**Narcissism 101: Terminology**

**ACoNs** This acronym stands for “adult children of narcissists.” It is commonly used in the narcissism survivor community.

**Cluster B Personality Disorders** Mental health professionals group personality disorders into three clusters. According to the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental* Disorders (DSM-V), there are four Cluster B personality disorders, including narcissistic personality disorder, antisocial personality disorder, borderline personality disorder, and histrionic personality disorder. Often an individual with one personality disorder will exhibit traits of one or more other disorders.

**Cognitive Dissonance** The narcissist’s externalized, manufactured identity is built on lies and denial, and s/he expects family members to accept her/his version of the “truth.” What this means for the narcissist’s partner and children is that they find themselves in “opposite land,” where they are told (usually through a range of manipulative tactics) that “reality” is different from or even the opposite of what they feel and perceive. This feature of narcissism produces a cognitive dissonance in others, who experience a profoundly disorienting gap between what they perceive and what the narcissist says happened—black is white, good is bad, false is true. Particularly in young children, cognitive dissonance is extremely traumatic, leading to self-doubt and disassociation.

**CPTSD** This stands for Complex PostTraumatic Stress Disorder, a condition common in narcissistic abuse victims, as well as in people with pathological narcissism. CPTSD includes a wide range of disabling symptoms, including some or all of the following disturbances:

* hypervigilance;
* generalized fear, anxiety, and agitation;
* overreactivity;
* insomnia;
* nightmares and/or night terrors;
* self-isolation;
* difficulty trusting;
* self-destructive behavior; and
* intrusive thoughts.

**Denial** This is a compulsive feature of narcissism, whereby the narcissist willfully believes or pretends that traumatic events or circumstances do not exist or did not happen, even when presented with evidence to the contrary.

**Devaluation** Because of their emotionally primitive perfect-or-worthless thinking (stuck at the developmental level of a young child) and their insistence on unattainable perfection, narcissists in relationships (with partners, family members, or friends) nearly inevitably become disillusioned. And because they lack a moral compass (again, like the stunted children they are), they do not hesitate to express their disappointment in a range of devaluing hostile behaviors, including judgment, belittlement, and rage, if not outright abandonment.

**Divide and Conquer** This is a primary strategy narcissists use to assert control, particularly within their family, to create divisions among individuals. This weakens and isolates family members, making it easier for the narcissist to manipulate and dominate. The narcissist sets up an environment of competition and terror in which individuals are trying to avoid attack, often at one another’s expense. S/he favors some and scapegoats others, breeding mistrust and resentment among siblings or between the other parent and children. Such dynamics also can play out in a work setting, where a boss uses the same kinds of tactics to control and manipulate employees.

**Enabler** Usually a partner/spouse of the narcissist, enablers “normalize” and even perpetuate the narcissist’s grandiose persona, extreme sense of entitlement, and haughty attitude and behavior toward others by absorbing the abuse and acting as an apologist for it. Enablers are always avoiding conflict and attack while often also seeking rewards such as affection, praise, power, gifts, or money. Enablers may be under the delusion that they are the only ones who can truly understand the narcissist and oftentimes sacrifice or scapegoat their children to placate the narcissist.

**Fauxpology** Because narcissists refuse accountability and believe they are always right, they rarely if ever genuinely apologize. Instead they may toss out a false apology, or fauxpology, meant to deflect, induce guilt, or antagonize. Examples: “I’m sorry you think I’m such a disappointment as a mother,” “I’m sorry you interpreted something so innocent as unfair,” “I’m sorry you are so sensitive,” “I’m sorry you can’t understand how others feel,” or “I’m sorry you are so angry.”

**Flying Monkeys**  Like the flying monkeys who served the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz*, flying monkeys in the narcissistic family are **enablers** who help with the narcissist’s dirty work, often to avoid being targeted themselves and/or to benefit from a certain level of bestowed privilege. The most manipulable types make the best flying monkeys. They may be children or other relatives.

**Gaslighting** This is a form of psychological abuse in which narcissists systematically undermine other people’s mental state by leading them to question their perceptions of reality. Narcissists use lies and false information to erode their victims’ belief in their own judgment and, ultimately, their sanity. Common gaslighting techniques come in the form of denying and projecting: After an abusive incident, narcissists refuse responsibility, blame the abused, or outright deny that the abuse took place. They may say things like, “You’re too sensitive,” “You’re crazy,” “That’s not what happened,” “Why can’t you let anything go,” or “You made me do it.” The term *gaslighting* comes from the 1944 Hollywood film *Gaslight,* a classic depiction of this kind of brainwashing.

**Golden Child** This is a child singled out for favoritism, such as special privileges, more attention, high regard, exemption from discipline, and exemption from certain chores and responsibilities. Such favoritism is typically at the direct expense of a disfavored **scapegoated** child.

**Gray Rock** Going “gray rock” is a boundary-setting and conflict-avoidance strategy that can be effective in dealing with narcissists. It simply means making yourself dull and nonreactive, like a colorless unmoving rock. In gray-rock mode, you engage minimally with the narcissist and his/her circus of enablers/flying monkeys. You do not show or share your thoughts or feelings. You do not react to antagonism and manipulation. In short, you make yourself of little interest to the narcissist.

**Hoovering** Since narcissists are by nature pathologically self-centered and often stunningly cruel, they ultimately make those around them unhappy, if not miserable, and eventually drive many people away. If people pull away or try to go no contact, narcissists may attempt to hoover (as in vacuum suck) them back within their realm of control. They try to hoover through a variety of means, from promising to reform their behavior, to acting unusually solicitous, to dangling carrots such as gifts or money. However, if they find replacement sources of supply they may simply walk away from old ones.

**Hypervigilance** To cope with a chaotic and often psychologically and physically abusive environment, people close to narcissism adapt by becoming hypervigilant to threat or attack. They are always on guard, seeking to anticipate and potentially avoid being in the line of fire. Hypervigilance is emotionally and physiologically debilitating because it drains the body’s natural defense system by constantly overloading it. Hypervigilance often leads to **Complex PostTraumatic Stress Disorder** (CPTSD) and illness. Narcissists themselves are hypervigilant to anything that might trigger their **narcissistic injury**.

**Idealization** Narcissists see the world and others in binary terms—good or bad, black or white. They tend to either idealize or devalue others. Parents who suffer from narcissism often idealize one **golden child** and **devalue**, or **scapegoat**, others. Their romantic relationships are characterized by a pattern of idealization followed by devaluation and oftentimes discard. When they identify a potential mate, they initially see them as perfect. When the false promise of perfection begins to break down, they cannot see their mate realistically as having a mix of good and flawed qualities. Instead, bitter and punishing disillusionment follows.

**Lost Child** This is a child who copes with the family narcissism by drawing little attention, positive or negative, staying under the radar, and making few demands.

**Mascot** This child plays the cute or funny “jester” role, diffusing family tensions without making demands.

**Narcissistic Injury** Individuals with **narcissistic personality disorder** typically suffer invalidating emotional injury during their early years that interferes with the healthy development of a stable identify, sense of self-esteem, and emotional empathy. Conditional caregiving because of loss, rejection, abuse, neglect, or overindulgence (or a messy mix of those things) and a possible genetic predisposition is thought to be at the root of narcissistic injury, leading to foundational feelings of worthlessness.

**Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD)** This is a **Cluster B personality disorder** characterized by the following impairments: overreliance on others for self-definition; overreliance on others for regulation of self-esteem; lack of empathy; exploitative of others; grandiose delusions; exaggerated entitlement; excessive attention seeking; and excessive admiration seeking.

**Narcissistic Rage** Narcissistic personalities often react with rage when their underlying feelings of vulnerability and shame are triggered. They tend to take even small slights, which most people would easily brush off, as intensely humiliating. When this happens, their fabricated “perfect” self and overblown feelings of entitlement are threatened, setting off a wild rage response. Narcissistic rage is terrifying, sometimes physically violent, and far beyond normal anger. It is emotionally and physically traumatizing for those on the receiving end, particularly children, who naturally blame themselves for adults’ reactions.

**Narcissistic Supply** People with **narcissistic personality disorder** depend emotionally on others to sustain their sense of identity and regulate their self-esteem. They get their narcissistic supply either by idealizing and emulating others or by devaluing and asserting their superiority over others. Anyone they can manipulate—a partner, child, friend, or colleague—is a potential source of supply. Without suppliers, narcissists are empty husks. If a source of supply pulls away, they may attempt to **hoover** them back and/or look for other sources.

**Neglect** This is a passive form of abuse in which caregivers ignore the emotional, psychological, and/or physical needs of their dependent(s). It can range from not providing adequate food or shelter to failing to provide affection, supervision, or protection.

**No Contact** People who have been abused by a narcissist may choose to cut ties altogether with that person. Typically people who end up going no contact have had their boundaries violated in traumatic ways that eventually push them to shut down all communication with the narcissist. For **adult children of narcissists**, going no contact is typically a deeply ambivalent and painful choice that feels like a matter of survival in order to break the cycle of hurt and to attempt to heal. Going no contact, especially from a parent, is difficult to explain to people who don’t understand narcissism and its devastating effects, further isolating victims.

**NPD** This is the acronym for narcissistic personality disorder.

**Object Constancy** People with **narcissistic personality disorder** suffer from a lack of object constancy, or the ability to sustain in real time an awareness of overall positive feelings and past positive experiences with people in their lives when they are disappointed or hurt by them in some way. When triggered, the narcissist’s continuity of perception collapses into present-moment reactive emotion. If his/her child forgets to do a chore, for example, the narcissist father may become enraged and punish him/her, seeing the behavior as spiteful or irresponsible even if the child is usually conscientious.

**Parentification** This is a role reversal whereby a parent inappropriately looks to a child, usually the oldest or most capable, to take on parental roles and responsibilities in the family. Narcissists often parentify a child to meet their emotional, physical, and/or sexual needs. Parentification is an extreme violation of children’s boundaries, burdening them with adult responsibilities. A parentified child may be expected to play the role of confidante, therapist, or surrogate spouse, as well as perform adult duties, such as caring for younger siblings, cooking, cleaning, managing finances, or earning money for the family.

**Projection** Simply put, projection is attributing one’s own feelings, actions, or traits onto someone else. Projection is a compulsive aspect of narcissism. Through projection, narcissists blame the victim and deny accountability. If they lie, you are the liar; if they are childish, you are immature; if they insult you, you are critical; if they demand reassurance, you are insecure. Projection is especially traumatic for children, who internalize the belief that they are like their abuser or hurting the person who is actually abusing them. Narcissists also may project their ideal beliefs about themselves onto others, such as their **golden child** or someone they admire. Narcissists project both consciously and unconsciously.

**Scapegoat** This is a child (or children) singled out unfairly for disfavored treatment in the narcissistic family. Scapegoats are typically blamed for family problems, disciplined or punished disproportionately, burdened with excessive chores and responsibilities, and subjected to unmerited negative treatment.

**Smear Campaign** Narcissists engage in smear campaigns to discredit others within their family or social sphere. Narcissists may smear another person because that person sees through their mask, they are trying to conceal preemptively their own abuse of that person, or they are taking revenge because the person offended or rejected them. Narcissists may conduct a smear campaign for lesser reasons, such as jealousy or resentment. Narcissists can be quite calculating in their process of discrediting and socially isolating their target, using innuendo, gossip, and outright lies to family, friends, neighbors, and community members. Narcissists won’t hesitate to smear an ex to their children, a scapegoated child to friends and relatives, or a colleague to other colleagues. The smear campaign usually happens behind the victim’s back, often with the assistance of the narcissist’s **enablers/flying monkeys**.

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