

What is humility: a brief definition

Complete these words to ascertain a helpful definition of humility

Humble people...



- acknowledge, explore, and embrace their limitations and shortcomings,
- appreciate other people and perspectives,
- integrate these insights with their existing beliefs, values, and tendencies.

Before we explore these three features of humility in more detail, we will demonstrate some of the benefits of humility

What do you feel are the benefits of humility?



Complete one or more of the following exercises:



- Recall an occasion in which you acted with humility—such as a time you decided not to demonstrate your knowledge or refer to a recent achievement. How did you feel about yourself afterwards?
- Identify one or more people who you admire who you also perceive as humble. What do you like about these people?
- Identify some arrogant people you do not like. Why do you dislike these people.

From these exercises, list some of the benefits of humility from your perspective



Established benefits of humility

The following table outlines the benefits of humility that researchers have uncovered.

- Which one to three discoveries surprised you the most?
- Which one to three discoveries do you feel may be interesting to other people?
- Imagine a conversation in which you convey one of these discoveries to someone else (Mendonça et al., 2023).

Performance

Generally, people who tend to be humble—and, for example, acknowledge their limitations, question their assumptions, consider diverse perspectives, and do not perceive themselves or their community as inherently superior—perform better on many tasks. For example, these individuals

- receive higher grades at university (Wong & Wong, 2021), partly because they are more receptive to feedback,
- differentiate strong arguments from tenuous arguments better (Leary et al., 2017)—and are not as inclined to ascribe problems in society to secret deals or other conspiracies (Bertin, 2024)
- develop more extensive general knowledge (Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2020),
- are more prudent, diminishing the likelihood of bankruptcy (Dixon et al., 2025).

Resilience and wellbeing

Typically, people who exhibit the hallmarks of humility—such as acknowledge their limitations, embrace other perspectives, and strive to develop rather than seem defensive or feel special—tend to experience greater wellbeing. For example, these individuals

- experience a greater sense of autonomy, mastery, growth, positive relationships, sense of purpose, and self-acceptance (Ross & Wright, 2023; see also Wright et al., 2018),
- enjoy greater satisfaction with life and more pleasant emotions (e.g., Scharbert et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2025),
- cope better and exhibit resilience in response to initial failures (Porter et al., 2020), unfavourable feedback (Wong & Wong, 2021), personal conflicts (Peetz & Grossmann, 2021), or other adversities (e.g., Zhang et al., 2025).

Relationships

Typically, people who exhibit humility—such as acknowledge their limitations, embrace other perspectives, and strive to develop rather than seem very defensive, competitive, or conceited—are more likely to establish and to maintain trusting and supportive relationships (Peters et al., 2011). For example, these individuals

- are more generous, charitable, empathic, grateful, and willing to assist other individuals (Krumrei-Mancuso, 2017; Zhang et al., 2025)—even after controlling personality (Exline & Hill, 2012),
- establish more satisfying romantic relationships—relationships in which their partner feels satisfied too (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2024).



Integrity

Individuals who are narcissistic are more likely to engage in academic misconduct, such as cheat or plagiarise. This relationship can partly be explained by a sense of entitlement (Curtis et al., 2022).

Leadership

When leaders are humble rather than narcissistic or conceited, they tend to enhance the performance of their teams or organisation and are more likely to be perceived as effective (Lynch & Benson, 2024). For example

- the organisations they lead perform better on the share market than expected (Petrenko et al., 2019),
- the teams they lead tend to collaborate more effectively (Ou et al., 2018; Owens & Hekman, 2016) as well as support customers more proactively and effectively (Peng et al., 2023),
- these teams also adapt effectively and proactively to accommodate recent changes and innovations in the sector (Chaudhary et al., 2025),
- the individuals they lead feel more supported and satisfied with their jobs (Krumrei-Mancuso & Rowatt, 2023).

Did you know



Individuals tend to prefer political leaders who exhibit humility, especially in circumstances in which cooperation and discussion with opposing communities are vital (Koetke & Schumann, 2025).

Did you know



To earn a higher salary, many staff highlight their experience, their education, and the long hours they work, praise colleagues to seem likeable, or even attempt to intimidate co-workers occasionally. Interestingly, staff who utilise these strategies, called impression management, tend to earn a lower salary and receive fewer promotions (Debus et al., 2024).

Exceptions and caveats

Admittedly, the benefits of humility, and the drawbacks of narcissism, entitlement, and conceit, may not be as pronounced in all circumstances. Below are some of these caveats. To what extent do these caveats may apply to your circumstances?



In Western nations, narcissistic people tend to refrain from acts that are intended to benefit the community, such as donations to social causes. But, in some Eastern nations, in which individuals may be more inclined to define themselves by their community and relationships, narcissistic people may be more inclined to initiate these acts to pursue status in their community (An et al., 2024).

In some workplaces, most people, including leaders, embrace the importance of freedom and autonomy. These people recognise that individuals should be granted the right to express themselves and even to deviate from social norms occasionally.

In other workplaces, people are more concerned about law and order. They believe that individuals who deviate from social norms should, in general, be swiftly punished.

In workplaces that prioritise law and order, staff tend to prefer leaders who are authoritarian, dominant, and even masculine—leaders who control and restrict their staff (Chen et al., 2024). Consequently, individuals in these workplaces may, at least initially, be concerned that humble leaders will not control and restrict other people sufficiently.

Some facets of narcissism may be helpful in specific settings. For example, in US states in which narcissism is higher, obesity is not as prevalent, perhaps because narcissistic individuals are often especially concerned about their appearance (Gruda et al., 2024).

The drawbacks of humility

In the following space, list what you feel might be the drawbacks of humility. For example, you might assume that people who are humble do not feel assured and confident.

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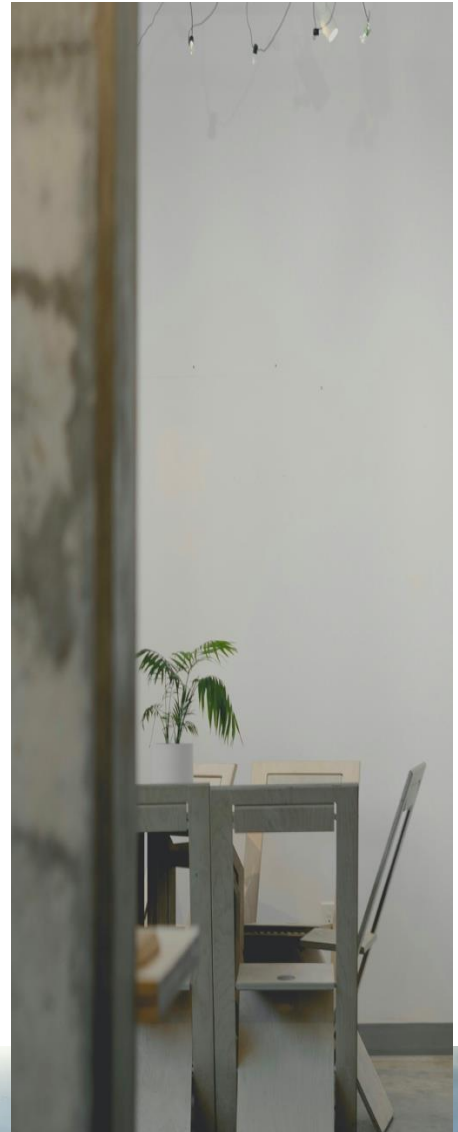
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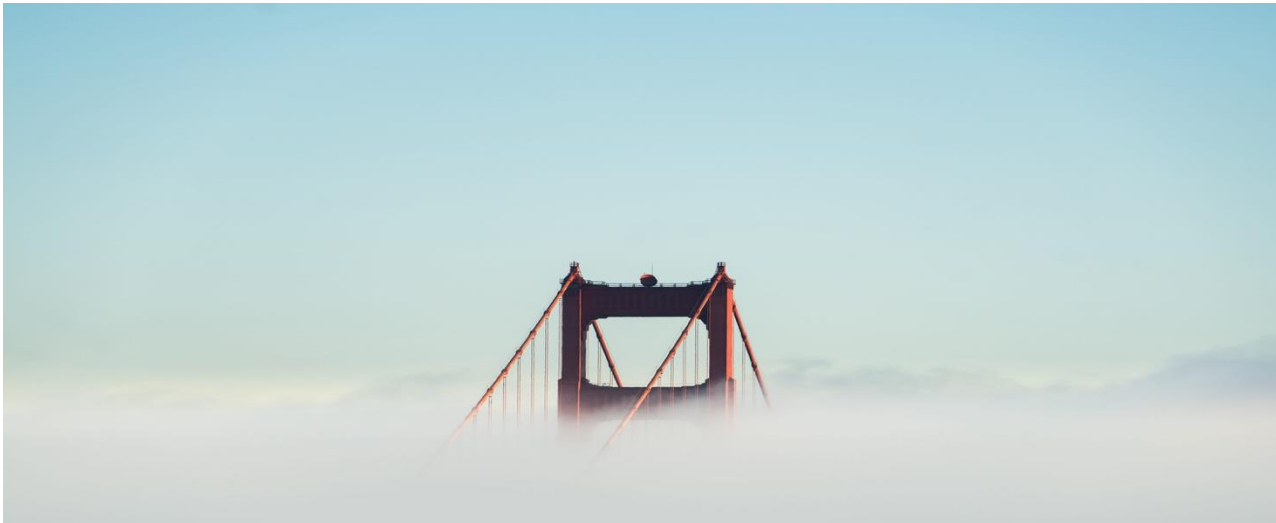
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Research has refuted some of the perceived drawbacks of humility--such as the perception that humble people are not assured and confident.

- People who are humble, rather than narcissistic, are often more assured and confident because they are not as defensive. Their perception of themselves is thus more stable and resilient.
- Likewise, humble people are more inclined to seek, to respect, and to embrace feedback about their behaviour. This feedback helps individuals clarify both their strengths and limitations. So, humble people are often more attuned to their strengths and talents than other people.





In the following table, the left column outlines some perceived drawbacks of humility. The right column outlines the evidence that challenges these perceptions. Scan this table to determine whether this information tempers some of the apparent drawbacks of humility.

Perceived drawback	Reality
People who are narcissistic, arrogant, or entitled—rather than humble—often display unmitigated confidence and may thus impress customers and investors	<p>People who are humble can also display unmitigated confidence and demonstrate leadership at times. As leaders, these individuals tend to promote innovation in their teams. Yet, unlike their narcissistic counterparts, humble people can activate or disable these inclinations—and can thus adjust more appropriately to the circumstances (Zhang et al., 2017).</p> <p>If you feel the need to display humility and confidence simultaneously, you could display body language that manifests this confidence. For example, you could adopt a more dominant posture, with your elbows away from your chest, your legs apart, while you lean back slightly. In response, the other person may feel and behave more submissively (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003).</p>
People who are humble may not seem to be credible.	People who are humble often willing to ask questions and to seek advice. Interestingly, after people seek advice, especially about complicated matters, their credibility improves rather than deteriorates (Brooks et al., 2015).

Perceived drawback	Reality
People who are narcissistic, arrogant, or entitled—rather than humble—tend to be more confident and competent in negotiations	When negotiating, people who are narcissistic, arrogant, or entitled tend to belittle the product or service the other person is offering, expressing statements like “That product is not worthy of this price”. In contrast, people who are humble may indicate they cannot afford the product or service, expressing statements like “I cannot afford this amount at this stage”. The strategy that narcissistic, arrogant, or entitled adopt, however, tends to be less effective. The other person is more likely to experience unpleasant emotions, diminishing the likelihood of compromise (Bhattachary & Dugar, 2023).
People who are humble may not seem to be credible.	People who are humble often willing to ask questions and to seek advice. Interestingly, after people seek advice, especially about complicated matters, their credibility improves rather than deteriorates (Brooks et al., 2015).

Even if you strive to foster humility, you are welcome to pursue inspiring aspirations, but you should question your expectations. For example, you might pursue the aspiration to be a leader of a division. But, to manage your expectations, identify two or three reasons this goal may not be as feasible as you first assumed.

Did you know

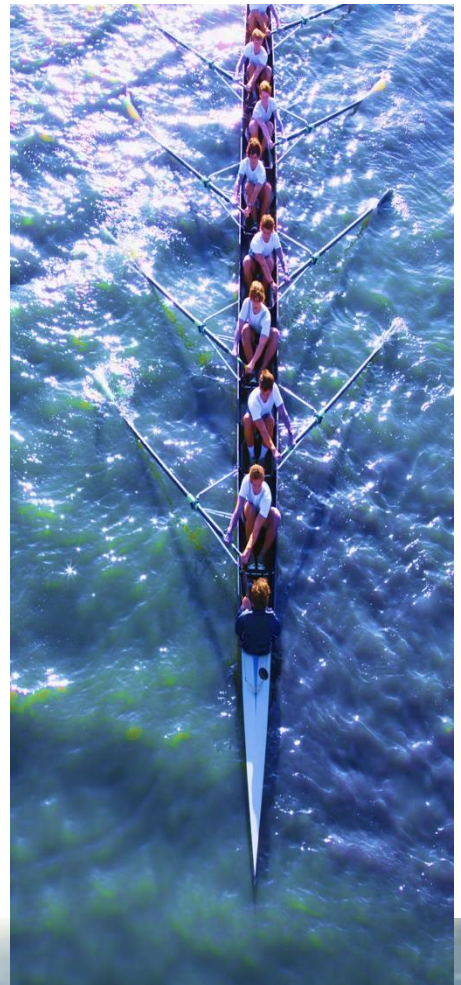


People who fail to fulfill their aspirations are no more likely than people who do fulfill their aspirations to experience mental health concerns. Yet, people who fail to fulfill achievements they strongly expect are likely to experience mental health concerns (Sendroiu et al., 2021).

Incidental rewards

Usually, if people receive some reward in response to a specific behaviour or action, they are more likely to repeat this behaviour or action in the future. So, if conceited people receive a reward after they exhibit the hallmarks of humility, they may be more likely to demonstrate humility in the future. Here are some hallmarks of humility that should be rewarded:

- Humble people acknowledge moments in which they feel anxious or dejected
- Humble people deliberately attempt an unfamiliar or challenging activity to develop themselves
- Humble people do not pretend to be certain or sure, but rather concede they do not know something
- Humble people concede a mistake they have committed or a limitation in their capabilities
- Humble people participate in workshops or other events to address a shortcoming
- Humble people acknowledge the benefits of ideologies or perspectives they do not usually adopt
- Humble people express praise, gratitude, or empathy to people from other communities



However, to reward these hallmarks of humility, you need to address two challenges. First, you need to decide how to reward these individuals. That is, you need to know which rewards conceited, defensive, entitled, or narcissistic individuals tend to value. The following table outlines the rewards these individuals are likely to value.

Rewards that conceited individuals often value	Examples
Admiration	You may say “People really admire you when you acknowledge your limitations”
Public recognition	In a public forum, you may state “I really like how Robert sometimes admits when he is not sure”
Leadership roles	You may say “Because you are aware of your bondaries and limitations, I think you deserve more leadership responsibilites”.
Introductions to the elite	You may say, “I think the president of this association would really value your sensitivity to multiple perspectives. I know someone who could introduce you to her”.

Note: These rewards should be genuine. People who are narcissistic may be sensitive to patronising or feigned praise.

Of course, you can reward the hallmarks of humility only if these individuals actually exhibit the hallmarks of humility. So, how can encourage this behaviour? That is, how can you encourage conceited people to demonstrate humility. In essence, you need to contrive circumstances in which individuals feel almost compelled to act with humility. The following list illustrates how you can compel people to act with humility.



Setting in which people feel compelled to act with humility



Ask questions with the word “ever”, such as “Have you ever felt a bit down?”, “Have you ever committed a mistake at work?”, or “Have you ever felt empathy towards these individuals?”



Ask questions with the word “any”, such as “Have you attempted to address any limitations in your skills?”, “Have you identified any good traits in this person you do not like?”, or “Are you grateful to anyone in this organisation?”



Contrive a circumstance in which these individuals need to show respect towards someone who they would usually dismiss. For example, you might invite someone from a diverse community to speak at an event.

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So, now you know the rewards that conceited individuals value and the circumstances that may compel these individuals to show the semblances of humility. Therefore, in the future, you should

- occasionally, ask these individuals the questions that tend to elicit these hallmarks of humility, such as “Have you attempted to address any limitations in your skills”,
- reward these responses immediately, “People really admire you when you acknowledge your limitations”,
- then gradually, over time, raise these expectations, so that you reward only humility that seems voluntary or substantial.

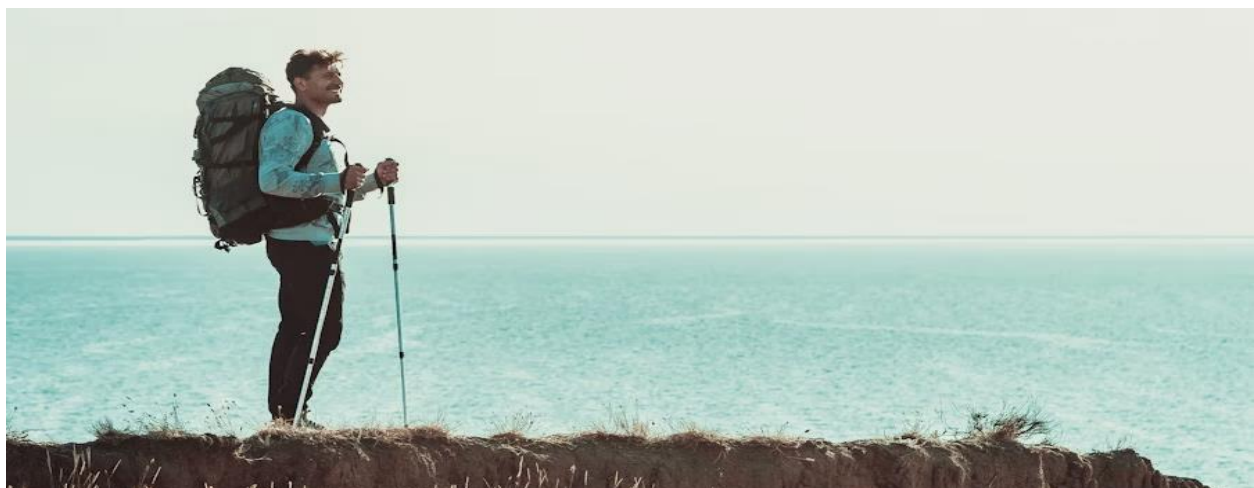
Practice first

This exercise may be challenging. So perhaps first ask the questions that are designed to elicit humility to yourself and then answer these questions. The questions, then, will feel more familiar over time.

Vicarious disapproval

Rather than reward acts that epitomise humility, you could also disapprove behaviours or inclinations that exemplify conceit or impede humility. For example, in the following table, the first column delineates some acts that you could disapprove. The second column illustrates some comments you could express to display your disapproval.

Acts that you could disapprove	How to disapprove these acts
A person who seems conceited and also shuns unfamiliar settings or circumstances	You could say “I think this person is afraid to commit mistakes or experience uncertainty. They are obviously not courageous enough to challenge themselves and to broaden their wisdom” (Fletcher, et al., 2020; Schiffrin & Liss, 2017)”.
A person who often flaunts expensive items, such as a luxury car	You could pose something like, “I think he needs to compensate for something; perhaps he does not feel he can earn respect from his opinions, his arguments, or his capacity to understand and to accommodate other people” (DeCelles & Norton, 2016).



Alternatively, to imply that you, or even other people, disapprove of behaviours that epitomise conceit, maybe label these behaviours disparagingly. To achieve this goal, you could express one or more of the statements that appear in the following table.



- I am wary of people who exhibit **grandiose** narcissism—and always seek attention and boast about their achievements.
- I do not respect people who display **vulnerable** narcissism—and always blame other individuals when they fail to achieve their goals.
- I am very concerned about people who demonstrate **malignant** narcissism—in which they feel the urge to harm the individuals who question their behaviour.
- I am wary of people who exhibit **communal** narcissism—and always inflate their contributions to the community but do not really care.
- I do not respect people who display **self-righteous** narcissism—and depict other individuals as immoral and believe only their actions are right and proper.
- I do not like people who demonstrate **neglectful** narcissism—and seem oblivious to the needs and concerns of other people.
- I am concerned about people who adopt a **fixed mindset**—and underestimate the capacity of other individuals to grow and to improve over time.

To learn these statements...

- walk into one room—perhaps in your house or workplace,
- in this room, attempt to memorise the first statement, at least roughly,
- then, walk to the next room of this house, workplace, or other location and memorise the second statement, and so forth.

You may need to repeat this exercise several times. Whenever you want to recall one of these statements, imagine yourself in the corresponding room; these images, called a memory palace, may help you retrieve these statements.