

# A Vulnerable Generation: Relations to Narcissism and Generalized Anxiety

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## Background

Our study examines the connection between Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) and Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), particularly in adolescents. NPD, marked by grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy, often emerges in early adulthood and is increasingly linked to persistent worry and anxiety, as described in the DSM-5. Adolescents who fear rejection, failure, or not meeting societal expectations may adopt narcissistic traits as a defense mechanism, while also becoming more vulnerable to anxiety. A study in *Personality and Individual Differences* found that fear of failure and rejection correlates with higher levels of both vulnerable narcissism and anxiety symptoms in teens (ScienceDirect). This “acceptance competition” intensifies emotional stress, contributing to long-term mental health issues. Our study aims to better understand how these emotional stress factors impact young people’s mental and emotional development, and how we might reduce their harmful effects.

**Research Question:** How does the fear of rejection or failure during adolescence contribute to the development of narcissistic traits and increase vulnerability to anxiety?

**Hypothesis:** We believe that there is a direct connection between the fear of rejection and failure to the mental health issues of generalized anxiety and narcissism present in adolescents today.

## Method & Procedure

A study of 348 young adults (17-25), mirroring van Schie et al. (2021), revealed an 11% diagnosis rate for depression and anxiety. This research investigates the correlation between vulnerable narcissism in adolescents, shame experiences, and relationship challenges. Utilizing the PNI to gauge vulnerable Narcissistic Personality Disorder traits and the DASS-21 anxiety subscale (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .89$ ) to measure anxiety symptoms, the study aims to elucidate how shame mediates the connection between narcissistic traits and attachment styles. By linking anxiety severity with narcissistic behaviors, such as empathy deficits and arrogance, this work underscores that failure and fear of rejection can precipitate a failure complex, potentially exacerbating NPD-related issues. This highlights the critical need for mental health awareness and self-regulation skills, especially given the global increase in reported cases of narcissism and anxiety among young people.

## References

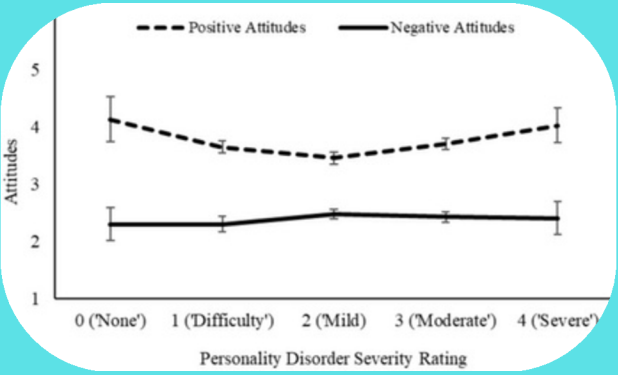
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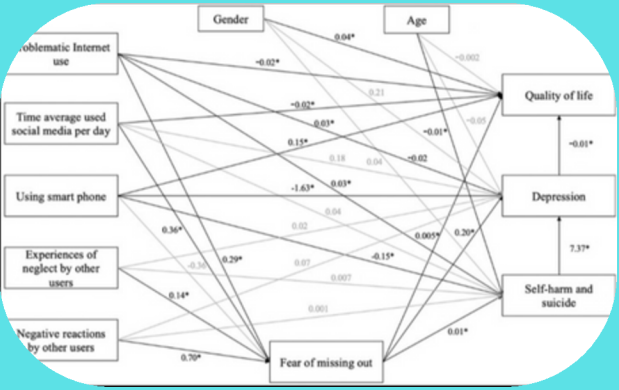
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(Day et al., 2025)

## Results, Tables, & Figures

Our analysis found that fear of rejection and failure during adolescence contributes significantly to the development of narcissistic traits, particularly the vulnerable subtype, which is marked by hypersensitivity, insecurity, and defensiveness. Data showed that negative attitudes and social pressures intensify feelings of inadequacy, reinforcing these traits as a coping mechanism. Grandiose narcissism, while outwardly confident, also correlated with emotional struggles like hopelessness when influenced by external judgment. Notably, fear of missing out (FOMO)—closely tied to fear of rejection—emerged as a consistent factor influencing mental health across multiple pathways. These findings underscore how fear-based emotional stressors in adolescence shape both narcissistic behaviors and increased anxiety vulnerability.



(Trong et al., 2023)

## Discussion

- Anxiety is closely linked to vulnerable narcissism, as supported by our research findings.
- Adolescence is a sensitive period where individuals form identity and attachment schemas, making them more susceptible to developing narcissistic traits.
- Vulnerable narcissism develops not solely from entitlement, but often stems from self-doubt, shame, and unmet attachment needs—factors that are frequently overlooked.
- Day et al. (2025) illustrated this duality, showing that clinicians perceive vulnerable narcissism as tied to sadness, empathy, and self-devaluation, unlike the outward defensiveness seen in grandiose narcissism.
- Our study focused exclusively on vulnerable narcissism, and did not include grandiose narcissism or malignant narcissism.
- Fear of rejection and failure are not just emotional reactions but formative psychological experiences that shape both how individuals expect others to treat them and how they defend themselves socially.
- The findings validate our literature review’s position, showing how internal vulnerabilities contribute to narcissistic traits.
- This research challenges common misconceptions, offering a data-driven perspective that highlights the internal struggles of narcissistic individuals.
- In some ways, narcissistic individuals—especially those with the vulnerable subtype—can also be seen as victims of their own emotional and developmental experiences.

## Conclusion

Overall, our research shows that narcissism exists in various forms, with many hidden factors that must be considered during diagnosis. We focused on vulnerable narcissism, which may stem from childhood experiences of rejection and fear of failure, shaping emotional responses early on. These experiences can lead to the development of narcissistic traits and anxiety later in life, often rooted in a belief of superiority as a coping mechanism. While the exact cause of narcissism remains unclear, continued research may one day offer clearer understanding and better treatment for those affected.