

We live in an age of loud egos. Scholars have documented a large increase since the late 1970s in the percentage of people with a narcissistic personality, a trend that is especially clear among young adults. According to one survey, more than half of young people today say they want to be an influencer. A similar incentive structure undergirds our media-driven political system. Where politics once attracted people with a strong public-service ethic and traditional virtues of modesty and humility, now it rewards leaders and activists — on both the left and right — who are performative and self-interested.

The increase in loud egos has coincided with declines in well-being. Behavioral science offers a compelling thesis that may explain what we're seeing, because of what has been termed the "self-reflection paradox." An intense focus on self is an evolved trait, scientists suggest, because it confers competitive advantages in mating and survival. But research has also shown that to be so focused on self can be a primary source of unhappiness and maladjustment.

Where this grim trend will take our society I have no idea, but I do know that there are measures you can take to protect your well-being. The secret to staying happy amid a culture of loud ego is to adopt for yourself the opposite strategy: cultivate a quiet ego.

Quiet ego is defined as **"a self-identity that is neither excessively self-focused nor excessively other-focused — an identity that incorporates others without losing the self."**

Researchers found that people possessing quiet ego showed:

"Inclusive identity" (they thought about others and not just themselves),

"Perspective taking" (they saw things from others' point of view),

"Growth" (they believed they could improve), and

"Detached awareness" (they were able to observe themselves with some distance).

In other words, **quiet ego involves the virtues of charity, humility, self-awareness, and hope.**

In another collaboration, the same psychologists who coined quiet ego found that, on average, quiet ego raises happiness. It is associated with better mood balance, superior life satisfaction, and a greater sense of life's meaning. The virtues of charity, humility, self-awareness, and hope help people who possess them get along with others, not take themselves too seriously, understand and manage their own emotions, and see the way toward a better future.

Quiet ego also has protective qualities, because it enables people to deal effectively with life's inevitable problems, even big ones. Researchers find that possessing a quiet ego is associated with a capacity for growth after traumatic experiences, which means such positive psychological changes as stronger relationships, appreciation for life, and deeper spirituality.

Research has demonstrated a positive correlation between quiet ego and such personality traits as agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience.

In a world of loud egos and increasing unhappiness, the countercultural strategy is to cultivate your quiet ego. One way I like to do this is through two questions and two affirmations.

The first question is “**What do others need that only I can provide?**”

This empowers me to do what is uniquely under my control for the people who depend on me. Only I can be a husband, father, and grandfather to my family, so I focus on doing those jobs generously and well. Likewise, only I can teach my class and write my column today, so I pay attention to performing these tasks to the best of my ability. Others can follow the news and complain about the government as well as I can, so I try to ensure that this gets a lot less of my energy and attention.

The second question is “**What can be better around me, and how can I help bring it about?**”

This involves regularly scouring my personal and professional environment for areas of improvement. Sometimes, this means reconsidering my schedule to make sure it’s not getting in the way of my family life. It might mean thinking creatively about what issue or topic I can write or speak about that could use some public attention. Or it might be some cause or activity that I should support charitably with my time or money.

Then the first affirmation I try to make daily is “**I might be wrong.**”

In truth, I am wrong about many things. I just don’t know what they are yet. The only way to find out, and be more correct, is to maintain the humble attitude that in any contested area I could be wrong; I must therefore be open to alternative viewpoints and new data. You can see how this approach to quieting ego helps: It makes me curious, rather than prickly, and attracted to opinions different from mine.

The second affirmation is “**I am not my emotions.**”

This is a way to cultivate a detached self-awareness, putting some space between my limbic system (from which my emotions emanate) and my prefrontal cortex (where I make conscious decisions). My emotions are information about perceived threats and opportunities, not a guide to how I should evaluate my life or choose to act. When I wake up feeling blue, I am not a sad person; I am someone who probably slept poorly and who needs to exercise to put things right. This gives me control over my feelings, rather than vice versa.

A parting idea: One school of thought proposes the merits of having no ego at all. This idea underpins the doctrine of anātman in Buddhism: the realization that your individual self is an illusion of the moment. According to this philosophy, what you see as an essential you is really just an evanescent and changing melody in the song of life, taking its place in a chorus with all other melodies.

Quiet ego is a wonderful way to mute the cacophony of the egotistical world. You don’t need to go the whole way toward the Buddhist self-abnegation of no ego, but you can absolutely enjoy the peace, harmony, and happiness that your quiet ego will bring you.