

Me

If It's All About You, You're in Trouble. Why a Sense of Entitlement Can Wreak Havoc on Happiness.

By Dan Zak
Washington Post Staff Writer
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Broad pronouncement of the week: We are entitled brats.

For immediate proof, turn on the television. Locate a reality show on Bravo or MTV. The "Real Housewives of Orange County" and their real children are halfway through a marathon of placating and whining. "The Hills" and "Newport Harbor" are stocked with people who expect to be treated with a disproportionate amount of respect, lest they erupt in a raging meltdown.

We watch these shows in horror, with a judgmental eye on their cast members, but how different are we from them? In real life, we want what we want and we want it now. No delay. No aggravation. No hassle, pain-free, our way, right away. We're a highly technical society in a land of plenty. We place a premium on efficiency and convenience. Tiny annoyances and inconveniences foul our moods and affect our behaviors. Why? And how can we get past these trivialities?

Consider this paradox: Things are becoming more instantaneous in an era when delays are rampant and increasing. There are faster flights and cars but more people in airplanes and on the roads.

What has happened, even though companies are improving service, is that "customer expectations are continuing to rise," says Roger Nunley, managing director of the Customer Care Institute in Atlanta. This can be attributed to "consumers doing business online, where they get instant gratification and quick turnarounds. That's quickly becoming the standard expectation."

Change in expectations is a generational thing, experts say. People who grew up during the Depression were happy to have a job and stuck with one for a lifetime. Many members of generations X and Y were raised in a different light. They expect a buffet of opportunities and are peeved when they don't materialize.

Narcissism and entitlement among college students have increased steadily since 1979, according to a study to be published this year in the Journal of Personality. Between that year and 2006, 16,000 college students were asked to pick between such paired statements as "I expect a great deal from other people" and "I like to do things for other people," and "I will never be satisfied until I get all that I deserve" and "I will take my satisfactions as they come."

The data are clear: The ascent of narcissism and entitlement is dramatic.

"What we really have is a culture that has increasingly emphasized feeling good about yourself and favoring the individual over the group," says the study's co-author, Jean Twenge, a professor

of psychology at [San Diego State University](#). "And that has happened across the board, culturally, and it's showing no signs of slowing down."

To complement her research, Twenge offers evidence from the field: "I have a 14-month-old daughter, and the clothing available to her has 'little princess,' or 'I'm the boss,' or 'spoiled rotten' written on it. This is what we're dressing our babies in."

Schools have programs designed to boost self-esteem. Parents say things like, "You shouldn't care what other people think of you." We're inundated with the notions of "feeling special," "believing in yourself" and "be anything you want to be." Twenge ponders all these messages in her book "Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled -- and More Miserable Than Ever Before" (Free Press, 2006).

Quite a title, but doesn't it feel kind of right? Twenge also coins the term "iGeneration" ("i" as in both [iPod](#) and "me, me, me"), which includes those of us born in the general range of 1981 to 1999.

This goes beyond social conditioning and technology, though. Entitlement is something that's part of human narcissism. It's an ego thing that transcends generations. When something goes wrong for others, it's their fault. When something goes wrong for us, it's not ours; it's the fault of external forces. We project blame.

This projection often antagonizes a situation. Feeling entitled to something you aren't getting leads to frustration, which leads to bratty behavior and confrontation. Nearly 80 percent of Americans say rudeness -- particularly behind the wheel, on cellphones and in customer service -- should be regarded as a serious national problem, according to a study by the opinion research firm Public Agenda.

An airport is a petri dish for rude behavior: a bunch of people in close quarters under time constraints. Stress and impatience lay down the welcome mat for brattiness.

"You have people screaming at customer representatives at airports because it's snowing out -- as if they're entitled to have a sunny day," says professor W. Keith Campbell, who specializes in the study of narcissism at the [University of Georgia](#). "That's where it gets out of hand. With entitlement, the issue is, yeah, there are certain times where we're entitled and other times we're not. The problem is when we have that meter wrong."

It's unreasonable to spend an hour on hold, in other words, but there are situations when basic entitlement turns into self-infatuation and blatant disrespect for others. All of this is tied to the feeling of not being satisfied, of thinking that some force is blocking the way to a goal we think we deserve.

"The question is, 'What the heck is *enough?*' " says writer and psychologist Carl Pickhardt, who specializes in parenting and child development in his private practice in [Austin](#). "I see that all the time. A couple comes in for marriage counseling, and they ask me, 'Are we happy enough?' Somebody's at a job they like, but are they successful enough? People have to make that choice."

We are a dissatisfaction market society. Advertising constantly creates the notion that whatever we have is not enough. We can declare independence of that."

But how? It's about realigning our expectations and then squelching the nagging voice in our minds that propels our discontent. [Pennsylvania](#) psychologist Pauline Wallin calls this voice our "inner brat," which is an evil twin to our "inner child." After years of counseling clients who routinely made mountains out of molehills, Wallin dived into the concept, named it and produced the book "Taming Your Inner Brat: A Guide for Transforming Self-Defeating Behavior" (Wildcat Canyon Press, 2004).

"We have enough big things to be upset about, and people are losing their minds over small things," she says. "Frustration leads to aggression. If you don't let yourself get frustrated in the first place, then you don't get so angry and you don't blow things out of proportion."

Stress also fuels bratty behavior. It makes us impatient and irritable from the get-go. Psychologist Ronald Nathan of [Albany](#), N.Y., recommends practicing relaxation techniques when waiting for such things as the Metro, the doctor or tech support. This turns a disadvantage (the frustration of waiting) into an advantage (making good use of that time to relax).

"Whether you are tempted to interrupt someone or are trying to get around a slow car -- when you're under stress you tend to *react* rather than *respond*," says Nathan, who specializes in stress. "Look at what you're telling yourself about your world and how you are interpreting it. We sometimes interpret the world as a set of 'shoulds,' 'oughts,' 'have to's,' 'musts,' 'deserves.' Those are exaggerations. It's a very competitive world we live in, so we easily get frustrated."

Nathan has trademarked a technique for stress relief that has a time-release formula (<http://www.relaxfastforfree.com>). It involves setting some kind of unobtrusive alarm -- the vibrate function on your cellphone, for example -- to remind you to take several minutes to do some deep belly breathing and loosen your muscles and limbs. After several months of conditioning yourself to do this at certain times of the day, this kind of reframing of the mind can become automatic.

Another habit to form is being grateful. Clinical experiments show that people who express gratitude in some form every day live more-content lives, and they record lower levels of narcissism and entitlement.

"On the drive home from work, it's a matter of turning the radio off and thinking about how wonderful your job is or, if your job sucks, how wonderful your family is or, if your family's in shambles, how good your health is," says psychology professor Mike McCullough, who studies gratitude at the [University of Miami](#).

He helped conduct one experiment titled "Counting Blessings Versus Burdens," wherein one group kept a journal of their daily hassles for a period of time while another recorded the times they were grateful. The outcome may be obvious, but it is no less instructive: People who concentrated on hassles were generally miserable; the others were pleased and satisfied.

It comes down to perspective and *expectations*. Do you want empty highways, no lines, a promotion and limousine conveyance to your birthday party? Fine. But don't expect them. Focus on your reliable car, your good health, your job stability or the fact that you're in a position to celebrate a birthday at all.

"When you're feeling this sense of deprivation or entitlement, try to take the longer view," McCullough urges. "Ask yourself, 'Is it really true -- *empirically* true -- that you are entitled to something?' In most cases, people say no."