

Protection From Abuse Orders, Aggression & Narcissism

By Hillary Vesell

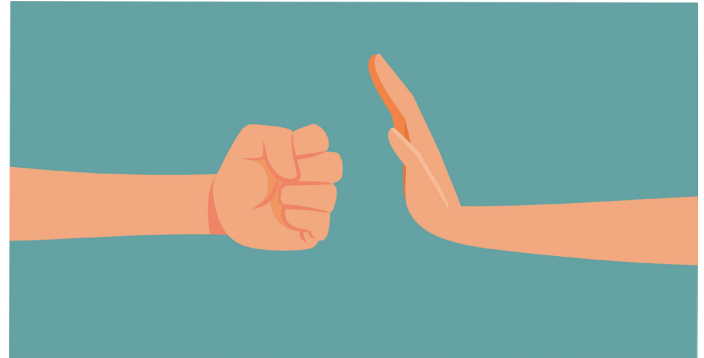
Narcissism: A History & Overview

The term narcissist comes from the Greek mythological character Narcissus, who fell in love with his own image reflected in still water. The story is an oxymoron of sorts because narcissists aren't capable of love. Narcissism can be thought of as entitled self-importance. Nearly everyone displays some degree of narcissism, although only a minority of individuals exhibit high enough levels of narcissism for it to be considered pathological and to interfere with normal functioning.

While everyone has some traits of narcissism, some have higher levels than others.ⁱ Individuals with high levels of narcissism show a higher inclination toward physical aggression, verbal aggression, smear campaigns, bullying behaviors and even displaced aggression against the public (i.e. road rage). People high in narcissism are not only more likely to lash out in anger, they are also more likely to be cold, deliberate and proactive in their aggression.ⁱⁱ Individuals who believe they are superior to others seem to have little reservation about attacking others whom they regard as inferior and may not be particularly picky about how they do it.ⁱⁱⁱ

Traits of narcissism, such as lack of empathy, entitlement (i.e. expectation of special treatment from others), selfishness, low frustration tolerance, hypersensitivity, rage and control are associated with a greater likelihood of acting out. While not all narcissists are abusers, many domestic batterers are believed to have personality disorders, often Narcissistic Personality Disorder.^{iv}

Narcissistic parents are thought to cause a host of maladaptive and life-long mental health issues for the children in their care. Parental alienation may be driven by narcissistic personality disorder, where a mentally ill parent projects their contemptuous behavior onto the other parent. Narcissists may not understand the negative effects and mental health consequences



their actions cause for their children. Instead, they objectify their children, disregarding their feelings and treating them as property. Alienation is hard to detect in any setting because it is set up to look like the child is rejecting the target parent for legitimate reasons. Borderline Personality Disorder may originate in the same abuse patterns that coexist with narcissism. Many people who have personality disorders are thought to have more than one.

Narcissists have a fragile sense of self — everything is a potential threat to their self-esteem, for which they may react with rage. A narcissist is likely to bring unwanted stress to almost any situation, especially an already stressful one. They tend to punish others for any perceived transgression, no matter how minor. They have a whole host of tools used to censure their target including the silent treatment, stonewalling — emotionally withdrawing and shutting down communication, devaluing and belittling, and physical abuse. Because narcissists often face difficulty in receiving constructive criticism, including about their children — whom they may be living vicariously through as extensions of themselves — any criticism may engender another round of punishments. Eventually, a target often modifies their behavior to avoid the potential wrath of a narcissist.

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The opinion is here: [J-A08002-25m — 106485327324168524.pdf](https://www.pba.org/record/J-A08002-25m—106485327324168524.pdf).

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Because of a narcissist's susceptibility to feelings of emptiness, paranoia and lack of empathy (traits present in most personality disorders), anything can potentially provoke them. Narcissists generally cannot sustain criticism as they live in a state of paranoia, believing the world is conspiring against them. With their emotional distance, low empathy and selfishness, narcissists are wired to be abusive. They are also inclined through their narcissistic rage to be vindictive. Narcissists have a tendency to commit psychological and emotional transgressions by sabotaging and slandering their target.^v Armed with arrogance and feelings of superiority, narcissists may feel entitled to mistreat others. Brain scans of narcissists show abnormalities in the area of the brain that correspond to compassion. A narcissist is not suited to meet the emotional demands of empathy, stability, consistency and availability required in close relationships, as they often use relationships as opportunities to exploit and take advantage of others.

Protection From Abuse Orders

In Pennsylvania, the legal remedy to protect oneself from aggression in a family setting where violence may erupt is a Protection from Abuse Order (PFA).^{vi} The primary goal of a PFA is to prevent abuse among members of the same household where aggression can quickly escalate into violence and imminent bodily harm.^{vii} The victim need not suffer actual injury as a reasonable fear of imminent serious bodily injury is sufficient to justify a PFA. Accordingly, all that is needed is the petitioner's testimony, if believed by the trial court that the victim was in reasonable fear of imminent bodily harm.^{viii} Where emotional abuse encourages or manifests in physical injuries, especially in children, abuse is considered to have occurred, justifying a PFA.^{ix}

A PFA can grant possession to the plaintiff of the residence or household, to the exclusion of the defendant, along with the relinquishment of any firearms or weapons in the possession of the defendant.^x The PFA Order may also direct that the defendant compensate the plaintiff for reasonable losses suffered from the abuse. These include medical, dental, relocation and moving expenses, counseling, loss of earnings or support, costs of repair or replacement of real or personal property damaged, destroyed or taken by the defendant or at the discretion of the defendant, along with any out-of-pocket losses for injuries sustained. The court may order the defendant to pay reasonable attorney fees, but can decide to waive fees and costs upon a showing of good cause or through a finding that the defendant is not

able to pay costs.^{xi} On the other hand, a defendant may recover actual damages and attorney fees where a PFA is found to be filed in bad faith.^{xii} The civil remedy, such as wrongful use of civil process and criminal prosecution relating to falsification and intimidation, are also available.^{xiii}

A PFA Order can grant temporary custody and support to the Plaintiff and any minor children.^{xiv} It can also grant temporary ownership rights over a companion animal, directing a defendant to refrain from possessing, contacting, attempting to contact, transferring or relocating a companion animal and prohibiting the defendant from contacting or entering the property of an individual sheltering the companion animal.^{xv}

Monetary penalties of a fine of not less than \$300 nor more than \$1,000 and imprisonment of up to six months exists for violations of the protection order.^{xvi} A PFA can be extended beyond three years for cause where violations exist, such as where the defendant engaged in a pattern of practice that indicates continued risk of harm to the plaintiff, minor child or companion animal.^{xvii} There are no limitations on the number of extensions that can be granted.^{xviii} The court may also amend or modify its order or agreement at any time upon subsequent petition filed by either party.^{xix} The PFA also allows the plaintiff to keep their address confidential in various related court pleadings and alerted prior to the release of the offender from incarceration.^{xx}

The court can order resources for the abuser such as batterer intervention programs and any necessary evaluations. While not all narcissists are abusers, many abusers are believed to have mental health issues that would benefit from a full psychological examination to identify mental health issues and recommend treatment.

Because individuals with personality disorders may be vengeful and vindictive and can potentially turn violent in interpersonal relationships, a PFA can be a valuable tool. While a PFA can be obtained at any time, generally within a few weeks of any actual abuse, a safety plan should be developed to ensure a safe exit from the relationship. A domestic violence hotline can be contacted for help in developing a safety plan.^{xxi} Precautions should be taken around people who are physically violent, threatening or retaliate with acts of extreme mental cruelty.^{xxii}

While no contact may be the best strategy to forgo dealing with a likely cruel and otherwise aggressive narcissist, if contact is necessary for custody or other reasons, one may want to employ the strategy of what is called low contact or gray rocking.^{xxiii} Gray rocking refers

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to the practice of showing little to no emotion when dealing with difficult personalities, in the hopes that a narcissist who wishes to feel special or important will lose interest.^{xxiv} Only facts, not feelings, are discussed to deescalate conflict with individuals who often try to incite, bait and destabilize others. The idea is to be non-reactive, using uninteresting responses until the high conflict personality loses interest and directs their negative attention elsewhere.^{xxv} Because healthy boundaries generally can't be set with a narcissist, the best option may be to gray rock, limiting contact whenever possible.

To avoid shame, the narcissist will often unconsciously project the negative aspects of their personalities onto others, blaming others for their own bad behavior. Narcissists also often use gaslighting — denying another person's reality — to maintain control in their relationships. Individuals who have suffered significant childhood trauma, such as individuals with personality disorders, may have fragmented personalities where different areas of their lives are compartmentalized instead of fully integrated into their personalities. Think Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde — these shadow or hidden parts of the personality may emerge when the individual is triggered, at which time the negative aspects of their personality can be projected onto others.

Beyond just social interactions, narcissists are likely to be antagonistic and oppositional, generally refusing to take accountability. They usually avoid intimacy, having few, if any, close friends. Although they initially appear warm and charismatic in hopes of exploiting their target, narcissists tend to be superficial and shallow, lacking depth and any real concern for others. They are also often dishonest (even if by omission), angling to usurp and gain the resources of those around them whom they often envy. Narcissists usually have no interest in supporting and celebrating the successes or accomplishments of others, and can derail celebrations including holidays, redirecting any attention back onto themselves. It goes without saying that a relationship with a narcissist is likely to be volatile, unstable and potentially explosive.

The Making of a Narcissist

Narcissists are made, not born. Theories abound on how an individual develops narcissism, ranging from genetic predisposition to environmental factors. Narcissism is largely thought to develop at a very young age in children from caretakers who are emotionally unavailable due to factors such as alcoholism, drug addiction and other untreated mental health issues.

Personality disorders are thought to form in early childhood through abusive relationships, where a child is unable to have their basic emotional needs met for positive self-regard. When a child can't internalize positive self-esteem and is instead overly criticized, their personality may develop in odd and rigid ways, where flexibility in our culture is the benchmark for good mental health.

Personality disorders can also form through undiagnosed medical disorders where proper bonding with a caretaker doesn't take place. Societal factors may also be at play — while our society values submissiveness and dependence in women, narcissistic traits such as grandiosity, selfishness and aggression are generally encouraged and reinforced in men. Society often harshly criticizes a woman who displays this behavior, requiring instead that she be humble and self-aware, traits oppositional to narcissism. Furthermore, while it may be acceptable for girls to cry in our culture, boys are often shamed for doing so. This practice is believed to dissociate a child from their emotions, teaching them how to gain control of relationships through emotional withholding and manipulation. Without the support of a child's emotional world, personalities may develop in dysfunctional and maladaptive ways.

In a materialistic society where thoughts and feelings are devalued, it is also theorized that narcissism can develop when a child's innate qualities, such as physical characteristics, are overvalued. For instance, society may more readily condemn an unattractive person who is dishonest, but not an attractive individual who is unreliable or deceptive. Narcissism may also develop where successes and achievements are celebrated, forcing children to earn affection instead of offering them unconditional love and warmth. In this way, children serve the needs of their adult caretakers. In a narcissistic family, a child will be forced to deny their own needs to cater to the needs of a narcissistic parent. When one's inner world is not supported, it becomes much easier to objectify others, especially in a society where mistreating others is accepted and even revered.^{xxvi} Accordingly, narcissism may be on the rise in our society due to cultural conditions that not only support but celebrate narcissistic traits.^{xxvii}

When a child is forced to please a narcissistic parent to gain positive esteem, a dynamic is created in which the same child in adulthood may similarly attempt to earn the love of a narcissistic partner. For a narcissistic parent, nothing will ever be enough, which can be exhausting

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depending on the sensitivities and temperament of the child, possibly producing anxiety, among other mental health disorders. This dynamic also sets a child up for a lifetime of disappointment, where warmth, kindness, compassion, respect, support, consistency and a shared sense of purpose found in healthy relationships is traded for more familiar feelings of unpredictability, indifference and cruelty common in narcissistic relationships. In this way, chemistry in adult relationships may be likened to familiarity. For those who originate from families where a caregiver was a narcissist, there may be an energetic pull towards these individuals, where finding one can feel like returning home. It is not unusual for an individual to date and later marry someone with the same characteristics of their narcissistic parent. People tend to crave familiarity, even if it is unhealthy. If someone is in the dating pool long enough, chances are they may come across a narcissist who is likely to keep resurfacing in the same dating pool. Parents who are healthy, able to be attentive towards their children, and who value their children as individuals are more likely to raise children strongly equipped to mercifully avoid narcissists.

Narcissists at Home & Work

Because narcissists are often drawn to positions that wield status and power, narcissists may be disproportionately represented in positions of leadership. Statistically, narcissistic men are thought to make more money than non-narcissistic men. Caring, empathic individuals may also enter into relationships with narcissists simply because they have no roadmap for identifying and protecting themselves from narcissists in the loving families where they grew up. In other words, one may simply not be discerning enough to avoid them.

Drained emotionally, physically, financially and spiritually, the target of a narcissist may experience mental health issues such as depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and anxiety. Women in relationships with a narcissist may develop a higher threshold for pain tolerance, leading them to err away from self-care or medical treatment.

Health issues may cause the target to appear reactive, stressed, unkempt, forgetful, disheveled and otherwise not credible. Toxic relationships erode not only the mental health, but also the physical health of the target by wearing down the immune system through continuous stress. Financial dependence may also keep individuals in these relationships, particularly women, whom statistics show are sometimes still paid less than men in our society for the same work, which may be due in part to

the fact that women often leave work temporarily or permanently for childcaring responsibilities. Studies also show women are often rated as having lower potential than men and are thus less likely to be promoted than a male counterpart.^{xxviii}

Charming, intelligent, and alluring — although lacking important character traits such as reliability, honesty and integrity — narcissists are often popular with women and may initially seem like the best prospects. Only upon increased familiarity are they discovered to be selfish, exploitative and dishonest. They don't necessarily make enduring partners either, as they do not bond with others in normal and healthy ways. A connection with a narcissist is formed through a trauma bond, which develops through a cycle of physical or emotional abuse followed by positive reinforcement. These cycles of abuse through mistreatment or neglect, followed by intermittently positive periods, can cause a victim to wait for the good times to return. The cycle may repeat multiple times before the victim realizes that events such as violence in their relationship are cyclical and will often return in predictable intervals.^{xxviii} By this time, recovering from these toxic relationships and working through trauma narcissistic individuals may take a lifetime.

It's difficult to believe there are people simply incapable of caring for others, which is what makes the narcissist so successful in taking advantage of others. Most people believe in reciprocity, the expectation that their partner will give back to the relationship, but this is not true of a narcissist who is often only looking to exploit others. When confronted with their selfish behavior, the narcissist will use rage as a tool to control and further exploit a target. There is no quicker way to enrage or be discarded by a narcissist than to try to hold them accountable for their behavior. Those in an intimate relationship with a narcissist will be conditioned not to upset the narcissist, turning any association with a narcissist into a one-sided exploitive relationship.^{xxx} Once sufficiently invested in the relationship, the target will often be amenable to changing their behavior to preserve the relationship. Because the narcissist depletes the victim's emotional and financial resources for their own personal gain, a victim usually comes out of these relationships traumatized and financially strapped.

Long-Term Prospects for the Narcissist

While individuals may be able to change with insight and self-reflection, treatment prospects are somewhat bleak for the narcissist, because narcissistic traits are believed to be stable over time and more resistant to

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change. Attending a few sessions with an inexperienced therapist who can be easily charmed by an individual with a personality disorder will be ineffective. Furthermore, narcissists rarely see their behavior as problematic, as narcissists only stand to gain from their selfish behavior.

^{xxxi} Therefore, cognitive behavioral therapy may be of limited use with narcissists, as narcissists are thought to have limited ability to reflect on their behavior. Their personalities were likely formed in early childhood on an emotional level so understanding their actions on a cognitive level may not be enough to change them. Therapies that access the unconscious may be more helpful in changing these enduring and deep-rooted patterns.^{xxxii} Because personality disorders form in early childhood, early emotional states may need to be accessed to stop or limit repetitive, destructive and negative, albeit often unconscious patterns.

Untreated personality disorders such as narcissism usually have long-term consequences, such as poor financial decision making due to symptoms such as poor impulse control. Narcissists are also more likely to be addicts than the general population; because a narcissist needs external validation, they frequently turn to substances — such as alcohol, drugs or other addictions such as relationships to balance their moods and numb their emotions. Individuals with narcissism also have a higher likelihood of cheating on their partners, not just romantically, but also out of time, energy, resources and opportunities. Personality disorders often coexist with substance use disorders. It's not surprising that narcissists would turn to external sources, as they can't regulate their own self-esteem. However, substance abuse may work to amplify already existing rage and other problematic emotional challenges in narcissistic relationships.

Abuse is complex. People often don't fully understand what happened to them, so they may not be able to accurately explain it to others. Memories encoded in the brain during a traumatic event may also be stored and retrieved differently, causing problems with memory and recall. It's also not uncommon for the good intentions of the target to be projected onto the abuser. Good people eternally hope things will get better and may not fully understand what they are dealing with.

While all relationships entail conflict, in a healthy relationship disagreements can be worked through to resolution. For the narcissist this is almost impossible, as any criticism entails shame that the narcissist deflects at any cost. Narcissists are generally not suited to meet the

emotional demands of empathy, stability, consistency and availability required in close, enduring relationships. Furthermore, because a narcissist is typically not interested in meeting the needs of others that do not suit them, relationships with narcissists are often draining. Narcissists do not communicate or meaningfully invest in their relationships and so may leave when faced with demands they are not interested in meeting. There is often no healthy ending with a narcissist. The narcissist will tend to identify their target as the problem and the relationship will likely dissolve. When the relationship implodes, a PFA may be a helpful tool.

While success is often measured in terms of financial wealth, it can also be measured in an ability to maintain consistent, stable, harmonious and safe relationships. However, in a society that enables and sometimes rewards narcissism, qualities that make the world a more dangerous place such as indifference, inconsistency and unpredictability are instead glorified. Accordingly, narcissists feel entitled to continue their mistreatment of others, especially when they only stand to gain from their selfish and abusive behaviors.

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Endnotes

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^{vi}See 23 Pa.C.S. § 6101-6122.

^{vii}*Custer v. Cochran*, 933 A.2d 1050 (Pa. Super. 2007); *See Hood-O'Hara v. Wills*, 873 A.2d 757 (Pa. Super. 2005).

^{viii}*Custer v. Cochran*, 933 A.2d 1050 (Pa. Super. 2007).

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^{ix}See *D.J.S. v. J.D.S.*, No. 1445 MDA 2017 (Pa. Super. May 22, 2018).

^xSee 23 Pa.C.S. § 6108.

^{xi}See 23 Pa.C.S. § 6108 (a)(8); See also 23 Pa.C.S. § 6106 (c); See also *Egelman ex rel Egelman v. Egelman*, 728 A.2d 360 (Pa. Super. 1999).

^{xii}See 23 Pa.C.S. § 6117(b).

^{xiii}See 23 Pa.C.S. § 6122

^{xiv}See 23 Pa.C.S. § 6105 (b)

^{xv}See 23 Pa.C.S. § 6108(a)(a.1)

^{xvi}See 23 Pa.C.S. § 6114(b)(iii)(4).

^{xvii}See 23 Pa.C.S. § 6108 (e)(i).

^{xviii}See 23 Pa.C.S. § 6108 (e)(3).

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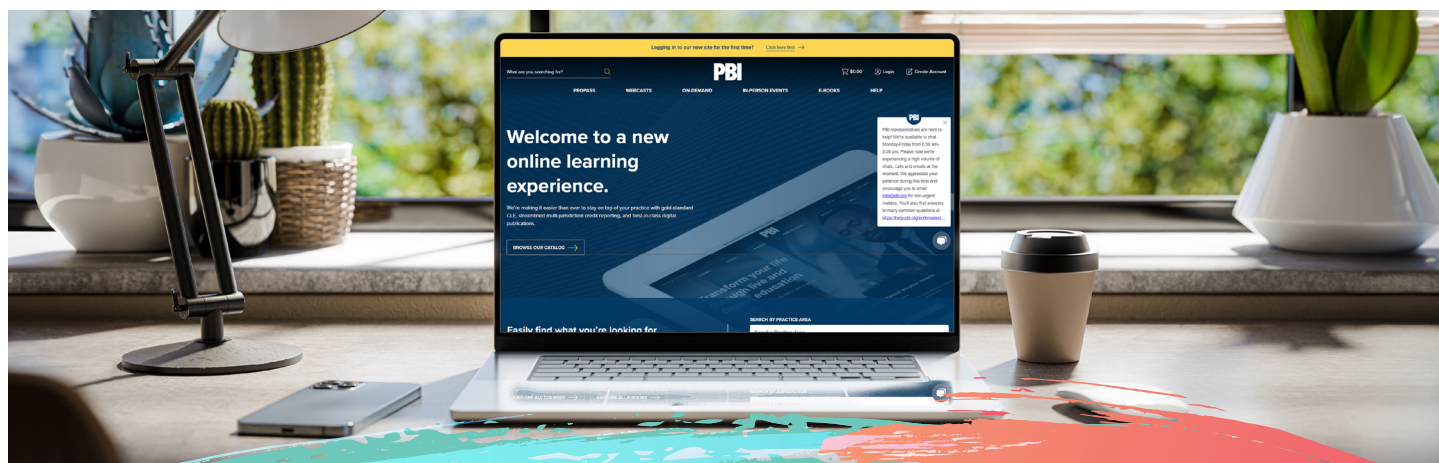
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