

Right Now

decades, in a culture that sees pills as a panacea. (Worldwide sales of Zoloft alone reached \$845 million in the first quarter of 2005.)

Because most antidepressant drugs on the market act on the brain's serotonin levels and serotonin receptors' sensitivity,

"People automatically assume that any treatment of depression in the brain has to involve serotonin," Carlezon says. He argues that this confuses remedy and cause, like suggesting we fill our houses with water to keep them from catching fire. He's not saying there's no link

between serotonin levels and depression, just that there's "room to ponder the possibility" that other treatments might be effective.

—ELIZABETH GUDRAIS

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PAPER SWAGGER

Self-Esteem, Real and Phony

WHEN TOM BRADY joined the New England Patriots as a sixth-round draft pick in 2000, he told the team's owner, Bob Kraft, "I'm the best decision this organization has ever made." Not surprisingly, Brady was accused of narcissism. But five years and three Super Bowl championships later, the Patriots' quarterback has proven himself a superlative team player, "the ultimate in being confident without having to be a show-off," says Seth Rosenthal, Ph.D. '05.

Contrast that with Kobe Bryant, the Los Angeles Lakers star whom some have accused of intentionally playing poorly for the first three periods so he can lead a miraculous comeback in the fourth. Lakers coach Phil Jackson even hired a narcissism coach to help deal with Bryant's famous demands and feuds with other players. Rosenthal's dissertation research—which, he's quick to add, did not include the two sports stars among its subjects—presents ways to separate the Bryants from the Bradys of our world.

In disentangling the two concepts, Rosenthal aims to clear self-esteem's good name. The concept's popularity soared in the 1980s, but more recently it has taken a beating in the popular media, which confuses it with narcissism. A 2002 *New York Times* article headlined "The Trouble With Self-Esteem," for instance, de-

scribed research results indicating that violent criminals tend to be narcissists. "Narcissism is not a kind of self-esteem," Rosenthal says. "Equating confident people with narcissistic people is like equating happy and manic and then saying, 'Well, maybe happiness isn't such a good thing after all.'"

To find out how narcissists really feel about themselves, Rosenthal used a computer test based on the Implicit Association Test codeveloped by Mahzarin Banaji, Cabot professor of social ethics in the department of psychology and Pforzheimer professor at Radcliffe (see "Stealthy Attitudes," July-August 2002, page 18). First, the test asks subjects to associate themselves with positive qualities and dissociate themselves from bad

qualities, and measures how quickly the subjects press computer keys to indicate those associations. Then the instructions are reversed (bad qualities are to be marked "me" and good qualities "not me") and response time is measured again. Those subjects quicker to assign positive qualities to themselves have high self-esteem; those quicker to assign themselves negative qualities have low self-esteem. Despite the sky-high self-regard narcissists project, Rosenthal found their implicit self-esteem was low.

Thus, he suggests, parents needn't worry that instilling healthy self-confidence in their children will turn them into creeps. In fact, psychologists believe narcissism—a diagnosable personality disorder whose symptoms include an exaggerated sense of self-worth, feelings of superiority over other people, a sense of entitlement, a willingness to exploit others, and a lack of empathy—is associated with parents who are cold and rejecting,

not overly attentive and doting. Because narcissists didn't get enough positive reinforcement as children, they need to prop up their egos with their own boasting and others' adoration. But because that inflated self-image lacks internal support, it is fragile, like a reflection that dissolves with the pond's disturbance, as in the Greek myth that gave narcissism its name. Underneath lies self-loathing.

The confusion, Rosenthal says, arises because psychologists have measured self-esteem poorly. The widely used 1965 Rosenberg self-esteem scale, for example, includes statements like, "On the



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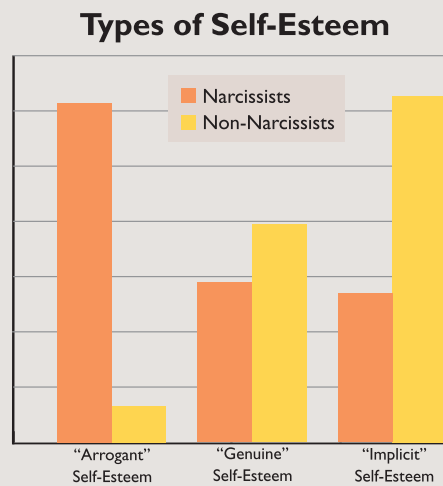
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whole, I am satisfied with myself," and yields similarly high results for both narcissists and people with healthy self-confidence. (We all rank ourselves relatively high; on Rosenberg's scale of 10 to 40, the mean is 32, well above the midpoint of 25.) The more elaborate 1979 Narcissistic Personality Inventory had statements like, "I find it easy to manipulate people," but still embraced items that Rosenthal says actually test for healthy self-esteem—for instance, "I am assertive" and "I see myself as a good leader."

With his adviser, psychology professor Jill Hooley, Rosenthal developed his own questionnaire to measure grandiosity, the tendency toward aggrandized self-description that's one component of narcissism. Rosenthal tested 100 traits on Harvard undergraduates—who, perhaps surprisingly, are no more narcissistic than the general population—and winnowed out 16 items that narcissists most fre-

quently ranked high, but non-narcissists ranked low. These self-descriptors include *perfect*, *superior*, *envied*, *unrivaled*, and *omnipotent*. Using traditional measures that conflate self-esteem with arrogance, Rosenthal found that narcissists scored high—above 33—while non-narcissists fell below 31. (Because respondents cluster at the top of the scale, a point or two represents a major change.) Arrogance seems to make the difference, because when it's edited out, narcissists' average score dropped under the non-narcissists'—just over 31, versus nearly 32.

Rosenthal's findings may even have political implications. During a postdoctoral research fellowship at the Kennedy School of Government, he has found that members of informal groups with no designated leader are likely to name the narcissist among them as a leader—but only at first. "Those are the people who show off



the most, make the most noise, have the most ideas, or at least are most likely to keep throwing them out there," Rosenthal says. "It does seem that, early on, people are attracted to the chest-thumping and showing off. But as the narcissism starts to show through, people start to get sick of that person." ~ELIZABETH GUDRAIS

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WAVES OF THE FUTURE

Tsunami-Safe(r) Housing

Last December's devastating tsunami leveled building walls that faced the sea in Sri Lanka—but walls perpendicular to the shoreline remained standing. A group of Graduate School of Design students (who styled themselves the Tsunami Design Initiative, or TDI) used that fact and others to inform their innovative design for homes more likely to survive the next tidal wave. The TDI—Ellen Chen, Eric Ho, Nour Jallad, Richard Lam, and Ying Zhou—won a Tsunami Challenge Competition that MIT's Special Interest Group in Urban Settlement sponsored this spring, and presented their work to the U.S. Agency for International Development in Washington in April.

Their design uses hollow-core structural elements, built of masonry units, that can house infrastructure like water and power lines. Flexible, cheap local materials such as bamboo fill in the exterior walls between the core elements. The 400-square-foot dwelling (rendered at right, with virtual "occupants")

includes a raised deck, as traditional homes do, so that seawater can pass beneath. Computer models indicate that this design would be five times stronger than a traditional Sri Lankan house (far right). "By creating moments of structural stability, you're vastly stronger than trying to make everything rigid," says associate professor of architecture Michelle Addington, who advised TDI. "You balance these stable elements with things that give." Hence, a big wave can wash through the house rather than knocking it down.

The rendering of a tsunami-survivable home design (below) shows its formal similarities to a traditional Sri Lankan residence (right).

The students estimate costs at about \$1,200 for a complete structure. The design is efficient enough that twice as many new-style homes as traditional models can be erected with the same resources. Construction of the first unit began in Sri Lanka this summer; the students would like to build many more and also hope to erect a community center. They will hold a conference at the Design School this November on rebuilding strategies in response to the tsunami.

~Craig Lambert

TSUNAMI DESIGN INITIATIVE WEBSITE:
<http://projects.gsd.harvard.edu/tsunami/>



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