

Divorcing a Narcissist

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As divorce attorneys at Beermann Pritikin Mirabelli Swerdlove LLP, we often find ourselves representing individuals who claim to have spouses with narcissistic characteristics.

If you are married to, or in a relationship with, a narcissist, take comfort in knowing that you are not alone and there is help. With the right tools, protection, resources and education, you can successfully navigate the turbulent waters of divorcing a narcissist.

As a starting point, consider this assessment from the world of psychology:

“You cannot change others, you can only change your response and expectations.”

Psychologist Dr. David Finn, Psy.D'

Managing **your** expectations, not those of your narcissistic significant other, is a critical aspect of successfully divorcing a narcissist. A fundamental mistake we see in representing individuals, is their desire to seek ways to change the narcissist's behavior instead of modifying his or her own expectations and reactions. This often leads to additional problems for the person married to the narcissist, in the follow ways: 1) emotional unrest, 2) increased litigation costs/time and 3) familial discord.

In counseling our clients in this type of situation, we routinely recite the mantra “focus and work on only those things that **you** can control.” Frequently, clients make the mistake of focusing on what the narcissist demands, even though such demands often can never be satisfied. Focusing on the mantra is a small step toward taking back control of **your** life, and resolving **your** divorce successfully and on **your** terms.

With greater knowledge into the mind of a narcissistic personality, you will have a better chance of mitigating the stress caused by irrational and abusive behavior.

Is My Spouse a Narcissist?

Answering this threshold question is a necessary first step in trying to manage your strategy and expectations throughout the divorce process. So, who is a narcissist? The DSM-V defines Narcissistic Personality Disorder as follows:

“A pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by five (or more) of the following:

1. Has a grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements).
2. Is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love.
3. Believes that he or she is “special” and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions).
4. Requires excessive admiration.
5. Has a sense of entitlement (i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations).
6. Is interpersonally exploitative (i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends).
7. Lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others.
8. Is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her.
9. Shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes.”

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If you have identified five (5) or more of these factors as being applicable to your spouse, there is a reasonable likelihood you are married to a person with narcissistic tendencies. These self-centered characteristics only become more exaggerated in a divorce proceeding.

In the context of a divorce proceeding, Dr. Finn notes that “the narcissist experiences a deep wound from what they believe is rejection from their spouse.” He relates that this theory is often referred to as a “Narcissistic Injury.” Commentary on the DSM-V suggests that “there is a sense of fear [on the part of the narcissist] from having his or her imperfections or flaws revealed.”

Put another way, Dr. Sol Rappaport² comments: “The feeling of rejection or criticism on the narcissist causes him or her to react negatively – most times with anger or rage. Spouses of narcissists feel as though they have to constantly cater to them, build them up and ‘tip-toe’ around what they say and how they interact with the narcissist, as they are fearful of the anger and repercussions that may follow.” In an article by Rhonda Feinberg, she describes the “classic” issue with narcissists in relationships as “[they] tend to blame others for any relationship problems and attempt to avoid looking at their own contribution.” *The Intractable Client*, Rhonda Feinberg, July 1997. They assume that others will accept their point of view, and will not hesitate to use gross or subtle coercion to achieve their goals. Id.

How Did I Get Here?

By the time you find yourself divorcing a narcissist, it is common to question how or why you got involved with this individual in the first place. As Dr. Rappaport notes, “the first impressions of a narcissist tend to be: attractive, well-groomed and successful. However, in longer term relationships, the narcissist proves to lack empathy, has an inability to relate to their partners in a mutually satisfying manner, and has difficulty maintaining close relationships.” Dr. Rappaport goes on to illustrate that “narcissists often have short fuses, are quick to anger if people don’t accommodate themselves to them, belittle others, and don’t feel remorse.”

What we frequently hear from our client’s is something to the effect of “he/she is a real ‘charmer’ in the outside world, but behind closed doors is an entirely different person.” This is the proverbial *Jekyll and Hyde* phenomenon. W.K. Campbell, in a series of publications, relates romantic relationships with a narcissistic partner to eating a chocolate cake: “An initial rush of excitement and positive feelings one cannot resist, followed by long-term costs and regret that outweigh the initial pleasure.” *Narcissism and Romantic Relationships: The Differential Impact of Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry*, Wurst et al., American Psychological Association, 2016.

What Is Next?

If anything set forth above sounds familiar to you, here is our *Top 10* List of suggestions for you to consider in communicating and interacting with a narcissist as you are contemplating and/or already involved in a divorce proceeding:

1. Consult with a divorce attorney familiar with representing people divorcing narcissists so that you can have appropriate legal strategy and advice to protect you in your divorce.
2. Secure a therapist or other mental health professional with experience in dealing with narcissists as a source of support, independent of your legal

counsel. Having a mental health professional in your corner is essential to managing the stress of any divorce proceeding, let alone the chaos associated with divorcing a narcissist.

3. Educate yourself about Personality Disorders and Narcissism so you can better understand the personality and behavioral patterns of your spouse.
4. Temper your expectations in divorcing a narcissist. What may seem logical, rational or even practical will not always enter into the narcissist’s mind. This often times results in protracted, costly and acrimonious litigation. In the extreme, a narcissist may engage in a “*scorched earth*” strategy to punish the other spouse even though such a strategy may be financially and emotionally devastating for the entire family.
5. Do not measure your success by the outcome as determined by the narcissist. Dr. Finn says “you are not going to fix [the narcissist] and it’s a trap for any spouse to become angry that the narcissist is not changing.”
6. In communicating with a narcissist during a divorce process, Dr. Rappaport suggest that you “begin sentences with ‘I’ rather than ‘you,’ and, if you have children, start your discussion focused on the children, so as to keep the focus off of the narcissist. Try to avoid or minimize the concept of win-lose.” Dr. Rappaport suggests there are several self-help books that may be useful, including *BIFF: Quick Responses to High-Conflict People, their Personal Attacks, Hostile Email and Social Media Meltdowns*, by Bill Eddy.
7. Dr. Finn suggests an interesting, but often difficult, approach to “treating the narcissist how **you** would like to be treated. Be able to have confidence that you are acting in a true, respectable manner regardless of the narcissist’s actions and comments. Do not get frustrated.”
8. Dr. Rappaport also suggests a creative strategy. He suggests that “even if you don’t mean it, build the narcissist up. Make him or her feel like they are important and *right* in their own mind. While trying to placate a narcissist may seem challenging when you have been hurt by that person, confronting a narcissist may lead to even greater conflict.”
9. Don’t get sucked into the narcissist’s world. Trust your view of what is right or wrong, as opposed to what the narcissist is telling you what your view should be. Step back and objectively view the situation you are dealing with from ‘*30,000 feet and above.*’
10. Own it and **win**. Be confident in **your** knowledge of the person and **your** inner strength. Be at peace with who you are, how you got here and **your** ability to overcome the challenges in divorcing a narcissist.

At Beermann, we believe it is essential to identify a wide range of factors which might influence the outcome of a divorce and develop an individualized strategy for the unique and specialized needs of each client. This may include an understanding of mental health, child-related issues, financial issues and even complex business structures. Cases involving narcissists will often involve intense and hotly-contested litigation. That does not mean that has to be first, or even the best, strategy employed. Sometimes, a collaborative, cooperative or even a mediation approach may be a means to disarm the narcissist. It is important to understand all of the options available in the divorce process.

You can do this.

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