

Narcissistic Personality Disorder: A Romanticized Death of the Human Soul

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Pervasive social misunderstandings of narcissism and narcissistic abuse stifle and silence survivors, obstructing their attempts at healing and further eroding their power and identity. While society aims to approach narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) with empathy and compassion, its tendency to overcompensate and discredit abuse victims contributes to a cultural narrative of victim-blaming and shaming, empowering abusers. A comprehensive understanding of the modern-day monster behind the disorder is critical to fostering awareness and supporting survivors on their journey of healing and identity reclamation post-narcissistic abuse. Exposing what lies behind the mask through exploration of narcissism's historical evolution, analysis of its contemporary psychological manifestation, and examination of abuse methodologies employed by malignant narcissists reveals the truth behind the trauma. Furthermore, evaluating society's role in perpetuating cycles of victimization, along with the enduring physiological and emotional effects of the abuse, unveils the devastating implications of chronic psychological violence.

The Myth: The Evolution of Narcissism

While narcissism, in its contemporary context, has evolved into a complex personality disorder, the term itself is as controversial and publicly misunderstood as its' original conception. In 1887, Alfred Binet was the first to link the psychological concept of self-obsession and vanity to the Greek mythical narrative of Narcissus, who fell in love with his own beauty only to die gazing longingly at his reflection (Engels, 2013, pp. 77, 89). However, the myth's influence on the evolution of NPD is sporadic and minimal at best. While Freud initially subscribed to the theory that narcissism was a regular part of adolescent sexual development, Havelock Ellis connected patients' "Narcissus-like behavior" (Engels, 2013, p. 77) with complete sexual self-gratification. The lack of consensus among psychoanalysts made defining narcissism challenging

until its 1980 introduction into the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-III), revolutionizing narcissism into its complex contemporary form. However, while this facilitated awareness, providing hope and potential reprieve for abuse survivors, it failed to remit distorted societal interpretations of the disorder and the prevalent romanticization of toxicity.

Modern renditions of narcissism and narcissistic relationships idealize and normalize toxic traits and red flags. Popular culture's standard depiction of ideal love is a whirlwind romance filled with passion and a profound lack of boundaries. These portrayals mirror the intensity of the love-bombing phase in narcissistic relationships, casting respectful and consensual relationships in a dull and insufficient light (Morningstar, 2019, pp. 290-291). Mythology, folktales, movies, and books highlight romances built on love at first sight, where Prince Charming rushes in and sweeps the princess off her feet, bypassing the progression of healthy relationships built on trust, respect, and individuality. Contemporary narratives of love desensitize and groom children and adults alike to view red flags as relationship goals. Understanding NPD's defining characteristics and diagnostic criteria, along with recognizing patterns of abuse, is critical to dismantling harmful, romanticized interpretations of toxic relationships.

DSM-5: What is NPD?

The DSM-5 characterizes NPD as “a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy, ... present in a variety of contexts.” To receive an NPD diagnosis, an individual must exhibit at least five of the following traits: “a grandiose sense of self-importance, fantasies of power or ideal love, a belief in being ‘special,’ a need for excessive admiration, a sense of entitlement, intentional exploitation of others, lack of empathy, ... and frequently displaying arrogant behavior” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, pp 669-670).

NPD's defining characteristics hinder growth and change for those with the disorder. Due to their inherent entitlement and inflated egos, they rarely acknowledge their faults and refuse treatment or a diagnosis (Arabi, 2017, pp. 24, 157). However, in some instances, they view seeking treatment as an effective tool for manipulating, hoovering, and triangulating victims. While NPD exists on a spectrum, and not everyone with narcissistic traits chooses to abuse, the manipulative tactics of malignant narcissists are more complex and harmful than DSM-5 criteria suggest. Their duplicitous persona and patterns of chronic psychological violence methodically and intentionally exploit and subjugate targets, resulting in traumatized victims with significantly diminished mental health.

The Monster: Psychological Weapons

Like Jekyll and Hyde, narcissistic abusers have two faces (Arabi, 2017, pp. 24, 85; Stevenson, 2000): the charismatic and charming mask they wear in public and their true face, gradually revealed to victims throughout the cycles of abuse. The multifaceted mask enables them to triangulate, discredit, and run smear campaigns against their victims. Their false persona of being kind, compassionate, and personable in public makes it difficult for outsiders to believe any later claims of abuse from their victims. Additionally, the mask enables them to mirror values and qualities their targets find attractive, intensifying the initiatory love bombing phase of the relationship and tricking victims into believing that the narcissist is their ideal partner. Coercive tactics utilized by narcissists are analogous to cult indoctrination, where the goal is to exert dominance and subjugate victims into believing their false narrative, eroding the victim's confidence, feelings of self-worth, and power (Shaw, 2021).

Patterns and Strategies of Psychological Violence

Malignant narcissists are experts at manipulating reality to meet their desired narrative. Through repeating cycles of abuse beginning with an initiatory idealization and love bombing phase, followed by devaluation and discard (Arabi, 2017, pp. 8-13), narcissists can Hoover targets back into the relationship until they no longer consider them a viable source of supply. Throughout this parasitic relationship, the malevolent narcissist uses strategic, manipulative, and psychologically violent tactics to keep their victims trauma bonded and compliant. Some of the narcissist's most insidious psychological weapons include gaslighting, intermittent reinforcement known as breadcrumbing, jealousy induction, stonewalling, devaluation, and sexual violence (Barnett & Millward, 2021; Horan et al., 2015; Massar et al., 2017; Miano et al., 2021; Strutzenberg et al., 2016, p. 82). Narcissists tactically employ this arsenal of manipulative weaponry to undermine and erode their victim's identity, reality, and intuition. They effectively exert a dynamic of dominance, submission, and control to meet their agenda, leaving psychological scars that can remain long after the abusive relationship has ended.

Gaslighting

Gaslighting is an insidious form of psychological violence utilized by narcissistic abusers to control and dominate their victim's sense of reality. It often manifests as the narcissist overtly calling their victims crazy, jealous, or oversensitive, claiming that their perceptions are inaccurate or false. However, it can also present covertly with outward appearances of support and encouragement as the narcissist subtly exercises control (Miano et al., 2021, p. 286). This form of violence sends victims through three primary stages: disbelief, defense, and depression, as they attempt to understand why a partner who was once so loving and attentive is now exhibiting callous and hurtful behavior. Gaslighting destroys confidence, dismantles the victim's ability to trust their intuition, and programs them to rely on their abuser for affirmation of reality

(Arabi, 2017, p. 48). This insidious tactic, when used in conjunction with other devaluing and crazy-making techniques, creates a deadly concoction of dissociation and psychological torment.

Breadcrumbing, Jealousy Induction, and Devaluation

Along with gaslighting, breadcrumbing, jealousy induction, and devaluation are some of the narcissist's favored psychological weapons. Hot and cold behaviors are a staple in their arsenal used to subjugate and dominate their prey (Arabi, 2017, pp. 25-26, 146). Slipping their mask on and off allows them to become their target's ideal partners or worst nightmares instantaneously and seemingly unprovoked. After fits of narcissistic rage, they feed their partner breadcrumbs of love and affection to reinforce the trauma bond and intensify feelings of instability and confusion. This intermittent reward system triggers biochemical and physiological responses that leave victims craving crumbs of allocated affection, effectually programming them to associate love and reward with chaos and unpredictability.

Moreover, through jealousy induction and other devaluation tactics, narcissists enhance the volatility of the relationships, projecting feelings of inadequacy on their partner while simultaneously feeding their ego. Triangulation through secondary sources, including past relationships, coworkers, friends, or through comparison of a "perfect" partner, causes the victim to feel as though they must compete for the narcissist's love and sends the message that they are not enough (Arabi, 2017, p. 16). The resultant competition and craving for the narcissist's affection temporarily defers their insatiable need to feel desired. However, studies reveal that when a narcissist senses a threat to their image of desirability or experience rejection, they are prone to escalating from psychological violence to sexual aggression and coercion (Barnett & Millward, 2021, p. 2), indicating additional hidden depths to the nightmares their victims endure. Despite the horrific implications this form of chronic violence has on victims, social conditioning

depicts empathy and compassion as inherent human qualities and struggles to cope with the realities of NPD and its violent and exploitative nature. It seeks to justify and discount evidence of its existence, often sacrificing the survivor's freedom, power, and sense of self to maintain the status quo.

Victims: Socially Sanctified Abuse

Society's predisposition to victim-blame and over-empathize with abusers contributes to a cycle of perpetual violence that undermines efforts to protect and support survivors. Rather than working to dismantle broken systems that support and enable abusers, the easiest and most comfortable course of action is to label and blame the victim. However, despite common misconceptions and ideals of codependency or lack of confidence, anyone, no matter their social background, socioeconomic status, confidence level, or attachment style, can become a victim of abuse (Shaw, 2021, p. 6). Narcissistic abusers seduce victims into exploitative, parasitic relationships where charisma and love bombing lull targets into false security and complacency, psychological manipulation erodes autonomy, and "submission is the price of love" (Shaw, 2021, p. 7). Social stigmatization of psychological abuse survivors fuels the cyclic effects of violence and exacerbates trauma. Victim-shaming and minimization perpetuate the narcissist's narrative that the survivor somehow deserved the abuse, increasing the victim's predisposition to self-harming behaviors and suicidal ideation.

Physiological and Psychological Effects: Death of the Soul

Psychological abuse from a narcissistic romantic partner is a predictor of post-traumatic stress disorder, lifelong physical and mental health disorders, suicidal ideation, and, in extreme cases, death (Arabi, 2023, pp. 1-2, 5). Traumatic experiences alter the brain's chemical composition, programming victims to both turn to their abusers for comfort and become

hypervigilant about triggering them (Arabi, 2017, pp. 214-221; Bremner, 2006; Fisher, 2004). The brain produces dopamine and serotonin, neurotransmitters associated with pleasure, more readily when there is an unpredictable, intermittent reward system, which is why slot machines can be so addictive. The beginning of the relationship, marked by the intensity of the love-bombing phase, floods the victim's system with the love hormone oxytocin and contributes to the deepening of the trauma bond. However, as abuse becomes prevalent in the relationship, stress hormones, including cortisol, adrenaline, and norepinephrine, induce a constant state of fight, flight, freeze, or fawn responses, keeping victims compliant in survival mode. The chemical effects on the brain produced by the highs and lows of abusive cycles are comparable to the ways drugs affect addicts, and leaving a narcissistic relationship is analogous to experiencing withdrawals. Narcissistic abusers use strategies of manufactured isolation, chemical and hormonal dependencies, and guilt to their advantage to Hoover victims back into abusive cycles, eroding their identity and binding them in perpetual states of obedience and emotional dissociation.

Atmospheres of shame and disbelief due to the cultural ubiquity of the term narcissist and social constructs that discredit the realities of psychological violence render it impossible for abuse victims to receive the support and credibility necessary for healing. The nature of narcissistic abuse, coupled with the societal minimization of victims' experiences, intensifies feelings of shame and guilt. As a result, survivors experience cognitive dissonance, depression, difficulty trusting their perception of reality, and social isolation (Arabi, 2017, pp. 233, 267). Developing a holistic understanding of NPD, including its history, defining characteristics, abuse methodologies, harmful societal constructs, and the horrific effects these relational traumas have on victims, is crucial to discovering social blind spots and fostering a society that empowers

survivors. Validating a victim's lived experiences with an empathetic and compassionate approach requires holding abusers accountable for the lasting implications of their strategic and deliberate abuse. Society's misaligned standards of protecting and empathizing with abusers at the expense of their victims perpetuate abusive cycles, prevent healing, and encourage revictimization. The devastating effects of psychological violence leave victims feeling like fragments of their former selves, disassociated and empty. Only through awareness and dismantling myths about narcissism and narcissistic abuse can society begin to support survivors on their path to reclaiming their stolen identity and healing from the wounds of trauma.

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