whole, I am satisfied with myself,” and yields similarly high results for both narcissists and people with healthy self-confidence. (We all rank ourselves relatively high; on Rosenberg’s scale of 10 to 40, the mean is 32, well above the midpoint of 25.) The more elaborate 1979 Narcissistic Personality Inventory had statements like, “I find it easy to manipulate people,” but still embraced items that Rosenthal says actually test for healthy self-esteem—for instance, “I am assertive” and “I see myself as a good leader.”

With his adviser, psychology professor Jill Hooley, Rosenthal developed his own questionnaire to measure grandiosity, the tendency toward aggrandized self-description that’s one component of narcissism. Rosenthal tested 100 traits on Harvard undergraduates—who, perhaps surprisingly, are no more narcissistic than the general population—and winnowed out 16 items that narcissists most frequently ranked high, but non-narcissists ranked low. These self-descriptors include perfect, superior, envied, unrivaled, and omnipotent. Using traditional measures that conflate self-esteem with arrogance, Rosenthal found that narcissists scored high—above 33—while non-narcissists fell below 31. (Because respondents cluster at the top of the scale, a point or two represents a major change.) Arrogance seems to make the difference, because when it’s edited out, narcissists’ average score dropped under the non-narcissists’—just over 31, versus nearly 32.

Rosenthal’s findings may even have political implications. During a postdoctoral research fellowship at the Kennedy School of Government, he has found that members of informal groups with no designated leader are likely to name the narcissist among them as a leader—but only at first. “Those are the people who show off the most, make the most noise, have the most ideas, or at least are most likely to keep throwing them out there,” Rosenthal says. “It does seem that, early on, people are attracted to the chest-thumping and showing off. But as the narcissism starts to show through, people start to get sick of that person.”

elizabeth gudrais
seth roenthal e-mail address: seth@wjh.harvard.edu

Last December’s devastating tsunami leveled building walls that faced the sea in Sri Lanka—but walls perpendicular to the shoreline remained standing. A group of Graduate School of Design students (who styled themselves the Tsunami Design Initiative, or TDI) used that fact and others to inform their innovative design for homes more likely to survive the next tidal wave. The TDI—Ellen Chen, Eric Ho, Nour Jallad, Richard Lam, and Ying Zhou—won a Tsunami Challenge Competition that MIT’s Special Interest Group in Urban Settlement sponsored this spring, and presented their work to the U.S. Agency for International Development in Washington in April.

Their design uses hollow-core structural elements, built of masonry units, that can house infrastructure like water and power lines. Flexible, cheap local materials such as bamboo fill in the exterior walls between the core elements. The 400-square-foot dwelling (rendered at right, with virtual “occupants”) includes a raised deck, as traditional homes do, so that seawater can pass beneath. Computer models indicate that this design would be five times stronger than a traditional Sri Lankan house (far right). “By creating moments of structural stability, you’re vastly stronger than trying to make everything rigid,” says associate professor of architecture Michelle Addington, who advised TDI. “You balance these stable elements with things that give.” Hence, a big wave can wash through the house rather than knocking it down.

The students estimate costs at about $1,200 for a complete structure. The design is efficient enough that twice as many new-style homes as traditional models can be erected with the same resources. Construction of the first unit began in Sri Lanka this summer; the students would like to build many more and also hope to erect a community center. They will hold a conference at the Design School this November on rebuilding strategies in response to the tsunami.

Craig Lambert

TSUNAMI DESIGN INITIATIVE WEBSITE: http://projects.gsd.harvard.edu/tsunami/