

Understanding Narcissism: “I come first!”

Narcissism is a complex construct that is talked about frequently. This handout seeks to explore and understand behaviors demonstrated by people who possess narcissistic traits or meet the diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). The more NPD traits, the greater the pathology.

Narcissistic behavior is best considered on a dimensional scale.

Narcissistic traits

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (6% of population)

How Does Narcissism Develop?

Theorists propose two developmental pathways in the development of narcissism.

Parental Devaluation:

The child experiences parental rejection and/or exclusion, or self-absorbed parenting (interacting with child only to meet parent's own needs).

The child realizes their needs will not be met and retreats into a fantasy world, creating a false sense of self-grandiosity. This defense protects the child from subjective **feelings of emptiness and shame**. The child constantly desires admiration and thrills, masking strong unconscious feelings of envy, deprivation, fear, and rage.

Parental Overvaluation:

The child is overly indulged with flattery, attention, or favoritism without the need to reciprocate. The child is led to believe they are lovable for being perfect and develops view of self that is grandiose and special.

The child believes they deserve special treatment from others and fails to learn others have feelings, needs and concerns outside of their own. Their internalized view of being truly unique or perfect creates **great despair and intense shame** when any perceived imperfection, flaw or 'failure' is exposed. The child develops narcissistic defenses to protect the self from being exposed as having flaws.

Defenses work to disguise internal fear.

Core Self:

Fear of being discovered as inadequate or inferior.

Preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited, success, power, beauty, wealth, or ideal love.

Lack of empathy. Impact of behavior on others is underestimated (e.g., abuse) or overestimated (e.g., caring gesture; "I do everything for you!").

Self-entitlement and a belief they deserve special treatment.

Exaggerated achievements and talents (not based on reality or facts).

Relationships are contingent upon gratification to the self (no reciprocity and often shallow).

Demands recognition. Strives for admiration and attention.

Takes advantage of others, lies and/or deceives to gratify own needs.

Patronizes others. Views others as inferior.

Lack of interest in learning about others unless beneficial to self.

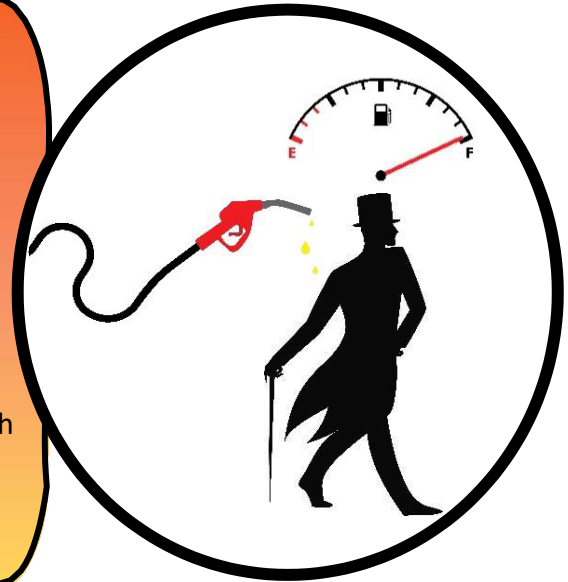
Arrogant. Blames others and takes no responsibility unless there is a perceived gain.

Behaviours promote grandiosity and keep others at a 'safe' distance.

What is Narcissistic Fuel?

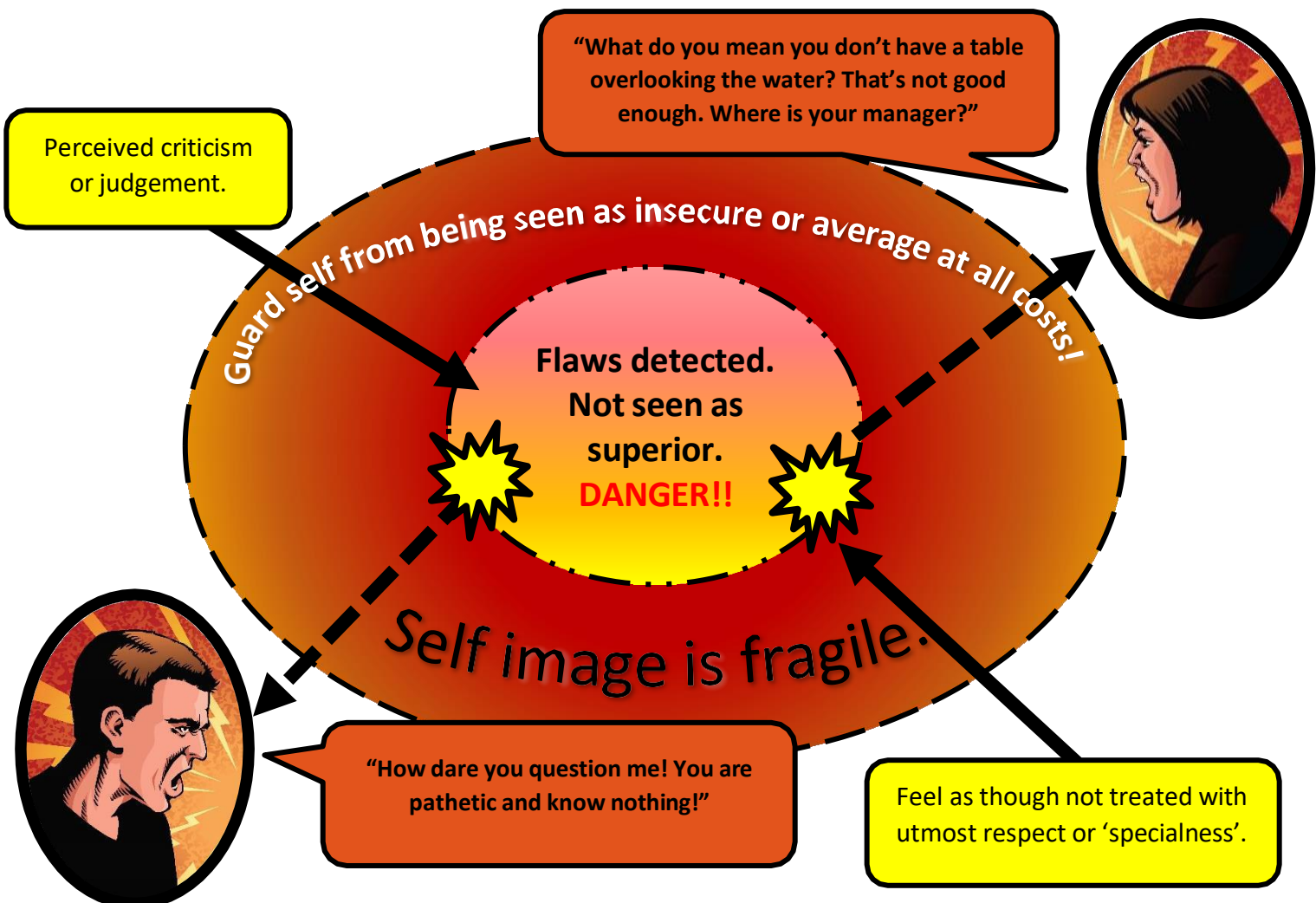
Given exaggerated views of superiority and entitlement, people with narcissism expect that others treat them as special, unique and/or gifted. Narcissistic people can be very adept at using superficial charm to 'lure' and/or attract people who may be manipulated into fulfilling the narcissists fantasy of being seen as exceptional. They can be highly seductive and present a narrative that has people believing a relationship with them could be exciting, adventurous and at times even 'dangerously fun'.

Narcissists will frequently associate with others they see as exceptional, believing only fellow 'superior' individuals can understand their own greatness. **Provided you continue to 'FUEL' a narcissist's inflated ego** with flattery, devoted attention or by meeting the narcissist's pre-requisite of being considered exceptional by others (e.g., fame, highly educated or wealthy) the narcissist will feel content you are topping up their fuel.



What is Narcissistic Rage?

Narcissists are acutely sensitive to the reactions of others. The moment a narcissist detects possible criticism or judgement, they will react. Their fear of being perceived and/or discovered as less than exceptional or superior can lead to **overreactions** and/or aggression. The aggressive response to a 'narcissistic injury' is frequently referred to as narcissistic rage. Once enraged, a narcissist will struggle to stop. Responses can range from smugness, contempt, sulkiness, passive aggressiveness or full-blown rage. They are quick to blame others and do not take responsibility for their harmful behavior (unless they feel a positive result for themselves may occur).

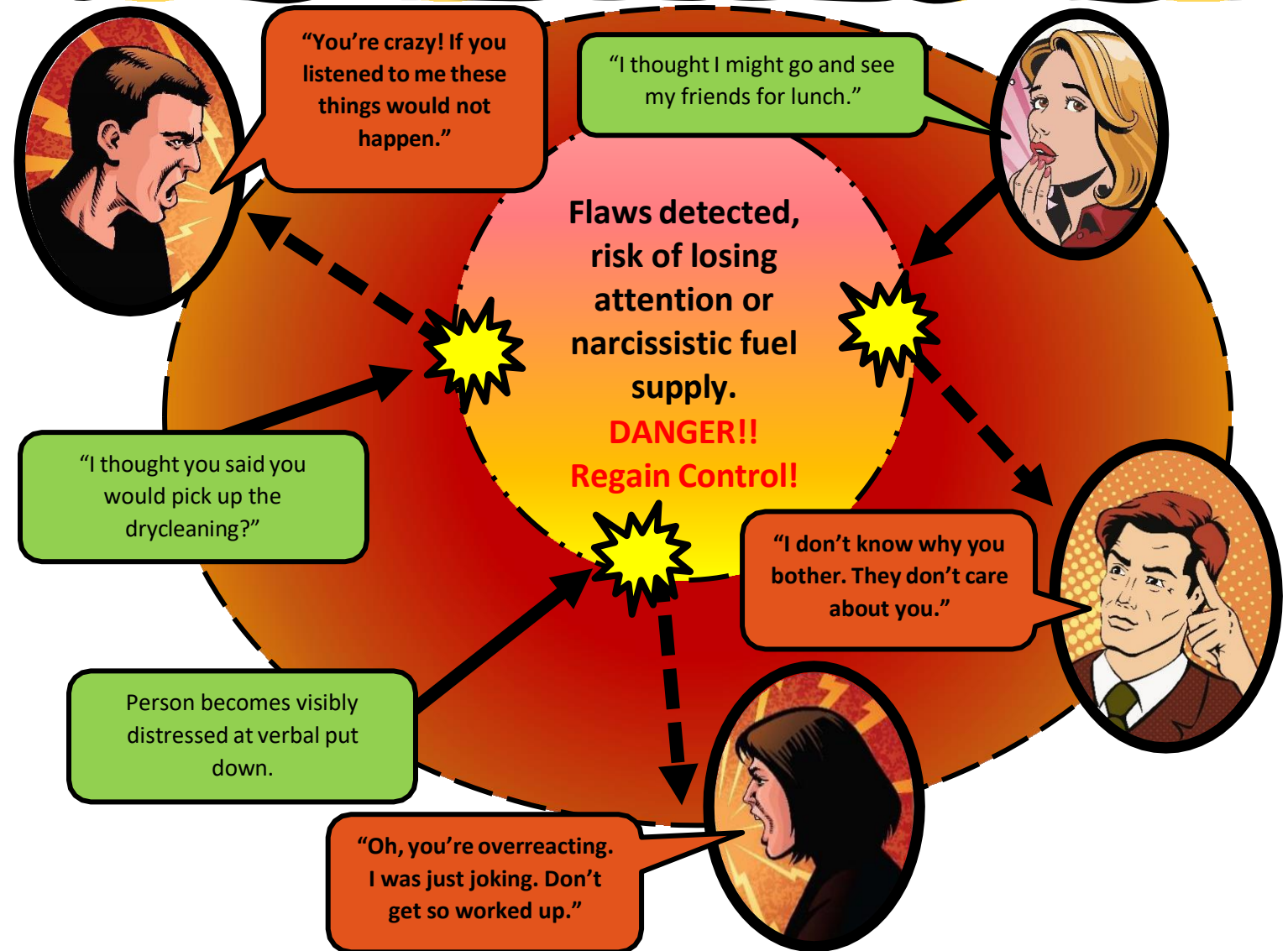


What is gaslighting?

Gaslighting is emotional and psychological abuse. A person who gaslights is attempting to make their target question their own sanity, memories, perceptions, and self-worth. Narcissistic gaslighters can be extremely clever at pushing your buttons by knowing what your vulnerabilities are. They will lie, get defensive, discredit you, blame, and twist the facts, rarely admitting fault. It can be hard to determine if all people with narcissistic traits are explicitly aware of what they are doing when they attempt to manipulate with gaslighting. It is a dangerous form of abuse that can be extremely distressing and harmful.

The goal of narcissistic gaslighting is largely twofold:

- Disguise one's own flaws and,
- Destabilize the victim and lower their self-confidence to gain control.



Different Types of Narcissism?

Most of us possess minor traits of narcissism. For those who demonstrate numerous symptoms, three main categories have been defined:

Overt Narcissists tend to parade their narcissism for all to see. They can be exploitive, competitive, entitled, arrogant, outgoing, and overbearing.

Covert Narcissists are extremely clever at disguising their narcissistic traits. They work hard to hide their real intentions and trick others into believing they are honest, altruistic, and empathic. By pretending to be a more likable version of themselves, they can achieve their goals, protecting their insecurities.

Malignant Narcissists tend to demonstrate a more severe form of narcissism. They can be vindictive, cruel, paranoid, and aggressive. Once they have control in a relationship, they will do almost anything to maintain it.

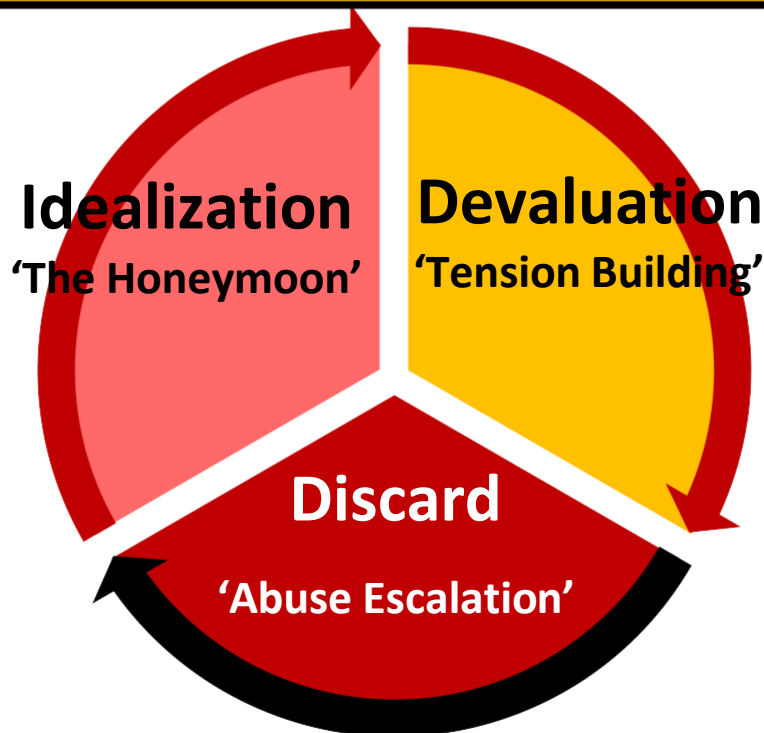
Cycle of Narcissistic Abuse

Stage 1: Idealization

Narcissists can be adept and persuasive lovers. They use superficial charm and strong social skills to make a great first impression. During the idealization (or 'honeymoon') phase, a narcissist will **'love bomb' and groom** their new romantic interest. They may seduce with elaborate gifts, use excessive flattery, make grand romantic gestures including early expressions of commitment and marriage. The goal is to secure the object of their desire. It is a game they are not willing to lose. The new partner is in a whirlwind of intense sexual chemistry having been swept off their feet and put on a pedestal. The narcissist may over-share details of a traumatic childhood and 'crazy' ex-partners, proclaiming they have never felt this way before. They may act over-protectively under the guise of 'love', slowly isolating their new partner from their family and friends. The narcissist may now start to test boundaries and make apologies for inappropriate behaviors with promises to change or seek therapy.

Stage 2: Devaluation

As time ensues, the new partner may express discontent with inappropriate behaviors (after all no one is perfect). A simple bid to reinstate a boundary is enough to inflict an 'injury' to the narcissist's fragile ego. The narcissist will respond with rage, anger or any means to re-gain control and power within the relationship. Gaslighting may escalate and the narcissist will attempt to undermine, punish, and devalue their partner, seeking compliance from them. The partner may begin to question their value, become depressed or anxious and operate as if 'walking on eggshells'. Sadly, the narcissist may use their partners increasing emotional distress to attract sympathy from others, justifying their behaviors and betrayal.



Stage 3: Discard

As the relationship progresses, the expectation of increased intimacy and connection 'triggers' the narcissist. They will likely lose interest in the relationship, prioritizing power over feelings of vulnerability and closeness. The narcissist will project their own feelings of shame and insecurity on their partner and possibly increase acts of aggression and/or violence. They may even use their partner's increased distress as confirmation that their partner is 'crazy' and the cause of their problems. To the dismay of their partner, the narcissist may 'disappear' or breakup without warning. The narcissist may have already begun 'Stage 1' with another unsuspecting partner. Sometimes they will return, beginning the dysfunctional cycle again.

Do Narcissists Know What They Are Doing and Other Common Questions:

Do narcissists fall in love?

Narcissists may **show great passion** in the early stages of dating. However, the passion they are experiencing is based on the 'fantasy' they have created of perfect love. It is a love not of another person, **but of a 'romantic ideal'**. The love fantasy supports the narcissist's ego and self-esteem as they like to believe no one else is as special or brilliant enough to experience something so amazing. They will enjoy the positive attention and sexual satisfaction so long as they are feeling in control and treated as superior (and/or better than others). It is rare to see a narcissist sustain a romantic relationship for longer than 6 months to a few years. They struggle as problems or differences within the relationship arise. They can't be wrong and quickly lose interest as the unrealistic fantasy they projected onto the relationship fades.

Do narcissists know what they are doing?

Yes, and not really. Narcissists use emotionally manipulative ways to meet their needs for narcissistic supply (fuel). Just like a young child who tantrums to get attention, narcissistic defenses are emotionally immature. Research indicates they know what they are doing on a mental (thinking) level, but they are unable to understand on an emotional level. Narcissists cannot be wrong, and their defenses will make them identify as the victim in the situation, irrespective of their actions. Interestingly, they show enough awareness to feign innocence when necessary.

Can narcissists feel empathy?

Yes, narcissists are capable of feeling empathy under certain circumstances. Generally, narcissists are simply unwilling to recognize or identify the feelings and needs of another. They are too busy upholding their defense of being unique and special. If empathizing means they need to admit fault, they most often will not show empathy.

Are You in a Relationship with a Narcissist?	Y/N
They were charming at first	
They dominate the conversation and tell you how great they are	
They expect special treatment and things to be done their way	
They show little interest in your feelings or needs	
They lack empathy when you are distressed	
They don't have any (or many) long-term friends	
They lack reliability and follow through	
They are self-centered, impatient and want instant gratification	
They break rules and violate boundaries	
They manipulate others	
They constantly put others down	
They react poorly when you don't give them what they want	
They lack personal responsibility	
They lack remorse	
They attempt to control their image (especially in public)	
They don't care about problems that don't directly involve them	
Your relationship revolves around them	
They get offended with any criticism (small or large)	
They always offer excuses	
They need a lot of attention from you	
They need to win every argument	

If you answered yes to many of the questions above, you are likely dating a narcissist. Every person deserves to be treated with compassion and warmth. Suggestions for you include, strengthening your support system, seeking professional therapy, and working to set appropriate boundaries whilst building your self-worth. You matter!