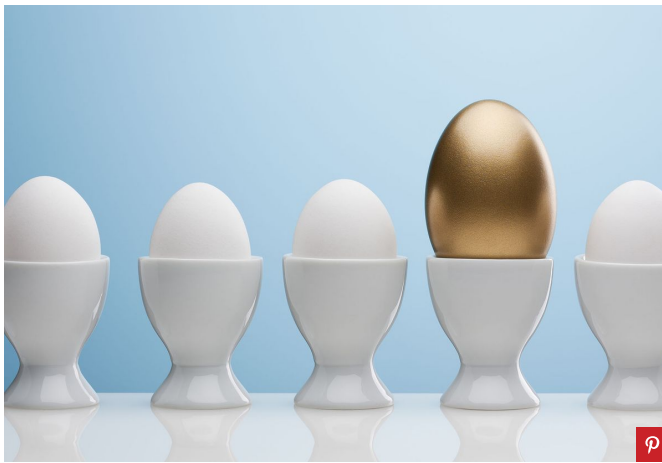


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# The Empath's Guide to Surviving a Narcissist

How a little praise and a lot of boundary setting can help you hold on to your sanity with that “me me me” person in your life.

By Louisa Kamps Published: Apr 20, 2023

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[Narcissism](#) could be on the fast track to being Merriam-Webster's word of 2023. (Remember *gaslighting* in 2022?) It's become a catchall term for impossibly self-centered people and a tag millennials can't seem to shake. But what's the actual definition, and how do you manage if someone close to you fits it to a T?

First, a quick overview. Narcissism isn't always a bad thing, say psychologists. It exists on a spectrum, and most people have some of its characteristics, such as boldness and [self-confidence](#). Healthy narcissism, which can help people launch new projects and otherwise improve their circumstances, falls in the middle of the spectrum. But moving up from there, it can become more chronic or addictive, and the high end of the spectrum shades into narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), a condition of extreme arrogance that afflicts an estimated 2 to 5 percent of the population. Per the DSM-5, NPD is characterized by a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, a need for admiration, and a lack of [empathy](#), and experts emphasize that it can only be diagnosed and treated by professionals. In other words, you can't DIY a person with NPD into changing.

Narcissism tends to come in one of two forms: grandiose and vulnerable, says W. Keith Campbell, PhD, a professor of psychology at the University of Georgia who helped identify these types with his colleagues there. Grandiose narcissists exhibit strong charisma and ambition. They're the life-of-the-party people “we end up meeting on Tinder, the ones we vote for, the ones who are our boss, and the ones we see in Marvel movies,”

explains Campbell, author of *The New Science of Narcissism*. Vulnerable narcissists are less self-promoting and more insecure, but still see themselves as exceptional and deserving of special treatment—think “neurotic and anxious, like a Woody Allen character,” he says. The advice in this story applies to both types of narcissists, people falling shy of the NPD zone who nonetheless get under your skin.

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There are a few ground rules. First, if you’re hoping to radically change a narcissist, downsize your expectations. It’s difficult to change anyone’s personality, but narcissists can be especially averse to criticism or confrontation. Second, it’s important not to call anyone a

“narcissist” directly, for the simple reason that it can be “hurtful and unhelpful,” Campbell says. What can help, he continues, is to act more selfishly yourself: “Sometimes, being selfish isn’t narcissistic. It’s about not being a doormat.” Here are more targeted strategies for dealing with a narcissist in your midst:

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## A Partner

If you’re dating or married to a die-hard me-firster and want them to show you more kindness and consideration, one way to begin is by clearly and respectfully stating what you need that you’re not getting—but focus on only one topic at a time. Highly empathetic people who end up with narcissists—as many do, according to Judith Orloff, MD, author of *The Empath’s Survival Guide*—often “go wrong by bringing up all their grievances at once.” But when you can say, for instance, “It would make me feel so cared for and loved if you can let me finish my sentences,” Orloff says, you “greatly improve your chances of getting through” without triggering your partner’s defenses, which can include getting mean or blaming you for the problem in the first place. “You can’t reform the narcissist. But bit by bit, you might be able to make a dent in certain behavior patterns.”

You can also nudge your partner with praise. As Campbell explains, narcissistic people are “wired for reward”—they want to feel good about themselves—so when you praise their good behavior, you motivate them to keep it up. “You need to think out a system where you’re slowly moving in the direction you want. That might mean reinforcing your spouse for spending time with the kids or with you. If you do that with gratitude, it becomes an ego reinforcer” for the narcissist, he says, and over time can heighten their attunement to the pleasures of connection.

If your hopes for your relationship have gotten hazy, remember that narcissists are infamous for churning up disappointment and self-doubt in their partners. Therapy can also help you identify what you’ve been missing and need to thrive—and, frankly, whether you want to stay.

“When someone is in a relationship with a narcissist, over time they build up neural connections that support going along with what the narcissist wants and doing what they have to do to make the narcissist happy,” says Jack Nitschke, PhD, a psychologist and associate professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health. Making a change means “going against years of doing things the narcissist’s way.” If so, counseling or therapy can help you not only understand what you’ve been missing but prepare you to communicate with your partner, says Nitschke. “A reasonable place to start is to say, ‘Hey, I’m willing to bend, but we’ve been doing things your way for a lot of years, and I’ve come to the realization that some of it doesn’t work for me.’” Couples therapy can also help loosen the grip of narcissism in your relationship and provide support as you and your partner chart a new path forward.

## A Friend

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Many of the principles and tactics that apply in partnerships also apply here, says Ramani S. Durvasula, PhD, a psychologist and professor emerita of psychology at California State University, Los Angeles. The dynamic, funny friend who drew you in with her charisma may eventually flash signs of narcissism: “Snarky comments, a lack of empathy, being unavailable when you need them (even when you are consistently available to them), inconsistency, and competitiveness”—red flags that tend to appear after the honeymoon phase of a friendship, and particularly when the narcissist, suddenly under stress or seeing some positive change in your life (a new job or partner, say), feels threatened or jealous, explains Durvasula in her book *Don’t You Know Who I Am?*

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If you want to stay in the friendship—maybe you share mutual friends and don’t want to jeopardize the greater harmony of your group—protect yourself by lowering your expectations and setting boundaries, per Durvasula. If your friend takes passive-aggressive digs at you in front of other people, pull her aside the next time it happens and tell her, privately, that you heard the dig but prefer that she speak to you directly next time. Then zip it—because the more succinctly you can set a boundary, the less likely your pal will be to pick your words apart. Of course, you may also choose to end the friendship. Durvasula has seen people who did just that and quickly found compassionate, respectful new friends because once they got some distance from the narcissist, they became more discerning.

## A Boss or Colleague

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With their built-in hierarchies, workplaces are perfect playgrounds for narcissists. Here’s how to stay in the game: If you have an attention- or power-seeking colleague who’s basically harmless, throw him a bone and say, “Great job!” when he’s crowing about some accomplishment—this will make him see you as someone who appreciates his excellence and make him less likely to sharp-shoulder you to the side so he can shine brighter. Likewise, if you can see that your boss is intent on manipulating her way further up the ladder, but isn’t out to exploit you, you can be a bit

manipulative yourself. Say you want to attend a conference. Explaining how your presence will benefit her, too, can help you get the green light, Campbell says. With narcissists, “Once you see their motives, you can say, *Well, this person just really wants their ego stroked, so I’ll do that.*”

However! If your boss wakes up with a list of people she’s intent on taking out, then Campbell recommends staying out of her crosshairs and documenting every exchange you have with her. As an added protection, Nitschke suggests keeping a written record of takeaways from every meeting you have with her, then sending her a recap to make sure she agrees with your account or corrects it. This reduces the risk of her gaslighting you later by suggesting that something you know was discussed in the meeting never came up. Documentation is also helpful if you decide to make a formal complaint to HR.

Ultimately, the best solution for dealing with a narcissistic boss may be to find a better job, Nitschke says. But while you’re looking—or staying put because you can’t afford to leave—talking about things with your partner and friends can help you counter the reality-distorting tactics your boss might deploy to destabilize you. “It helps you stay grounded in reality,” he says.

## A Parent

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Karyl McBride, PhD, a marriage and family therapist in Denver, treats the adult children of narcissists. While her patients range in age from their 20s to their 80s, women often come to see her for the first time soon after they’ve had their first child, she says. “There’s this burst of unconditional love toward their new baby, and it dawns on them, *My gosh, I would take a bullet for this kid. Well, hold on a minute—who has done this for me?*” It’s a moment of reckoning when they realize, even if they can’t put their finger on it right away, that they had a narcissistic parent who either engulfed or ignored them while they were growing up. Having parents who are perpetually caught up in their own dramas can create “tremendous confusion about healthy family dynamics and relationships,” McBride says.

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She guides her patients through a five-step recovery plan, detailed in her new book, *Will the Drama Ever End?*, that includes acknowledging and grieving the trauma of a narcissistic upbringing, in which their basic needs for empathy and encouragement went unmet, and learning new skills, such as empathetic parenting, to ensure they don’t repeat the same unhealthy relationship dynamics. (“Empathy is the antithesis of narcissism,” she notes.)

After processing the pain caused by growing up with a narcissistic parent, some of McBride’s patients who have cut off contact with their parent find that they are better equipped to resume contact. They establish a low-impact, cordial relationship—maybe they phone them every couple of weeks and ask how they are, without any expectation that they will be asked that same question back. “It’s going to be superficial,” says McBride, but it can help to remind yourself, *I’m going in with my eyes open. I’m only going to share certain parts of my life that aren’t going to be criticized and judged.*

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