

Narcissism and Self-Esteem in Adolescents

Exploring the Relationship between the Characteristics of Narcissistic Tendencies and Low Self Esteem

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: In a society where, mental health is talked about frequently, the Cluster B personality disorder group has been neglected, presenting the need for further research concerning low self-esteem in adolescents & narcissistic tendency.

Hypothesis: Narcissism is related to low self-esteem in adolescents.

Methods: Adolescents ages 13-18 took part in a Google Forms survey containing 34 questions. Questions were derived from the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). Participants were asked their age, gender, GPA, and ethnicity. The data was used to perform a Spearman rank-order correlation test.

Results: NPI questions related to narcissistic tendencies were not correlated with RSES questions related to low self-esteem. Rather, NPI questions related to narcissistic tendencies were more closely related to RSES questions suggesting high self-esteem.

Conclusion: Narcissism is not related to low self-esteem in adolescents. There needs to be more research done on narcissism and its relation to other factors. Self-esteem also needs to be factored into many issues concerning mental health and psychology.

Introduction

Narcissism can be identified through a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy beginning in early adulthood and is present in a variety of contexts. Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) affects up to 6.2% of individuals from community sample estimates. In the United States, this would mean roughly 20 million people. “You can look at individual scores of narcissism, you can look at data on lifetime prevalence of Narcissistic Personality Disorder, you can look at related cultural trends, and they all point to one thing,” says W. Keith Campbell, Ph.D., head of the University of Georgia psychology department. “Narcissism is on the rise.” Other psychologists find it difficult to accept that statement. They challenge the methods and conclusions of Campbell and others and have found results that say otherwise in their own studies. (Dingfelder, 2011) Since self-esteem has proved so integral in predicting the mentality of adolescents later in life, the chance of it being able to predict narcissism in adolescents needs to be studied.

There are two different subtypes of narcissism: Vulnerable narcissism and grandiose narcissism. Grandiose narcissism is characterized by arrogance, self-absorption, a sense of entitlement, and reactivity to criticism. The vulnerable narcissistic personality has been described as presenting shyness, constraint, and even the appearance of empathy. Vulnerable narcissism is associated with domain-specific contingencies related to narcissism, and grandiose

narcissists focus on getting the attention of others rather than their approval. Vulnerable narcissism is similar to grandiose narcissism in that both subtypes are associated with grandiose fantasies about the self, feelings of entitlement, and a willingness to exploit others for one's own gain. (Besser, 2010) Zeigler (2008) suggests that narcissism should not be studied without compartmentalizing its correlation to different categories, as it leads to generalization. These sources discuss the types of narcissism and their presentations in narcissists (Baumeister, 1999; McLeod, 2008). The relationship between narcissism and self-esteem will be discussed further.

Jones (2017) executed a study on a number of psychology students in university and used the Narcissistic Personality Inventory to measure self-esteem and categories of narcissism. Narcissists were shown to remember themselves more often compared to those believed to be without NPD. Psychology student subjects that were identified with a tendency toward NPD tended to remember themselves in a more positive light compared to others. At the same time, those with high self-esteem were also shown to have the tendency to self-enhance themselves in the context of their memories and in group settings (Barry, 2017; Jones, 2017). Self-esteem is a part of self-concept. Defined by Baumeister (1999), self-concept is "the individual's belief about himself or herself, including the person's attributes and who and what the self is." Self-concept can be affected by the judgments and opinions others have of us (Simply Psychology, 2008); more research between self-concept and its effect on vulnerable narcissism is necessary.

According to McClure (2011), low self-esteem is closely related to depression, anxiety, suicide, violent behavior, and disordered eating. Self-esteem may be able to predict narcissistic factors, according to Zeigler-Hill (2008) who studied contingent self-esteem in relation to vulnerable and grandiose narcissism. The people who are most at risk for developing adverse psychological effects are women, minorities, and adolescents. Individuals establish their sense of self, including their roles, values, and interests during adolescence and young adulthood (Vater 2018). What is important is how narcissism can be identified, how narcissism is related to self-esteem, and narcissism in adolescents.

There is a significant problem with self-esteem in adolescents especially from middle school to high school. Despite mental health awareness, low levels of self-esteem are occurring according to research by Vater (2018). It was found that the endorsement rate for the statement "I am an important person." has increased from 12% in 1963 to 77–80% in 1992 in adolescents. The problem of self-esteem has negatively impacted men and boys as they tend to have higher levels of narcissism (Foster 2003). A possible cause of this problem is parenting styles and school performance. This study shows that authoritarian parenting styles presented the highest mean scores of negative affect and the lowest mean scores in life satisfaction and positive affect. (Brodski, 2013) Authoritarian parenting styles involve stricter lifestyles for adolescents. Perhaps a study that investigates self-esteem in adolescents through the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and Narcissistic Personality Inventory could perhaps shed light on those with narcissistic tendencies. My research question to be investigated is: Is narcissism related to low self-esteem in adolescents? This leads me to hypothesize that low self-esteem in adolescents may predict narcissistic tendencies.

Literature Review

In the literature review to follow, low self-esteem as an indicator of narcissism in adolescents will be discussed. Examining narcissism and its correlation with low self-esteem is important for understanding how to spread awareness about the potential of narcissism in adolescents. First, it is necessary to examine narcissism and its characteristics, enabling it to be identified. Next, the relationship between self-esteem and narcissism is the key to understanding how low self-esteem may be able to predict narcissism. Lastly, narcissism in adolescents will be discussed to explore its effect on today's society and its effects on narcissistic individuals.

Different Types of Narcissism

Low self-esteem and how it relates to narcissism is important to the psychological field. More often than not, physical diseases can be identified by the symptoms they exhibit, for they can be seen, felt and heard, but psychological diseases are slightly harder to identify due to their similarity to other psychological diseases, like Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). According to the American Psychiatric Association (2013), other personality disorders may be confused with Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) because they have certain features in common, increasing the need for further research. In the western world, there have been increasing levels of narcissism, and this has been referred to as a narcissism epidemic. Books recently published contain more individualistic language such as 'I' and 'me', and scores of self-reported narcissisms have increased by 30% between 1979 and 2006 (Vater, 2018).

Zhang (2017) centered his research around how the two types of narcissism are related to emotional dysregulation and to self-esteem. Grandiose narcissism was measured with the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), and vulnerable narcissism was measured with the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale.

Through his research, he found that grandiose narcissism is positively related to self-esteem, while vulnerable narcissism is negatively related to self-esteem. Grandiose narcissists reported that their high levels of self-esteem enable them to bounce back from negative emotional situations and help manage their emotions.

Self-Esteem and Narcissism

Self-esteem data is collected through the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). The RSES measures self-esteem using a 10-item scale that measures positive and negative feelings about the self. In general, studies tend to find that men have higher levels of narcissism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) (Foster, 2003).

Narcissism and self-esteem have been studied in tandem to reveal if they truly correlate with each other. In Baufman's (2018) study, a social experiment was done on a popular dating app to reveal if people mistook narcissistic individuals for individuals with high self-esteem and vice versa. The results showed that people who scored high in narcissism and self-esteem were perceived as having higher self-esteem than people who had the same self-esteem but less narcissistic. Baufman also mentions that people are not attracted to narcissistic personalities and that the results were reversed when perceivers were told that certain individuals were narcissists. It can be said that narcissism and high self-esteem are associated with each other. A limitation necessary to mention that this study may not be perfectly suited to my study since the ages of the participants were not stated in the article.

Zeigler-Hill, a social-personality psychologist at Oakland University, asks if the facets of narcissism captured by the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979) and Pathological Narcissism Inventory are related to self-esteem. Zeigler-Hill concluded that vulnerable narcissism was associated with a tendency to base their self-esteem on those domains requiring the approval of others, whereas grandiose narcissism was linked with a lack of such approval. Zeigler (2008) focused on how narcissists perceive themselves, which brings into relevance the idea of self-concept. Self-concept consists of self-image, self-esteem, and the idealized self, as categorized by McLeod (2008).

Jones (2017) details how narcissists remember events compared to those with differing levels of self-esteem. According to the article, narcissists and those with high self-esteem both have the tendency to self-enhance themselves in retelling their memories. Narcissists tend to remember and focus on themselves in group settings, and also see themselves in a positive light. Narcissists tend to remember negative memories more quickly, but those with high self-esteem remember positive memories more quickly.

In Zeigler-Hill's research, self-esteem in relation to the different types of narcissism is studied. Using the NPI, RSES, Vulnerable Narcissism Scale, and the Big Five Inventory, levels of narcissism, self-esteem, contingent self-esteem, and personality traits were evaluated in psychology students. Vulnerable narcissism's reliance upon external validation may be a result of the conscious feelings of inadequacy and inferiority that are believed to prevent

them from engaging in the sorts of overt self-enhancement strategies favored by grandiose narcissists (Zeigler-Hill, 2008).

Narcissism & Adolescents

Social and personality psychologists have identified narcissism's personality correlates (Emmons, 1987) and interpersonal (e.g., Campbell, 1999) and intrapersonal consequences (e.g., Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998) and have now turned their attention to the developmental origins of narcissism (Ramsey, Watson, Biderman, & Reeves, 1996; Watson, Little, & Biderman, 1992).

There are few studies that explicitly study the relationship between narcissism and adolescents, which contribute to a lack of reference to prior studies. This is the gap within the research. Many of the sources additionally include communal narcissism or maladaptive narcissism which are factors this paper is not addressing. This study is being completed in the hopes of finding this information. The research found supports the idea that low self-esteem in adolescence is connected to narcissism. There needs to be research done on how adolescents can be sufficiently made aware of how narcissism can negatively affect their interpersonal relationships. If there is more awareness in this age group about the impacts of narcissistic qualities, it may discourage people from behaving in a narcissistic manner. Parents should be made aware of the self-esteem of their children, which could also contribute to narcissistic tendencies.

Methods

Is narcissism related to low self-esteem in adolescents? This is the question this study is aiming to answer. The theorem posed is that narcissistic behavior is related to low levels of self-esteem in adolescents. This study's relevance lies in gaining more information on narcissistic perspectives through adolescents. This survey is related to prior research in the psychological domain. Papps' (1998) study has provided the idea of low self-esteem's relation to an emotional state of mind, helping derive the question of the relationship between low self-esteem and narcissism.

Participants & Procedure

A survey was posted online on social media and was offered to participants from ages 13-18. Participants were not chosen and took the survey of their own volition. There were 293 participants (261 female, 31 male, & 1 other) included in this study. The mean age of the participants was 15.93 years. Participants completed a demographic survey made for the present study. Demographic items included: age, gender, grade point average, and ethnicity. After reading a paragraph about their consent, each participant was asked to complete the measures below using Google Forms.

Table 1. Participant gender ($n = 293$)

Gender	Number	Percentage
Female	261	89.1%
Male	31	10.6%
Other	1	0.3%

Table 2. Participant age ($n = 293$)

Age	Number	Percentage
Age 14	64	21.8%
Age 15	51	17.4%
Age 16	68	23.2%
Age 17	63	21.5%
Age 18	50	17.1%

Table 3. Participant Grade Point Average ($n = 293$)

GPA	Number	Percentage
100-90	120	43.6%
89-80	105	38.2%
79-70	39	14.2%
69-65	4	1.5%
Below 65	7	2.5%

Table 4. Participant Ethnicity ($n = 293$)

Ethnicity	Number	Percentage
White	138	47.1%
Hispanic/Latino	53	18.1%
African American/Black	38	13%
Asian	37	12.6%
Native American/Alaskan Na- tive/Pacific Islander/Native Hawai- ian	3	1%
Other	24	8.2%

Experimental Design

Narcissistic Personality Inventory

The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) was used to assess participants' levels of narcissism. The questionnaire contains 40 items measuring one's narcissism-related personality characteristics. For the purposes of this survey, only 20 questions were included. It includes 7 subscales: Authority, Self Sufficiency, Superiority, Exhibitionism, Exploitativeness, Vanity, and Entitlement. Each item is a pair of self-descriptive statements, and the participants were asked to choose the closest statement to their own feelings about themselves. To score the NPI, one point is assigned for each response that matches the key; the points of all items on the same dimension should be added together to obtain subscale scores for each respondent, and the composite score of NPI is obtained by summing the subscale scores together. In the present study, we chose to use the composite narcissism score for analyses, which is consistent with the construct of grandiose narcissism. For each of the following where A was answered gets one point: 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16. For each of the following where B was answered gets one point: 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20. Higher scores indicate higher narcissism.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) was used to assess participants' levels of self-esteem. The questionnaire is a 10-item scale that measures global self-worth by measuring both positive and negative feelings about the self. The scale is believed to be unidimensional. All items are answered using a 4-point Likert scale format ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Items 2, 5, 6, 8, 9 are reverse scored. "Strongly Disagree" gets 1 point, "Disagree" 2 points, "Agree" 3 points, and "Strongly Agree" 4 points. Sum scores for all ten items. Keep scores on a continuous scale. Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem. The RSES has been shown to be a well-validated and reliable measure of global self-regard (Blaskovich & Tomaka, 1991; Demo, 1985; Rosenberg, 1965; Silber & Tippett, 1965).

Design

Dependent Variables

In this survey, the dependent variables are the measure of the narcissistic aspect of the participants' behavior, and the measure of the self-esteem portion also. Questions on the NPI contained 2 answers that were decisive between high and low narcissism. For example, Question 6 posed: a. *I prefer to blend in with the crowd*, and b. *I like to be the center of attention*. The latter would suggest high narcissism. Questions on the RSES contained 4 likert scale responses in kind to a statement related to self-esteem. For example, Question 21 stated: *On the whole, I am satisfied with myself*. The available responses given are: a. Strongly disagree, b. Disagree, c. Agree, & d. Strongly agree.

Independent Variables

To measure the association between narcissistic tendencies and low self-esteem in adolescents, questions pertaining to demographics were asked. Age, gender, ethnicity, and GPA were asked about. Ages were limited to ages 13-18 as they're in the adolescent age range. Gender responses were female, male, and other. Ethnicity had composed responses of African American/Black, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, Native American/Alaskan Native/Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian, and White. GPA responses were as such: 100-90, 89-80, 79-70, 69-65, and below 65.

Statistical Methods

In order to effectively analyze the relationship between the data for the Results section, the data in the tables were garnered from Spearman rank-order correlations. This was used to determine the significance of certain correlations, such as answers delineating between high/low narcissism and self-esteem. JASP is the computer program that was used to generate the Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient for every correlation.

Results

Spearman rank-order correlations were conducted to determine if there were significant relationships between variables. The results suggest that 224 out of 900 correlations were statistically significant and were greater than $R_s = .30$, $p < .05$. The correlations concerning age, feelings concerning understanding others, and feelings concerning personal responsibility were not significant in relation to the research gap though they are statistically significant.

Table 1. Correlation Testing Results

Variables	Rho	Results
Gender - Shy	-0.126*	More females claim to be shy individuals.
Gender - Dare	-0.121*	More females claim to be cautious people.
Gender - Not_Good	+0.116*	More females strongly agree that they're not good at all.
Gender - Respect_Self	+0.188**	More females strongly agree that they wish they had more respect for themselves.
Age - Dare	+0.135	As adolescents get older, they tend to become more cautious.
Age - Compliment	+0.126*	As adolescents get older, they tend to believe they know they are good because everybody keeps telling them so.
Age - Leader	+0.125*	As adolescents get older, they see themselves as a better leader.
Age - Showoff_Body	+0.126*	As adolescents get older, they tend to show off their bodies.
Age - Body	+0.129*	As adolescents get older, they tend to look at their bodies.
Age - Not_Good	-0.120*	As adolescents get older, they tend to strongly disagree that they're not good at all.
Age - Good_Qual	+0.157**	As adolescents get older, they tend to strongly agree that they have a number of good qualities.
Age - Proud	-0.142*	As adolescents get older, they tend to strongly disagree that they do not have much to be proud of.
Age - Useless	-0.118*	As adolescents get older, they strongly disagree that they feel useless at times.
Age - Worth	+0.233***	As adolescents get older, they tend to strongly agree that they're people of worth.
Age - Failure	-0.140*	As adolescents get older, they tend to strongly disagree that they're a failure.
Age - Pos_Att	+0.135*	As adolescents get older, they strongly agree that they take a positive attitude toward themselves.

Talent_Inf - Shy	+0.278***	Those who believe that they're not good at influencing people also tend to be shy.
Talent_Inf - Blend	-0.179**	Those who believe they have a natural talent for influencing people also like to be the center of attention.
Talent_Inf - Leader	-0.335***	Those who believe that they're not good at influencing people are not sure if they'd make a good leader.
Talent_Inf - Stand_Up	+0.291***	Those who believe they have a natural talent for influencing people also stand up for themselves often.
Talent_Inf - Orders	+0.143*	Those who believe that they're not good at influencing people don't mind following orders.
Talent_Inf - Control	+0.207***	Those who believe they have a natural talent for influencing people find it easy to control people.
Talent_Inf - Doing	+0.142*	Those who believe that they're not good at influencing people sometimes feel that they are not sure of what they are doing.
Talent_Inf - Satisfied	-0.202***	Those who believe they have a natural talent for influencing people strongly agree that they're satisfied with themselves.
Talent_Inf - Good_Qual	-0.188**	Those who believe they're not good at influencing people strongly disagree that they have a number of good qualities.
Talent_Inf - Well_People	-0.244***	Those who believe they have a natural talent for influencing people strongly agree that they're able to do things as well as most other people.
Talent_Inf - Proud	+0.218***	Those who believe they're not good at influencing people strongly agree that they do not have much to be proud of.
Talent_Inf - Useless	+0.157**	Those who believe they have a natural talent for influencing people strongly disagree that they feel useless at times.
Talent_Inf - Worth	-0.133*	Those who believe they're not good at influencing people strongly disagree that they're a person of worth.

Talent_Inf - Respect_Self	+0.170**	Those who believe they're not good at influencing people wish they had more respect for themselves.
Talent_Inf - Failure	+0.211***	Those who believe they have a natural talent for influencing people strongly disagree that they're a failure.
Talent_Inf - Pos_Att	-0.226***	Those who believe they have a natural talent for influencing people strongly agree that they take a positive attitude toward themselves.
Shy - Dare	+0.246***	Those who believe they are shy individuals tend to be fairly cautious people.
Shy - Blend	-0.241***	Those who believe they aren't shy prefer to be the center of attention.
Shy - Leader	-0.151**	Those who believe they are shy individuals are not sure if they would make a good leader.
Shy - Stand_Up	+0.147*	Those who believe they aren't shy prefer to stand up for themselves often.
Shy - Control	+0.121*	Those who believe they are shy individuals tend to dislike it when they boss people around.
Shy - Showoff_Body	-0.164**	Those who believe they aren't shy prefer to show off their body.
Shy - Proud	+0.130*	Those who believe they are shy individuals tend to agree that they do not have much to be proud of.
Dare - Blend	-0.205***	Those who would do almost anything on a dare prefer to be the center of attention.
Dare - Stand_Up	+0.123*	Those who tend to be fairly cautious people tend to not stand up for themselves.
Dare - Control	+0.122*	Those who would do almost anything on a dare find it easy to control people.
Dare - Showoff_Body	-0.148*	Those who would do almost anything on a dare prefer to show off their bodies.
Dare - Responsibility	+0.210***	Those who tend to be fairly cautious people tend to make decisions and avoid taking responsibility for them.

Dare - Good_Qual	+0.120*	Those who would do almost anything on a dare strongly disagree that they have a number of good qualities.
Dare - Worth	+0.125*	Those who tend to be fairly cautious people tend to strongly agree that they're people of worth.
Dare - GPA	+0.117*	Those who would do almost anything on a dare have higher grade point averages.
Compliment - Rule	+0.169**	People who sometimes become embarrassed when complimented tend to be frightened at the thought of ruling the world.
Compliment - Blend	+0.191**	Those who believe they are good because they are told so prefer to be the center of attention.
Compliment - Leader	+0.227***	People who sometimes become embarrassed when complimented are unsure if they would make a good leader.
Compliment - Orders	-0.125*	Those who believe they are good because they are told so prefer to rule other people.
Compliment - Control	-0.188**	People who sometimes become embarrassed when complimented tend to don't like to boss others around.
Compliment - Showoff_Body	+0.132*	People who sometimes become embarrassed when complimented don't particularly like to show off their body.
Compliment - Body	+0.139*	Those who believe they are good because they are told so like to show off their body.
Compliment - Showoff	+0.174**	People who sometimes become embarrassed when complimented try not to be showoffs.
Compliment - Satisfied	+0.182**	Those who believe they are good because they are told so strongly agree that they're satisfied with themselves.
Compliment - Not_Good	-0.182**	People who sometimes become embarrassed when complimented tend to think they're not good at all.
Compliment - Good_Qual	+0.129*	Those who believe they are good because they are told so feel that

		they have a number of good qualities.
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* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Generally, the results suggest those who expressed lower levels of self-esteem expressed lower levels of narcissism. Adolescents that were older tended to pick answers unrelated to narcissistic tendencies, and those who expressed lower self-esteem tended to have lower GPAs. Those with higher levels of self-esteem expressed higher levels of narcissism. When asked about their aptitude in influencing people, those who claimed to possess high levels also claimed to have high levels of self-satisfaction.

Discussion

In this study, the variables related to the gap were analyzed and addressed the research question. The most significant findings related to the question would potentially be the correlations between high narcissism and low self-esteem. The research question is: Is narcissism related to low-self esteem in adolescents? It has been deemed that low self-esteem is not a predictor of narcissism in this study. For example, the correlations related to compliments suggest that those who become embarrassed when complimented have lower self-esteem and tended to pick answers that implied low levels of narcissistic behavior. In Table 1, Compliment - Good_Qual showed a correlation of +0.129*, suggesting that those who believe they are good because they are told so also feel that they have a number of good qualities. This proposes that there's a relationship between confidence and high self-esteem.

Implications & Limitations

Within the survey, complex language originally on the NPI and the RSES were altered in order to fit the young demographic targeted in this study. This may have also changed the understanding of the question though confusion was avoided. For example, Question 2 on the NPI was: a. *Modesty doesn't become me.* b. *I am essentially a modest person.* It was tailored to state shyness instead. In this study, I attempted to take an original approach to analyzing results from the NPI & the RSES. This attempt worked, however, it resulted in unnecessary data that may be useful for a future study.

The reason for the high number of correlations is due to the answers within the same measure being related. For example, the answers, "I will be a success" and "I think I am a special person" are both within the NPI and both suggest higher levels of narcissism. In the future, researchers may want to consider condensing such items to avoid overlap of the same measure.

Something to consider is the self-report method this study must rely on. There were no measures preventing participants from entering incorrect data, and there were a lack of verification measures as well. The survey was limited to only one social media platform, and it was only offered for less than 3 weeks.

Future Actions

In a future study, it may prove more beneficial to analyze correlations between NPI scores and RSES scores instead of the individual questions of each test. With the information garnered from this study, more research could be done in various manners, covering the limitations faced in this survey. In studies related to narcissism, the NPI was used to measure narcissistic tendencies along with the RSES to measure self-esteem, such as Horton (2006)'s study on parenting and narcissism. Nonetheless, results suggest that the measures used were sufficient in measuring levels of self-esteem and narcissism.

Conclusion

The hypothesis that narcissism will be related to low self-esteem in adolescents within this study was refuted. Even so, it still suggests a worrying theme may exist among today's youth, which is low self-esteem. This study found that 52% adolescents chose answers that indicated low self-esteem. Will self-esteem be used as a predictor for other maladaptive behaviors? This could be possible as there have been multiple studies that used self-esteem as a predictor of socially significant outcomes such as Brodski's (2012) study on self-esteem and emotional abuse. This leads us to believe that as long as there is research being done on this topic, more relevant information will be garnered concerning it.

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