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## Going head to head with a narcissist during a divorce proceeding

Going through a divorce is often an emotionally and financially challenging experience regardless of the circumstances. However, navigating the divorce process with a spouse who has a narcissistic personality makes the process even more difficult. Fortunately, there are strategies to help ameliorate the stress and challenges clients may feel when divorcing a narcissist.

### Narcissistic Personality Disorder

Mental health professionals use the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) as a diagnostic tool, which categorizes narcissistic personality disorder as the individual showing pervasive patterns of grandiosity, needing admiration, a sense of self-importance, entitlement, power and a lack of empathy.

Narcissists have difficulty forming intimate relationships due to these impairments in self and interpersonal functioning. Additionally, narcissists are interpersonally exploitative and manipulative.

### What to expect

Narcissistic personality disorder is consistent across situations and stable throughout time. Being aware of the personality traits of a narcissist assists attorneys in helping their clients learn how to best negotiate with a narcissist and accept the fact that their behavior will not change.

For most people, divorce is an extremely emotional process. For a narcissist, divorce is seen as an opportunity to manipulate and emotionally torment the other spouse. They use subtle coercion and fear tactics to obtain control of the divorce process.

Narcissists commonly see themselves as victims, when in reality, they are the oppressor in the relationship. Typically, their sense of self-entitlement and tendency to exaggerate make them uncooperative and difficult to deal with.

However, they often excel at manipulating and charming their attorney and frequently, the judge. Additionally, narcissists are highly competitive and feel as though they must "win" every situation.

By way of example, narcissists

feel as if they are above the law and refuse to provide any financial documentation or follow court orders. Negotiating is not an option considered. They find satisfaction in dragging out the divorce process and accumulating legal fees.

Many narcissists use their children as leverage and are unable to recognize placing them in the middle of a divorce is a problem. They tend to manipulate their children to obtain information about the other parent. Some narcissists present false allegations to gain an advantage in the divorce process.

Their lack of empathy destroys any care or concern they could possibly have for the other parent or their children.

Narcissists firmly believe their needs are superior to all others and are accustomed to easily convincing people to believe whatever they want. Be mindful of their manipulative ways and avoid playing into their hands, adding fuel to their fire by arguing with a nar-

### COLLABORATIVE CONCEPTS



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or violate them, having tangible boundaries will help your client avoid being taken advantage of and fighting pointless battles.

### Planning time

Narcissists often attempt to thwart attorneys' efforts to obtain financial information. As a result, you may find a narcissist attempting to sell property, transfer funds or purposefully misplace important documents. To avoid such is-

sists are ineffective and leave their spouse believing they will cooperate and agree on terms and then rescind agreements for seemingly no reason. If the narcissistic spouse refuses to cooperate and sign an agreement previously reached, the attorney must document all negotiations.

This may be future evidence of the narcissist's unwillingness to cooperate and show the litigious behavior with increased fees.

Reduce the narcissist's power to manipulate and control the situation by obtaining court orders on temporary matters. Narcissists often violate court orders believing they are above the law. Remind your client to keep diligent notes of any and all violations. Work with your client on creating an open line of communication so the client feels comfortable sharing the same.

Encourage your client to avoid verbal communication with the narcissist. Ensure the client keeps a file of all e-mails and text exchanges should you choose to introduce them into evidence later.

Written communication may lessen the narcissist's tendency to lie or abuse a situation. With that in mind, instruct your client only to respond to e-mails or text messages which are absolutely necessary and to avoid engaging in toxic conversations.

### Remain calm

Dealing with a narcissist is extremely frustrating, however, the solution is to combat narcissistic behavior strategically and cautiously, especially when in court.

As the attorney, do your best to remain calm and take the high road when dealing with a narcissist. Narcissists have difficulty keeping their story straight and their manipulative ways eventually unfold. Clients will see the value in your technique as you are only generating fees to a productive end.

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Note: A revised version of the June 2017 child support article can be found on the Chicago Daily Law Bulletin website.

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cissist or trying to make them understand reality.

Also, remind clients to run scenarios by you before agreeing to anything with a narcissistic spouse. Otherwise, the focus will shift to the attorney being to blame for the lack of agreement.

### Identify

Narcissists can be distracting and difficult to follow, tending to prolong issues and fabricate new ones. Identifying an end goal for your client right away may help you maintain focus on the situation. Choose your battles wisely and focus your energy on your client's end goal. Don't attend to every argument.

It is often beneficial to set boundaries and know what behaviors will be tolerated from the narcissist. Even if they push back

sues, conduct discovery immediately.

The sooner a narcissist is forced to respond to discovery, the less time is afforded to engage in deceitful behavior. Follow up consistently with opposing counsel to manage the narcissist during the discovery process.

Similarly, it is wise to file for temporary relief before the narcissist is able to concoct a plan to avoid financial obligations or prevent the other spouse from withholding or alienating the children.

### Writing

Formalize everything in writing — e-mail and otherwise — to avoid allowing the narcissist to delay the divorce process and misconstrue facts. Encourage your client to do the same.

Oral agreements with narcis-