away after puberty, they can be clinically diagnosed as narcissistic. Symptoms are usually exhibited during the early stages of life because this is when people are developing their sense of self and identity. This does not mean that they have narcissistic personality disorder. Narcissism is exhibited differently in men and women. Studies have shown that shame is the principal effect in narcissism and narcissistic tendencies are used to combat that shame. Men use grandiosity to defend against shame whereas women tend to be more sensitive to it. Women, being more shame-prone, feel shame intensely and men exhibit hostility to overcome the shame. One theory by Judith Butler suggests that the societal pressures of heterosexuality increase narcissistic symptoms because giving up attachments and emotions received by same-gender people evokes “melancholia and gendered identifications to the bodily ego” (Bieber). People with this disorder typically have superficial relationships that they maintain for their own benefit. Usually, for the purpose of making themselves feel more powerful by eliciting admiration and positive feedback

from their relationships. When they don't receive that positive feedback, their reactions are drastic. On the other hand, many people with this disorder are not able to read their partner's emotions. The relationship cannot satisfy the narcissist's desires. It feels unfulfilling and creates problems for both partners. It leads the other partner to believe that giving their all is not enough. The golden rule states, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This can be a comparison for love: "in order to love others as yourself, you must first love yourself." However, narcissists love themselves too much to where they are unable to love others. This raises the question of— is it real love that narcissists feel? We attach this feeling to "love," but if we cannot love others before we love ourselves, and narcissists are incapable of loving others, how can it be true love they feel? This kind of love is shallow and superficial (Burgemeester).

The modern idea of love consists of "two people seeing each other, recognizing an attraction, and coming together" (Moulton). It includes the following beliefs— the attraction between both partners is mutual, they may share similar ideas, beliefs, and tastes, both people in the relationship are equals, and the future of the relationship is decided by the individuals. On the other hand, in Greek and Roman culture, passion in a romantic relationship was deemed unnatural and unhealthy. They considered it to be madness and sickening and decided that passion to that extent should not be a factor in the future of the relationship (Moulton). Historically, love and marriage were seen as two completely different parts of life. Love is an "overpowering force" and marriage is a "practical matter." In these times, people viewed platonic love as the "highest and noblest form of love." They interpreted love as a path to the divine. While some people saw sexual desire as a necessity for love, others simply interpreted it as raw selfless emotion (Grendler). Love is a concept with many definitions. Each person loves differently, however, they all love with true passion, commitment, and attraction. The love that a narcissist feels— if it can even be considered

love— does not have the intense, real qualities that our adaptation of love contains. In order for a human to live a satisfying and fulfilling life, there must be a balance between self-love and affection for others. With narcissism, the balance is not equal. They love themselves far more than they could ever love others.

Self-love is necessary to live a healthy, fulfilling life but self-love becomes narcissism when it becomes excessive and obsessive. The difference between self-love and narcissism is self-awareness. People who practice self-love know their limits, strengths, and weaknesses, and are able to admit to mistakes without creating excuses to save their ego and image. Narcissist's "view of themselves is rarely established with real achievements and merit" (Burgemeester). It is difficult for narcissists to distinguish between fantasy and reality, while people who practice self-love are able to recognize the difference between who they are currently and who they want to be. They also have the ability to admit to fault. This trait is far from common in narcissists. Admitting to mistakes and accidents is seen as a sign of inferiority to those with this disorder. A primary difference between the two is empathy or lack thereof. The ability to understand others' emotions and put themselves into another's shoes is crucial to developing self-love, however, "a narcissist is not capable of empathizing with anyone" (Burgemeester). There is a possibility for them to give off empathetic impressions by being taught what to say and how to act, but they do not feel genuine emotion. Most of the time, the inability to feel empathy leads to complete unawareness of situations that require it. Narcissists come off as "cold and insensitive" because they can't recognize when situations require even fake sympathy. Self-esteem is another aspect that differentiates self-love from narcissism. The difference between self-esteem and narcissism is based on purpose and attitude. Self-esteem represents a positive attitude based on achievements and treating others with care and appreciation. People with good self-esteem are not afraid of

failure and accept it as part of the learning process for accomplishment. Narcissism is based on the fear of failure and an obsession with receiving acknowledgment from others. It typically stems from deep-rooted insecurity. When it comes to relationships, “Narcissism makes it necessary to pull others down in order to stand above them. Self-esteem leads to perceiving every human as a person of value in a world of meaning” (Firestone).

Narcissistic personality disorder is something that affects someone’s ability to empathize and live a balanced life. Their highly inflated ego makes it impossible for them to feel sympathy and true love for others. The idea of love that we have developed is incomparable to the shallow form of love that narcissists feel. Insecurity and shame are the roots of narcissism, so narcissists create a facade to mask them. This leads to an imbalance of self-love and affection for other people. Self-love only becomes narcissism when it turns obsessive and intense. Therefore, self-love is not narcissistic.

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