Narcissism's winning streak: Feed your ego, find success

If Donald Trump and his nascent presidential plans and Charlie Sheen and his ability to win while losing have taught us anything, it's that we should all work on our narcissism.

Excuse me — everyone except me should work on their narcissism. I'm great at it. Probably the best.

For those of you who aren't me, it's worth noting that self-admiration has recently been proved a stunningly effective way to succeed. Sheen being a prime example. After unapologetically indulging in epic drug binges and becoming romantically involved with two — TWO! — attractive young women, the actor lost his job on one of the most popular TV sitcoms in America, declared himself "winning" and became more of a household name than he had been before.

Although on Sunday night, a sold-out crowd at the Chicago Theatre paid good money to see him talk and swear and boast.

Trump has taken his fantastically oversized ego and fabulous hair and made serious runnings about entering the ring of GOP presidential candidates. His overtures have been taken seriously enough that Glenn Beck said it was making him "uncomfortable," which I believe means that Trump's narcissism trumped Beck's, no small feat.

There's also fellow possible GOP candidate Newt Gingrich, who boldly blamed his past affairs on loving America too much. And, of course, Barack Obama, who, according to a small but vocal swath of Americans, is so full of himself he became president despite being a Kenyan-born radical colonial Marxist imperialist dictator. Or something like that.

Anyway, the message we should all be receiving is that the sooner we start believing in our own infallibility the sooner we'll all be wealthy and famous and running for president and living with two beautiful women and/or men and having great hair.

Safely four decades of self-doubt, give or take a few infant years when I considered myself the universe, have left me sorely lacking in the self-esteem department. Previous faux-boasts aside, I'm not really sure how to be a good narcissist, though I would guess the first step would be to never admit you're not a good narcissist.

If Sheen has, as he claims, "tiger blood," I have "meerkat blood." (Not the unusually bold type of meerkat who's quick to pop his head up from the burrow, but rather the timid variety that hangs out underground, nervously nibbling on beetles.

Hungry for success, I turned to an expert to help me mine my inner wilderness.

James Garbarino, a psychology professor at Loyola University Chicago, is author of the recent book "The Positive Psychology of Personal Transformation," which includes a chapter titled "Can There Ever Be Enough Me?"

He explained that many psychologists use a multiquestion test called the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, where a person's score places them on a continuum. "When you get to a point on the scale, you reach a threshold for being called a narcissist," Garbarino said. "But up to that point, subjective self-evaluation is collated with happiness and success in the world. So narcissism is an extreme form of something that, when in moderation, is probably healthy."

I wasn't sure what all that meant, but I wasn't about to let Professor Smartpants out-narcissify me. So said things like "Ah, yes" and "I see," then asked him to just give me some pointers on excelling at thinking highly of myself.

"To some degree," Garbarino said, "narcissism is embedded in the modern American character." I'm an American, Step 1 — complete.

Narcissists are particularly susceptible to advertisements," he added.

I placed him on hold and ordered all of the new iPads and a Sham-Wow. Step 2 — done.

Then things got a little complicated. The psychologist explained that to become a true narcissist, you have to be clever and create waves in which your special talents can be highlighted by others.

I have to cultivate talents or knowledge that allow you to take control of a conversation and arm yourself so you shine in that situation," he said. "If you develop a specialized knowledge of turtles, you would then steer the conversation to turtles so you can impress people with how much you know about turtles."

Turtles? I don't think Trump or Sheen would know a three-eyed turtle from an African side-necked, but I don't really know that much about turtles.

Which led the professor to his next point. Be "ostentatiously humble" by doing exactly what I just did with those turtle references — "create a situation where the other person is inclined to compliment you on your knowledge, but pre-empt them by saying, 'Oh, this is nothing special.'"

"Boom. I'm on my way."

As our conversation ended — and as registered myself on Twitter, Facebook, Foursquare, LinkedIn and the Registry of Great Journalists — I figured I'd be further along than I realized.

"Given all of the serious events going on in the world right now," I asked the professor, "does the fact that I'm writing a column about narcissism mean I'm already a narcissist?"

"That shows that you have good aptitude," he said.

Did you hear that? He thinks I'm amazing.

rhhupke@tribune.com