

# What is narcissistic personality disorder (NPD)?

The word narcissism gets tossed around a lot in our selfie-obsessed, celebrity-driven culture, often to describe someone who seems excessively vain or full of themselves. But in psychological terms, narcissism doesn't mean self-love—at least not of a genuine sort. It's more accurate to say that people with narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) are in love with an idealized, grandiose image of themselves. And they're in love with this inflated self-image precisely because it allows them to avoid deep feelings of insecurity. But propping up their delusions of grandeur takes a lot of work—and that's where the dysfunctional attitudes and behaviors come in.

Narcissistic personality disorder involves a pattern of self-centered, arrogant thinking and behavior, a lack of empathy and consideration for other people, and an excessive need for admiration. Others often describe people with NPD as cocky, manipulative, selfish, patronizing, and demanding. This way of thinking and behaving surfaces in every area of the narcissist's life: from work and friendships to family and love relationships.

People with narcissistic personality disorder are extremely resistant to changing their behavior, even when it's causing them problems. Their tendency is to turn the blame on to others. What's more, they are extremely sensitive and react badly to even the slightest criticisms, disagreements, or perceived slights, which they view as personal attacks. For the people in the narcissist's life, it's often easier just to go along with their demands to avoid the coldness and rages. However, by understanding more about narcissistic personality disorder, you can spot the narcissists in your life, protect yourself from their power plays, and establish healthier boundaries.

## Signs and symptoms of narcissistic personality disorder

### Grandiose sense of self-importance

Grandiosity is the defining characteristic of narcissism. More than just arrogance or vanity, grandiosity is an unrealistic sense of superiority. Narcissists believe they are unique or “special” and can only be understood by other special people. What's more, they are too good for anything average or ordinary. They only want to associate and be associated with other high-status people, places, and things.

Narcissists also believe that they're better than everyone else and expect recognition as such—even when they've done nothing to earn it. They will often exaggerate or outright lie about their achievements and talents. And when they talk about work or relationships, all you'll hear is how much they contribute, how great they are, and how lucky the people in their lives are to have them. They are the undisputed star and everyone else is at best a bit player.

### Lives in a fantasy world that supports their delusions of grandeur

Since reality doesn't support their grandiose view of themselves, narcissists live in a fantasy world propped up by distortion, self-deception, and magical thinking. They spin self-glorifying fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, attractiveness, and ideal love that make them feel special and in control. These fantasies protect them from feelings of inner emptiness and shame, so facts and opinions that contradict them are ignored or rationalized away. Anything that threatens to burst the fantasy bubble is met with extreme defensiveness and even rage, so those around the narcissist learn to tread carefully around their denial of reality.

## Needs constant praise and admiration

A narcissist's sense of superiority is like a balloon that gradually loses air without a steady stream of applause and recognition to keep it inflated. The occasional compliment is not enough. Narcissists need constant food for their ego, so they surround themselves with people who are willing to cater to their obsessive craving for affirmation. These relationships are very one-sided. It's all about what the admirer can do for the narcissist, never the other way around. And if there is ever an interruption or diminishment in the admirer's attention and praise, the narcissist treats it as a betrayal.

## Sense of entitlement

Because they consider themselves special, narcissists expect favorable treatment as their due. They truly believe that whatever they want, they should get. They also expect the people around them to automatically comply with their every wish and whim. That is their only value. If you don't anticipate and meet their every need, then you're useless. And if you have the nerve to defy their will or "selfishly" ask for something in return, prepare yourself for aggression, outrage, or the cold shoulder.

## Exploits others without guilt or shame

Narcissists never develop the ability to identify with the feelings of others—to put themselves in other people's shoes. In other words, they lack empathy. In many ways, they view the people in their lives as objects—there to serve their needs. As a consequence, they don't think twice about taking advantage of others to achieve their own ends. Sometimes this interpersonal exploitation is malicious, but often it is simply oblivious. Narcissists simply don't think about how their behavior affects others. And if you point it out, they still won't truly get it. The only thing they understand is their own needs.

## Frequently demeans, intimidates, bullies, or belittles others

Narcissists feel threatened whenever they encounter someone who appears to have something they lack—especially those who are confident and popular. They're also threatened by people who don't kowtow to them or who challenge them in any way. Their defense mechanism is contempt. The only way to neutralize the threat and prop up their own sagging ego is to put those people down. They may do it in a patronizing or dismissive way as if to demonstrate how little the other person means to them. Or they may go on the attack with insults, name-calling, bullying, and threats to force the other person back into line.

## Dealing with a narcissist: Don't fall for the fantasy

Narcissists can be very magnetic and charming. They are very good at creating a fantastical, flattering self-image that draw us in. We're attracted to their apparent confidence and lofty dreams—and the shakier our own self-esteem, the more seductive the allure. It's easy to get caught up in their web, thinking that they will fulfill our longing to feel more important, more alive. But it's just a fantasy, and a costly one at that.

Your needs won't be fulfilled (or even recognized). It's important to remember that narcissists aren't looking for partners; they're looking for obedient admirers. Your sole value to the narcissist is as someone who can tell them how great they are to prop up their insatiable ego. Your desires and feelings don't count.

Look at the way the narcissist treats others. If the narcissist lies, manipulates, hurts, and disrespects others, he or she will eventually treat you the same way. Don't fall for the fantasy that you're different and will be spared.

Take off the rose-colored glasses. It's important to see the narcissist in your life for who they really are, not who you want them to be. Stop making excuses for bad behavior or minimizing the hurt it's causing you. Denial will not make it go away. The reality is that narcissists are very resistant to change, so the true question you must ask yourself is whether you can live like this indefinitely.

Focus on your own dreams. Instead of losing yourself in the narcissist's delusions, focus on the things you want for yourself. What do you want to change in your life? What gifts would you like to develop? What fantasies do you need to give up in order to create a more fulfilling reality?

### Set healthy boundaries

Healthy relationships are based on mutual respect and caring. But narcissists aren't capable of true reciprocity in their relationships. It isn't just that they're not willing; they truly aren't able. They don't see you. They don't hear you. They don't recognize you as someone who exists outside of their own needs. Because of this, narcissists regularly violate the boundaries of others. What's more, they do so with an absolute sense of entitlement.

Narcissists think nothing of going through or borrowing your possessions without asking, snooping through your mail and personal correspondence, eavesdropping on conversations, barging in without an invitation, stealing your ideas, and giving you unwanted opinions and advice. They may even tell you what to think and feel. It's important to recognize these violations for what they are, so you can begin to create healthier boundaries where your needs are respected.

Make a plan. If you have a long-standing pattern of letting others violate your boundaries, it's not easy to take back control. Set yourself up for success by carefully considering your goals and the potential obstacles. What are the most important changes you hope to achieve? Is there anything you've tried in the past with the narcissist that worked? Anything that hasn't? What is the balance of power between you and how will that impact your plan? How will you enforce your new boundaries? Answering these questions will help you evaluate your options and develop a realistic plan.

Consider a gentle approach. If preserving your relationship with the narcissist is important to you, you will have to tread softly. By pointing out their hurtful or dysfunctional behavior, you are damaging their self-image of perfection. Try to deliver your message calmly, respectfully, and as gently as possible. Focus on how their behavior makes you feel, rather than on their motivations and intentions. If they respond with anger and defensiveness, try to remain calm. Walk away if need be and revisit the conversation later.

Don't set a boundary unless you're willing to keep it. You can count on the narcissist to rebel against new boundaries and test your limits, so be prepared. Follow up with any consequences specified. If you back down, you're sending the message that you don't need to be taken seriously.

Be prepared for other changes in the relationship. The narcissist will feel threatened and upset by your attempts to take control of your life. They are used to calling the shots. To compensate, they may step up their demands in other aspects of the relationship, distance themselves to punish you, or attempt to manipulate or charm you into giving up the new boundaries. It's up to you to stand firm.

### Don't take things personally

To protect themselves from feelings of inferiority and shame, narcissists must always deny their shortcomings, cruelties, and mistakes. Often, they will do so by projecting their own faults on to others. It's very upsetting to get blamed for something that's not your fault or be characterized with negative traits you don't possess. But as difficult as it may be, try not to take it personally. It really isn't about you.

Don't buy into the narcissist's version of who you are. Narcissists don't live in reality, and that includes their views of other people. Don't let their shame and blame game undermine your self-esteem. Refuse to accept undeserved responsibility, blame, or criticism. That negativity is the narcissist's to keep.

Don't argue with a narcissist. When attacked, the natural instinct is to defend yourself and prove the narcissist wrong. But no matter how rational you are or how sound your argument, they are unlikely to hear you. And arguing the point may escalate the situation in a very unpleasant way. Don't waste your breath. Simply tell the narcissist you disagree with their assessment, then move on.

Know yourself. The best defense against the insults and projections of the narcissist is a strong sense of self. When you know your own strengths and weaknesses, it's easier to reject any unfair criticisms leveled against you.

Let go of the need for approval. It's important to detach from the narcissist's opinion and any desire to please or appease them at the expense of yourself. You need to be okay with knowing the truth about yourself, even if the narcissist sees the situation differently.

Look for support and purpose elsewhere

If you're going to stay in a relationship with a narcissist, be honest with yourself about what you can—and can't—expect. A narcissist isn't going to change into someone who truly values you, so you'll need to look elsewhere for emotional support and personal fulfillment.

Learn what healthy relationships look and feel like. If you come from a narcissistic family, you may not have a very good sense of what a healthy give-and-take relationship is. The narcissistic pattern of dysfunction may feel comfortable to you. Just remind yourself that as familiar as it feels, it also makes you feel bad. In a reciprocal relationship, you will feel respected, listened to, and free to be yourself.

Spend time with people who give you an honest reflection of who you are. In order to maintain perspective and avoid buying into the narcissist's distortions, it's important to spend time with people who know you as you really are and validate your thoughts and feelings.

Make new friendships, if necessary, outside the narcissist's orbit. Some narcissists isolate the people in their lives in order to better control them. If this is your situation, you'll need to invest time into rebuilding lapsed friendships or cultivating new relationships.

Look for meaning and purpose in work, volunteering, and hobbies. Instead of looking to the narcissist to make you feel good about yourself, pursue meaningful activities that make use of your talents and allow you to contribute.

How to leave a narcissist

Ending an abusive relationship is never easy. Ending one with a narcissist can be especially difficult as they can be so charming and charismatic—at least at the start of the relationship or if you threaten to leave. It's easy to become disoriented by the narcissist's manipulative behavior, caught up in the need to seek their approval, or even to feel "gaslighted" and doubt your own judgement. If you're codependent, your desire to be loyal may trump even your need to preserve your safety and sense of self. But it's important to remember that no one deserves to be bullied, threatened, or verbally and emotionally abused in a relationship. There are ways to escape the narcissist—and the guilt and self-blame—and begin the process of healing.

Educate yourself about narcissistic personality disorder. The more you understand, the better you'll

be able to recognize the techniques a narcissist may use to keep you in the relationship. When you threaten to leave, a narcissist will often resurrect the flattery and adoration (“love bombing”) that caused you to be interested in them in the first place. Or they’ll make grand promises about changing their behavior that they have no intention of keeping.

Write down the reasons why you’re leaving. Being clear on why you need to end the relationship can help prevent you from being sucked back in. Keep your list somewhere handy, such as on your phone, and refer to it when you’re starting to have self-doubts or the narcissist is laying on the charm or making outlandish promises.

Seek support. During your time together, the narcissist may have damaged your relationships with friends and family or limited your social life. But whatever your circumstances, you’re not alone. Even if you can’t reach out to old friends, you can find help from support groups or domestic violence helplines and shelters.

Don’t make empty threats. It’s a better tactic to accept that the narcissist won’t change and when you’re ready, simply leave. Making threats or pronouncements will only forewarn the narcissist and enable them to make it more difficult for you to get away.

Seek immediate help if you’re physically threatened or abused. Call 911 in the U.S. or your country’s local emergency service.

For more tips on leaving, read [How to Get Out of an Abusive Relationship](#).

After you’ve left

Leaving a narcissist can be a huge blow to their sense of entitlement and self-importance. Their huge ego still needs to be fed, so they’ll often continue trying to exert control over you. If charm and “love bombing” doesn’t work, they may resort to threats, denigrating you to mutual friends and acquaintances, or stalking you, on social media or in person.

Cut off all contact with the narcissist. The more contact you have with them, the more hope you’ll give them that they can reel you back in. It’s safer to block their calls, texts, and emails, and disconnect from them on social media. If you have children together, have others with you for any scheduled custody handovers.

Allow yourself to grieve. Breakups can be extremely painful, whatever the circumstances. Even ending a toxic relationship can leave you feeling sad, angry, confused, and grieving the loss of shared dreams and commitments. Healing can take time, so go easy on yourself and turn to family and friends for support.

Don’t expect the narcissist to share your grief. Once the message sinks in that you will no longer be feeding their ego, the narcissist will likely soon move on to exploit someone else. They won’t feel loss or guilt, just that never-ending need for praise and admiration. This is no reflection on you, but rather an illustration of how very one-sided their relationships always are.