Currently much attention is being devoted to narcissism and self psychology. The work of Kohut and his followers has allowed previously maligned aspects of personality such as narcissism to be viewed as part of the normal developmental process of achieving self. Self psychology has gained the attention of psychotherapists previously not enamored with classical psychoanalysis. The author views self psychology as a new twist in a highly viable tradition that has opened the doors to psychotherapeutic intervention in some of the more difficult aspects of personality development. Clinical vignettes are used to illustrate the interplay of psychosexual development and the development of self, the application of self psychology to the treatment of psychosomatic disorders, and the similarity of narcissistic and co-dependent issues. The vignettes reflect difficulties not only seen in those often referred to as mentally ill, but also in those characterized as the “worried well.” Dyer warns that not responding to the suffering of the “worried-well” may be one of the great unmet health needs of our time.

No aspect of contemporary psychoanalysis and psychotherapy is receiving more attention than narcissism and self psychology. The focus on narcissism, particularly by Heinz Kohut, in the 1970’s, was an extension of classical Freudian psychoanalytic techniques and largely derived from Freud’s classic 1914 paper “On Narcissism.”(1) Kohut and his followers focused attention on some of the
most difficult aspects of psychodynamic treatment, namely those suffering from narcissistic character pathology. The work of Kohut and his followers can be credited in the best psychoanalytic tradition with making more respectable and sympathetic some of the more malign aspects of personality. Narcissism had the connotation of malignantly selfinterested. It is now more common to speak of self-psychology as a part of the normal developmental process of achieving a sense of self. This makes it easier to empathize with those whose interactions with others especially the therapist may at times be quite aloof and hostile.

Self-psychology is now attracting adherents among psychotherapists who never showed interest in classical psychoanalysis. It has become fashionable in recent years to emphasize the differences between the approach Kohut developed and that of Freud. Kohut himself in his later writings speaks of self psychology somewhat disingenuously (even narcissistically) as a new discovery, ignoring the earlier work of Freud particularly in the 1914 paper. It is important to recognize that psychoanalytic technique had already evolved considerably in the decades of the twentieth century. I prefer to think of self psychology as part of that evolution, a new twist in a highly useful and highly viable tradition.

The genius of Kohut’s innovations lies in careful empirical work in the classic psychoanalytic paradigm. Kohut noticed that certain individuals required longer analyses to deal with disturbances of “self” or narcissistic issues resulting from failure of empathy in early development. Often these were people who presented for reanalysis later in life after completing a “classical” analysis focusing on Oedipal issues. Kohut noticed that these individuals, rather than becoming competitive with the analyst, formed either “mirroring” or “idealizing” transferences, which required certain modifications of analytic technique, and took longer to resolve, perhaps five, six or seven years, as opposed to the customary three or four.

At this point we might expect a few cynics as well as those conditioned by the economics of extremely brief interventions to ask, “So what?” My answer to that question is that much of the technique we have available for brief interventions comes from the careful observation of human behavior that is only possible in long-term therapy and psychoanalysis.

Self-psychology has opened the door to psychotherapeutic intervention in some of the more difficult aspects of personality develop-