It has been widely asserted that low self-esteem causes violence, but laboratory evidence is lacking, and some contrary observations have characterized aggressors as narcissistic individuals having inflated, grandiose self-views (e.g., Hitler probably did not have low self-esteem). In experimental studies involving college students, we measured both simple self-esteem and narcissism and then gave individual subjects an opportunity to aggress against someone who had insulted them or praised them, or against an innocent third person. Self-esteem proved irrelevant to aggression. The combination of narcissism and insult led to exceptionally high levels of aggression toward the source of the insult. Neither form of self-regard affected displaced aggression, which was low in general. Similar results were found in a recent experiment involving 10- to 13-year-old children. In a meta-analysis, we compared self-esteem and narcissism scores of violent male prisoners who had murdered, assaulted, raped, or robbed someone, and nonviolent males the same age. Violent prisoners had much higher narcissism scores than nonviolent men, but self-esteem scores were similar for the two groups. These findings contradict the popular view that low self-esteem causes aggression and point instead to threatened egotism as an important cause.

Unfortunately, narcissism scores are increasing over time (at least in American college students). Fortunately, experiments show that narcissistic aggression can be reduced by increasing the psychological overlap between the narcissist and the victim. Narcissists love themselves, and if someone else is like them, they are reluctant to aggress against that person.