

NARCISSISM

How to Live with a Narcissistic Spouse and Maybe Even Thrive...

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Narcissism falls on a spectrum or continuum of traits. This handout focuses on the more difficult or extreme cases of living with someone who has a lot of narcissistic tendencies. Much of the counsel one might find is to avoid narcissists at all costs. The reality is that narcissism, to some degree, can be found almost everywhere. Although married to a spouse who is quite painfully narcissistic, many clients simply don't want to choose the option of divorce. But to stay healthy in that marriage, they will need specialized understanding and skills in order to successfully remain married to a narcissist.

For couples in unhealthy relationships, there are technically the following three choices. As a marriage-friendly therapist, I always lean toward encouraging clients to take the tougher road of the "3rd option."

1. Get divorced
2. Live as you are in misery doing the same things and perpetuating the same unhealthy cycle
3. Accept *what is*. Work on learning new ways of interacting. Focus on changing yourself, which ultimately changes them.

WHAT IS NARCISSISM

Characteristics of Narcissism:¹

- arrogance and a sense of entitlement
- acts superior to others
- is unforgiving
- doesn't apologize or admit error
- is selfish/self-absorbed – It's all about them!
- rarely thinks about others or considers other's perspectives
- spends most of the time talking and thinking about themselves
- exaggerates accomplishments
- fantasizes about power, success, appearance
- needs/expects constant praise, attention, admiration
- believes they are uniquely special
- easily offended or embarrassed
- believes others want their life
- little empathy for others
- expects automatic compliance
- demands others do as they request.
- regularly manipulates and intimidates
- takes advantage of others/is opportunistic even when it hurts others
- has deeply rooted insecurities (from childhood, traumas, experiencing failures, etc.)
- often very successful people
- narcissists are everywhere, so it's good to learn how to work with them.

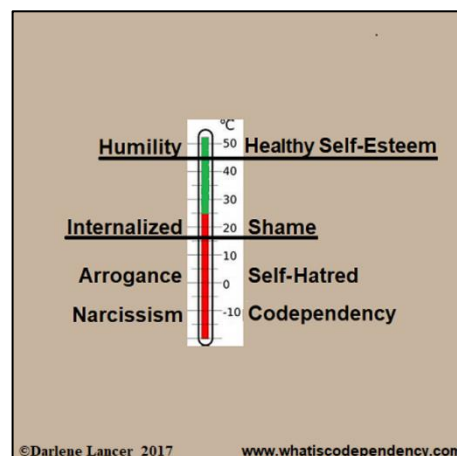
WHAT CAUSES NARCISSISM?²

- It develops in an environment where vulnerability comes to feel dangerous, representing, at worst, either a grave defect, or at best, a stubborn barrier to becoming a worthwhile human being.
- We find some correlation between narcissism and insecure attachment styles, in which fears of depending on anyone at all engender constant attempts to control the relationship or avoid intimacy altogether.
- Narcissists have learned to ignore, suppress, deny, project, and disavow their vulnerabilities (or at least try) in their attempts to control, shape, and reshape "who they are" in their interactions.

HELP FOR HANDLING A NARCISSISTIC SPOUSE

Laura's Suggested Tools for Thriving with a Narcissistic Spouse – Read through this information daily to help you stay on track with your new ways of thinking, speaking and acting!

1. **Accept What Is** -- Accept the “horribleness” of his/her behavior and how he treats you. Accept *what is* instead of continually being shocked, surprised, or appalled by their behavior. Learning to love and accept *what is* gives you great power and the ability to be okay even when things aren't okay. People are also a lot more likely to change when no one needs them to. (See book - [Loving What Is](#) by Byron Katie)
2. **Process the Pain** -- Regularly process the daily hurts and frustrations through process writing like an ongoing written conversation with God. (See handout - [Process Writing Worksheet](#))
3. **Self-Care** -- Diligently engage in daily self-care, as living with a narcissist can be emotionally exhausting. If you want to stay married and thrive, you'll have to preventatively and proactively develop the wherewithal to endure the energy drain of dealing with a narcissist *as* you and *until* you can change YOUR behavior enough to change the narcissistic cycle. (See handouts - [Healthy Habits Worksheet](#) and [5 Minute Meditation](#) and [5 Minute Meditation - AUDIO](#))
4. **Partner with God** -- Develop a more personal and profound relationship with Christ to heal, strengthen and enable you to withstand the narcissism and allow you to come to genuinely see your spouse as a wounded human worthy of your love and compassion. (See handout - [Keys to Develop a More Personal and Profound Relationship with God](#))
5. **Get Educated** -- Learn all you can about narcissism (see some starting resources below) so you can better understand what you're up against and become better equipped to deal with challenges. Practice the new approaches consistently to bring your interactions in line with what will stop fueling or perpetuating the narcissistic cycle. For example, you'll learn to be sure to NOT use the “n” word (narcissist) with narcissists. You'll learn that “normal” ways of interacting with your spouse will not work when dealing with narcissism. The most difficult adjustment will be to act in ways that may feel “un-Christlike” to you in order to re-balance the unhealthy power dynamics in your marriage. As you get educated and change your ways of thinking, speaking and acting, you'll actually have more power than you might currently realize.
6. **Strengthen the Self** -- Thriving with a narcissistic spouse will require a stronger sense of “self” and greater differentiation of self. Differentiation is the ability to hold onto and value yourself while maintaining relationships with others (especially unhealthy others).³ This includes the ability to tolerate personal discomfort and to manage or regulate your own anxieties and difficult emotions. It requires the ability to hold boundaries, confront yourself (where you have some control) instead of just your spouse (where you don't have control) and to develop the ability to hear, say and do difficult things like “require respect” and hold your spouse more accountable for his hurtful behavior. You change your relationship by changing and strengthening YOU and not letting them use your “niceness” against you!⁴ (See - [Laura's Counseling Handouts](#) - search for “coping” and “regulation”)
7. **Practice Self-Compassion** -- It's very tough being married to a narcissist. It's tough to make the necessary changes in yourself and to set and hold the boundaries needed with them. Be gentle with yourself as you do your best to make these changes. Having self-compassion entails being warm and understanding toward yourself when you suffer, fail, or feel inadequate instead of ignoring your pain or beating yourself up with self-criticism.⁵ I encourage clients to regularly listen to at least a few minutes of this [self-compassion book](#) to develop a more self-compassionate mindset.
8. **Address Codependency Issues.** Codependency is about having lost a connection to your innate self. Your thinking and behavior revolve around a person, substance, or process instead of the self.⁶ Needing your spouse to be “nice” or to be “loving” or to “connect” with you or “be happy” are all ways narcissists maintain their power over you allowing or enabling him/her to manipulate, control and micro-manage you and treat you disrespectfully. Addressing these needs within you and “detaching with love” can help you break free of codependency and stop the narcissistic cycle. (See - [Laura's Counseling Handouts](#) - search for “codependency” and [Why I Love 12 Steps for...Everyone](#) and podcast - [“The Dysfunctional Bond Between Narcissists and Co-Dependents”](#))



9. **Focus on You!** -- Stay in your own lane. Focus on your own mental and emotional business. Challenge yourself mentally and emotionally before you challenge your spouse. You have no direct control over them and what they think, say or do anyway. Stop believing you can fix them and stop trying to change them or "help them be better." Trying to do so messes with their agency and increases their resistance and defensiveness and keeps you stuck in unhealthy patterns. It also fuels their narcissism and the unhealthy narcissistic cycle. Own the role you play in perpetuating or continuing to fuel the unhealthy patterns of interaction. Own the hurt and damage you've caused in your relationship. Their "horrible behavior" is already a given. Work to repair the damage you've done--not by apologizing all the time, but by changing your ways of thinking, speaking and acting toward them that have enabled the narcissistic/codependent pattern. (See handout - [Marriage as a Collaborative Alliance](#))
10. **Don't Buy Into Their Narrative** -- Don't buy into/believe their narcissistic narrative. Don't let them define you or tell you who you are, how you think or how you feel. Let them think, feel and perceive what they will, but don't buy into it as the one "correct" reality. Buying into their narrative gives them power and keeps you stuck in the narcissistic cycle. We each have a different, but valid perception of reality. That is very difficult for a narcissist to accept. They desperately need you to buy into their narrative, for instance, that *you* are the problem, and that *they* are the victim. To understand how you might instead hear them, consider how you'd respond when your teenager tells you they hate you and that you're the worst parent ever! You hear it, aren't terribly surprised by it, and don't give it a lot of weight or energy.
11. **Stop Explaining and Defending** -- Don't let yourself be interrogated or constantly criticized. Don't try to explain or defend yourself or try to get them to see your point of view.⁷ They won't, and they don't care. Don't allow them for even a second to get into a discussion of what YOU are doing wrong. Instead, in your conversations: 1) just listen for a predetermined period of time; 2) make maybe one comment or one point; then 3) get out of there! Physically remove yourself from their presence and don't comment on the narcissistic things they will say to get you to stay (in the cycle) to "defend" yourself.
12. **Short and Simple Conversations** -- Cut way back on major "discussions" keeping them to a minimum maybe even with a time limit i.e. "I can talk with you for 10 minutes." Conversations need to be short and simple. This helps you maintain your composure and makes it less likely that you'll get sucked into the old narcissistic cycle. Speak and share in minimalistic ways so they have less information to use against you. You'll actually be able to stay better "connected" emotionally by cutting back on the "narcissistic discussions" you've probably been having on a regular basis.
13. **Be a Broken Record & Exit** -- In addition to NOT constantly trying to explain or defend yourself, develop a few simple but important statements that you repeat over and over then exit! This is about practicing the broken record principle. Decide on one or two key messages that you calmly repeat maybe 2-3 times then physically walk away or they'll suck you into the old narcissistic cycle or arguing, defending, explaining, blaming, etc. (I have clients that have to leave and go for a drive, in order to get out of the situation.) This will take great discipline so practice, practice, practice being a broken record. Your statement might sound something like, "I love you, but I'm not okay with how you are criticizing me." Anytime they criticize you, you could say, "I hear you. I will keep that in mind." Once you say that a couple times, get out of the conversation and out of the house if needed if they tend to pursue and won't let you end the conversation, which is common for a narcissist. Some important mnemonic devices you need to remember in conversations with a narcissistic spouse (or dealing with bullying or any high-conflict conversations) are:
 - a. **JADE** – don't... J = Justify; A = Argue; D = Defend; or E = Explain (this is an Al-Anon 12-step slogan)
 - b. **FOG** – don't do things out of... F = Fear; O = Obligation; or G = Guilt (only do things that you freely choose to do.)
 - c. **BIFF** – keep all conversations... B = Brief; I = Informative; F = Firm; and F = Friendly
14. **Set Boundaries** -- Narcissists don't have healthy boundaries and don't like boundaries because they get in the way of their objectives. Their sense of entitlement, lack of empathy and willingness to exploit make it mandatory to set and maintain healthy boundaries--if you want to have sanity being married to a narcissist. Set up specific boundaries of what you will and won't allow and be fiercely consistent in holding to them. Speak to them simply with no explanation or rationale needed. Setting your boundaries won't be a one-time event. An example of a boundary might be, "I am not okay with you criticizing me, so I'm leaving for a few

hours” then get out with NO further discussion...AT ALL!!! They know what works on you and how to bully you into submission with all their antics. Do the things we’ve mentioned here to break the cycle. Know that things will usually get worse before they get better as you begin to change and set healthier boundaries. (See articles - [11 Ways to Set Boundaries with Narcissists](#) and [Setting Boundaries with a Narcissist](#))

15. **Out-Endure Them** -- Until your spouse realizes that YOU and the “rules of the game” have changed (i.e. they can’t manipulate you like they used to) they will continue to control, bully, guilt, manipulate, gaslight and micromanage you. As you begin to think, speak and act differently with them, you will need to have a mindset of resolutely maintaining these new ways of being no matter how much of a fit they throw or how long it takes to break the cycle. You must out-endure their narcissistic ways. It won’t be easy, but it is required if you want to stay sane, stay married and not be miserable.
16. **Do Things Differently** -- To break the cycle, do something different than what you would normally do. If you would normally apologize. Don’t. If you would normally make a passive aggressive comment. Refrain. The tools above will help you do things differently to break the narcissistic cycle.
17. **Focus on Their Positives** -- While being married to a narcissist is hard, there are still many good things about your spouse. It will serve you well to train your mind to think about and focus on their positives. Keep an ongoing list of every little thing you can think of that you like, love or appreciate about them. You might even share these things with them especially in public settings, which helps them to actually hear and take them in more easily.
18. **Love in Their Love Language** -- Since most clients that want to stay married also want to have a warm and connected relationship, doing things on your spouse’s Love Language list will dramatically help your connection with them. As you change and do the things mentioned here, you will have more inner peace and a greater reservoir or capacity to love someone that may sometimes feel pretty difficult to love and connect with. Let them know you are wanting to love them better. Have them fill out this [Love Language worksheet](#) then strive to do at least one thing on their list each day.

These suggestions are a whole new way to be with your spouse but will bring you greater peace and will help you break free of the narcissistic cycle that you’ve been living for many years. It isn’t easy and it will take much time, effort and energy, but you can create something new—even a thriving relationship with your beloved spouse.

New Responses to Stop Fueling the Narcissistic Cycle

- “Yes, you can share your thoughts, but not if it’s about what I need to do differently.” (Keep them in their own lane/their own business.)
- “I love you and don’t want to lose you but I’m not okay with how you control, manipulate and micromanage me.”
- “I want to be a teammate with you, so we need to attend to my opinions and needs as much as we do yours.”
- “I’m happy to hear what you have to say for a few minutes. As soon as it turns to criticism or correction, I will need to leave.”
- “The best I can do right now is listen. I won’t be able to respond right now but may be able to later.”
- “I hear what you are saying. Thanks for explaining yourself.”
- “I can see that’s your opinion. I can understand that.”

¹ <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/e01-what-is-narcissism/id1209719013?i=1000381869630>

² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/romance-redux/201309/can-narcissists-change>

³ <https://crucibletherapy.com/approach-marital-sexual-therapy>

⁴ <https://crucibletherapy.com/approach-marital-sexual-therapy>

⁵ <https://self-compassion.org/the-three-elements-of-self-compassion-2/>

⁶ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/toxic-relationships/201907/narcissists-are-codependent-too>

⁷ <https://blogs.psychcentral.com/narcissism-decoded/2017/06/11-ways-to-set-boundaries-with-narcissists/>