

Narcissism, Addiction, and Manipulation: How to Maintain Your Self-Respect



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Narcissism and Addiction: What We Need to Know

Narcissus: Self-Adoration

“Narcissism” is a big word for a simple concept. To explain what narcissism actually is, we need to look at Greek mythology.

Once upon a time, a young man named Narcissus, who was blessed with many beautiful physical attributes, was sitting alone by a pond. As he looked down into the still water, he saw his own reflection shining back at him. Mesmerized by his own magnificence—which he himself considered to be nothing short of stunning—he gazed lovingly into the water, moving closer and closer to that face which so entranced him. Down and down he leaned, trying to become one with the face he had fallen in love with—until at last he fell into his own reflection in the pond and drowned. Narcissus was so drawn to his own beauty that it caused his untimely demise.

Many of us know someone just like him.

This brings to mind a time when I was involved with a community theater group several years ago. I was acting in a play with a narcissist—let’s call him George—who seemed to have no concern for anyone but himself. Even in show business circles where there is a fair amount of narcissism, George was a standout. Although he wasn’t a particularly skilled performer, he was so good at projecting the image of a confident and talented actor that he was sometimes able to fool other people. But those who knew George well had a nickname for him: “I Love Me, Who Do You Love?” In fact, that could be the best descriptive nickname I’ve ever heard for people with narcissistic tendencies.

Narcissism has now been classified as a personality disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), which is the most prominent go-to resource for virtually all mental health conditions. One of several personality disorders, narcissism is listed with such other syndromes as Histrionic, Anti-Social, Grandiose, and Borderline. What sets Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) apart is the excessive self-centeredness, vanity, and often total lack of empathy and compassion for others.

Some other DSM-5 criteria for Narcissistic Personality Disorder include:

- Having an exaggerated sense of self-importance
- Expecting to be recognized as superior even without achievements that warrant it
- Exaggeration of achievements and talents
- Requiring constant admiration
- Having a sense of entitlement
- Taking advantage of others to get what they want

- Having an inability or unwillingness to recognize the needs and feelings of others
- Behaving in an arrogant or haughty manner

Although people who are narcissistic appear to think very highly of themselves, this can be deceiving. In order to fully understand the possible origins of narcissism, it is important to delve a little deeper. In my opinion, the most arrogant people we encounter are also the most insecure. In fact, if not for their intense feelings of insecurity, such as profound shame and unworthiness, arrogance as a common coping strategy among people with narcissistic leanings would be unwarranted—and completely unnecessary.

Is Forgiveness Possible?

Even when we have a better understanding of what this personality disorder is all about, even when we can feel empathy and compassion for those who seem to have no concern for anyone else but themselves, it does not take away the pain that being in a relationship with a narcissist can cause. If we love a narcissist—in any form or context—the suffering we go through is real. The scars are real. And we must honor ourselves for the courage we have to be willing to look at this difficult issue and heal this pain within ourselves.

Often, children of narcissists have trouble forgiving their parents for the profound hurt they've experienced. I can personally understand that problem, and I pose the following questions:

- Can narcissists really change?
- Do they have the capacity to develop empathy for others?
- Is it a choice on their part to remain so drastically self-absorbed to the point where they so often hurt their loved ones?
- Or, can they choose to learn to tame their own inner demons and behave in a different way?

As the adult child of a profoundly narcissistic parent, I believe these are important questions to ask, and I hope to find some answers to them. At the moment, for me, the jury is out. It would make sense that if people with NPD truly cannot change, we would likely have an easier time forgiving them. However, if a narcissist is simply choosing to continue the dysfunctional behavior because that feels easier for them, then forgiveness for causing so much pain to so many others would prove much more challenging.

It Was Never About You

When we are children, we need our parents and other caregivers to take care of us. We are not able to function on our own for quite some time. We don't have the luxury of thinking that our parents might actually be unhealthy in any way because 1) we need them to be

healthy so that we can survive well, and 2) we are taught, over and over, to respect our elders, especially our parents, even if they are not behaving in ways that deserve our respect. If they are acting in inappropriate ways, it is therefore easier for children to think that there must be something wrong with us than to think there might be something wrong with our parents.

This makes perfect—albeit flawed—sense to me now, as an adult.

As adult children of narcissists, we need to remember that what happened to us in our childhood was never about us to begin with. What our parents did to us, often done in the name of ‘love’ as they knew it, was about their need to behave like that. It was not because of anything we did wrong—it was really not about us at all. But since that kind of trauma definitely felt like it was about us, many of us made the classic childhood mistake of believing that the often difficult and distressing treatment we received must have been because we were not smart enough, or pretty enough, or strong enough—or perhaps just plain not good enough—and we have unwittingly carried that brutal scar into adulthood.

And as a result, far too many of us found ourselves in the seemingly unrelenting throes of addiction of some sort. Sometimes we chose to stay in our ‘comfort zones’ by creating relationships with partners who treated us in similar ways as when we were children—without even realizing it. Narcissistic partners can be extremely demanding to live with because of their need to always be right and better than everyone else. When we are in any type of relationship with someone who is narcissistic, we often feel so badly inside that we seek out ways to help ourselves feel better—and these can easily turn into addictions if we’re not aware of our self-sabotage. When that happens, life does not get better—it progressively gets worse.

But the truth is that none of us has to remain in that terribly painful place. Healing is possible—we can find our way back. If what you’re wanting is a healthy loving partnership with the potential for true intimacy, it will be important for you to look within and do your own inner healing around why you chose a narcissist to begin with—and whether you want to stay there or move on.

Embarking on the Healing Journey

Once we understand that narcissists have their own private logic informing them that they know best about everything (while actually feeling quite inferior to others), we also begin to understand why they so desperately believe that there can be no space for anyone but them and no room for any other opinions but theirs. For those of us who are not narcissistic, this surpasses all reason and simply cannot be fathomed in childhood. For

most of us who were raised by narcissistic caregivers, the wounds we incurred back then can only be healed when we become adults.

And, as the adults we are, if not now—when?

I invite you to come along with me on this journey of healing the hurt you've been carrying with you for possibly a very long time. Even if that prospect feels uncomfortable for you, you will begin to see how much more advantageous it will be for you when you allow yourself to feel the emotions that come up for you. Remember: we can't heal what we won't allow ourselves to feel. You are not alone anymore: there are, in fact, millions of adult children of narcissists—and a great many others who are in narcissistic relationships—all over the world, just like you. We are all feeling the same emotions and tending to the same types of wounds. Many of us have inadvertently become locked into addictive behaviors for a long time, not understanding that we really do have another choice.

Instead of allowing our secrets to keep us sick, what if we decided to stop hiding in shame-based addiction? What if we decided instead to speak our truth about our long-held pain and to heal together?

Can you imagine how much better life could be?

Loving Someone with an Addiction: A Life of Chaos

Whether your addicted loved one is a parent, a child, a partner, friend, or colleague, loving someone who is actively engaging in addictive behaviours is one of the most difficult ways to live. This is because addicts who continue to be involved with their own self-destructive patterns typically experience many emotional highs and lows, creating a virtual roller coaster of fantasy followed by severe despondency, remorse, and self-loathing, with every conceivable emotion in between.

Addicts often develop physical and financial problems as well, which usually result from long periods of a variety of stresses as well as their failure to take good care of themselves holistically. Unfortunately, if you love an addict, you are likely to experience many of these emotional, physical, and financial issues as well.

The Three Stages of Addiction

In the beginning stage of addiction, people generally feel they can take or leave the potentially problematic substance or behaviour. For example, a person considers himself to be a “social” user or drinker, able to indulge in alcohol and/or other drugs only

recreationally. Or, a woman may tell herself she simply enjoys going to the mall or to the casino now and then—no harm in that, is there?

Later, in the progressive stage, people feel the need to engage more and more in the preferred substances or behaviours, but they remain in denial about how far the addiction has progressed. This is seen in situations where a person will be imbibing whatever is in sight, sometimes to the point of blacking out or engaging in other dangerous behaviours. Or a gambler has increased her visits to the casino—and often her spending limit—and may even stop on the way home from work several nights in a row.

In the advanced stage of addiction, the consequences are much more evident for the addict, such as more and more of the mind-altering substances are now required to achieve the same effect, and methods of procuring the drugs and alcohol are becoming more frequent and dangerous. Health and financial problems increase and the addict may lose his job. For a gambling addict, weekend trips to the casino have increased to at least once a day with far more losses than wins to show for it. The addict's financial difficulties are now overwhelming. When you love an addict, it's important to acknowledge what is truly going on with them in order to begin the process of releasing yourself from the life of chaos you are undoubtedly living. Ask yourself where on this continuum is the addict you love, and how long has this been the case?

Are You Isolating Yourself Because of the Addict in Your Life?

If you are in a significant relationship with an addict, you probably don't talk in depth with others about what you are going through because of the shame and guilt you may be feeling about your situation.

You may also feel a sense of isolation, not realizing that there are other people who are in exactly the same predicaments, experiencing exactly the same feelings you are. It may be difficult for you to maintain some of your relationships because you do not want anyone to know what is really going on in your life.

Be honest with yourself, are there folks you are no longer in contact with because of an addicted loved one? Are there things you once enjoyed doing that you no longer do? Isolation is a slippery slope and will only increase the chaos you are living with every day, and using it as a means of emotional self-protection is a strategy that rarely works. If you find that you have been doing this, you may want to begin to reach out, because your secrets will only continue to keep you sick.

It's Not That Bad, Is It? Yes, It Is!

A practicing addict's denial can often be a mirror for a loved one's denial—in fact, you may have become an expert in convincing yourself that things aren't as bad as they are, simply to justify staying in such a difficult and draining relationship.

Perhaps you have lived this way for so long that it seems normal to you. It's possible that you may already be so used to the lies, the deception, the manipulation, and the self-absorption of your addicted loved one that living like this has become, in effect, your comfort zone.

To eventually be able to come out of your comfort zone of denial, you will first need to identify and acknowledge what has become the dysfunctional “norm” that you now live with. Do you routinely put up with raging, threats and manipulation from the addict in your life? If you're like the loved ones I regularly see in my practice when I begin to work with them, the answer is yes. And no one should have to live like that.

Helping versus Enabling

If you're like most people who find themselves in relationships with practicing addicts, you no longer understand what a “healthy normal” is, nor do you have the tools to make that your reality. And because of this lack of tools, you have likely made some missteps that have inadvertently allowed the addict in your life to continue his or her unhealthy behaviours.

For example, do you shield the addict from things he or she doesn't want to face about themselves? Do you walk on eggshells for fear of setting off the addict's anger? Do you make excuses or cover up for them? Do you lie to them to avoid an argument? Those are all enabling behaviours.

Focusing on Yourself

When you begin to take positive action to remedy the situation, you become part of the solution rather than being part of the problem. The most important thing you will need to do is learn how to focus on yourself. As the loved one of a person with addictive behaviours, most of your energy has been spent worrying about and placating someone else, perhaps trying to solve their increasing emotional, financial, and physical health problems. This may feel like the path of least resistance, but in reality you are helping to keep the addiction going.

Focusing more on others than you do on yourself is a form of codependency. Your own recovery from participating in dysfunctional behaviours will truly begin when you start to focus your attention and energy away from the addicted person and onto yourself.

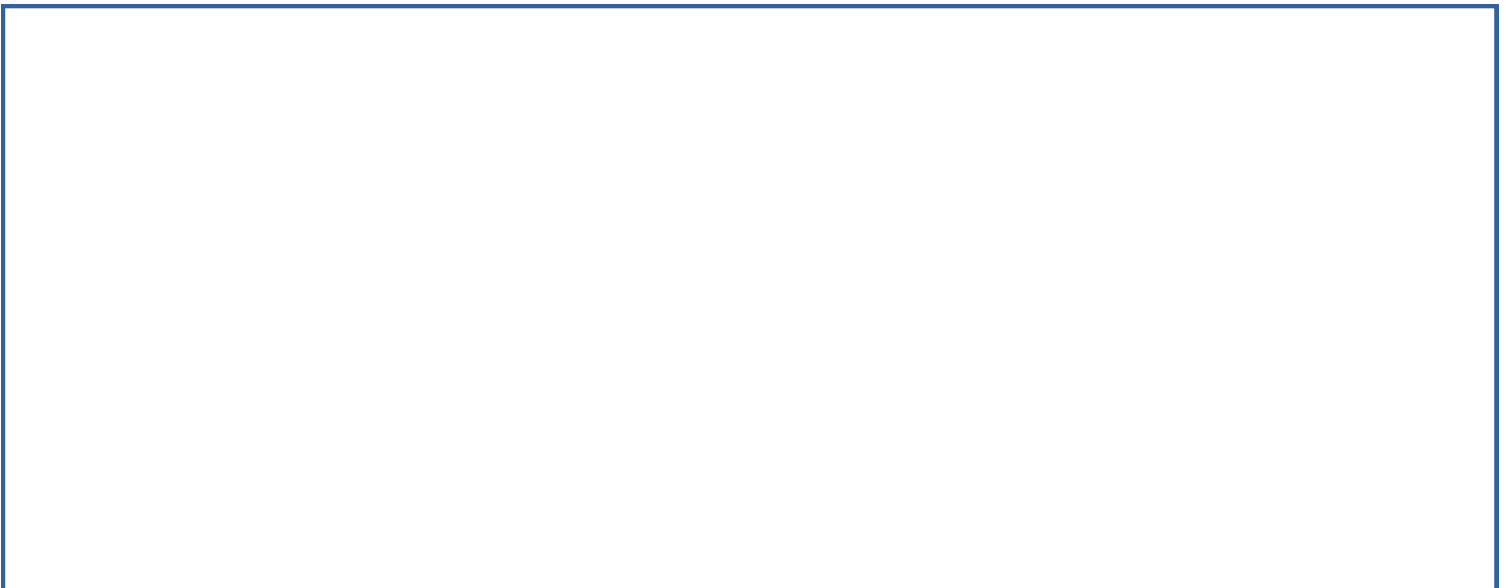
If you are like most people who are in relationships with addicts, looking after yourself first will be a novel concept for you. But as you start taking better care of yourself and treating yourself with more respect, you will experience the ripple effect of other people in your life respecting you more as well. Remember—you are teaching others how to treat you by showing them how you are treating yourself. As well, as you begin to live your own best life, you will begin to role-model for your addicted loved ones how to live in healthier ways—a win-win situation for all who are involved.

Don't Give in to Manipulation

List the top three forms of manipulation that you encounter and discuss how each type of manipulation has affected you.



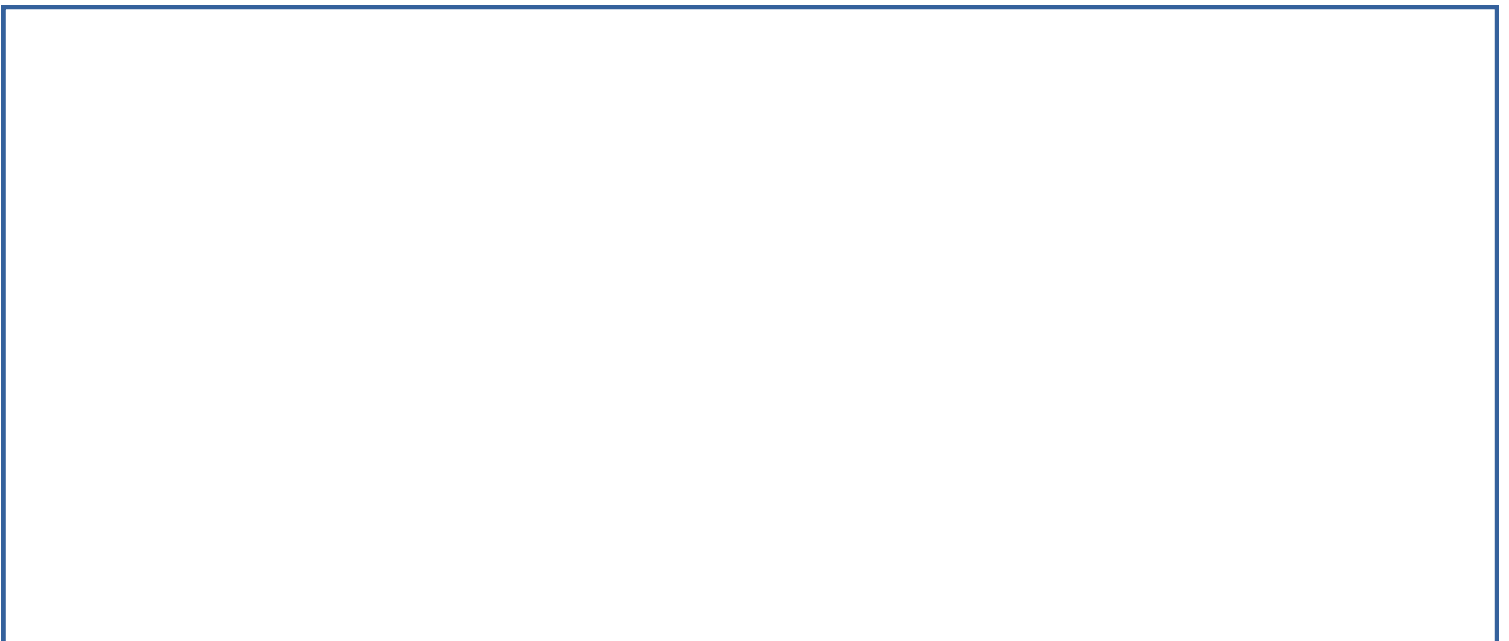
Have you ever said “no” when someone in your life has tried to manipulate you? If so, describe what happened when you did this.



When you feel manipulated, where do you see yourself on the spectrum between passive coddling and angry scolding? Do you think you generally assume one of those positions, or do you find yourself going back and forth between the two?



Have there been times when you have reacted in ways that have not been self-respecting, such as not standing up for yourself when someone in your life is trying to manipulate you? Name one or two of those times, and discuss what you could do differently now if a similar situation arose?



Do you think you have ever manipulated anyone in your life so that your own needs could be met? What are some healthier and more appropriate ways that you can get your important needs met now?

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