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Divorcing A Narcissist: Breaking The Cycle Of Coercive Control

By Carmela M. Miraglia | October 24, 2022

Family Law Divorce Child Custody Carmela M. Miraglia

We explore problems and solutions for litigating divorce and custody cases with individuals with narcissistic personality traits.



As divorce attorneys, we field a lot of questions about personality disorders. Many of these questions center around **narcissistic personality disorder (NPD)**, which is characterized by an inflated sense of self-importance, a deep need for excessive attention and admiration, deceitfulness, participation in troubled relationships, and a lack of empathy for others. Whether a self-centered divorce litigant could be diagnosed with NPD is often an unknowable question, but in many ways, a formal diagnosis of NPD is less important than recognizing and responding to the narcissistic traits and behaviors engaged in by some spouses during the divorce process.

Defining Narcissism in the Divorce Process

There are three main ways to think about narcissism in the context of **divorce**. The most common way that people understand narcissism in the divorce process is the colloquial; that is simply to say, “my husband/wife is a narcissist.” For many of us, referring to another as a “narcissist” is shorthand for describing that person as selfish or self-centered. In the divorce process, where spouses are often looking out for their own interests – at the expense of their soon-to-be former

spouse – it can be easy to interpret a litigant’s actions as selfish. However, one party’s temporary selfishness during a period of intense stress is likely to fall short of a diagnosis for NPD.

The second way to view narcissism in the divorce process falls on the opposite pole. Instead of relying on the colloquial definition of narcissism, one can move directly to the formal definition of NPD, by underlining the nine criteria identified for NPD under the [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition](#) (DSM-5), five of which must be present for a formal diagnosis of NPD:

1. A grandiose sense of self-importance
2. Preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love
3. Believing that they are “special” and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions)
4. Requiring excessive admiration
5. A sense of entitlement (unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with their expectations)
6. Being interpersonally exploitative (taking advantage of others to achieve their own ends)
7. Lacking empathy (unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others)
8. Often being envious of others or believing that others are envious of them
9. Showing arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes

While the [DSM-5](#) definition for NPD can be a helpful framing tool, the reality is that focusing on a formal diagnosis of NPD can be a distraction in the divorce process. Psychological tests certainly exist to [identify and diagnose NPD](#), but these can be “gamed” by clever test-takers who are smart enough to identify which questions to avoid providing honest answers for.

With this in mind, the best way to understand narcissism in the divorce process is focus less on an individual’s *status* – i.e. whether he or she should be labeled a “narcissist” or diagnosed with NPD – and instead focus on the individual’s *behaviors*, to the extent these behaviors correspond with the nine narcissistic traits identified in [DSM-5](#). In most divorce cases, it is a party’s *behavior* that drives the process, rather than a formal diagnosis for a personality disorder or colloquial shorthand for selfishness.

How do Strong Narcissistic Traits Impact Divorce and Custody Cases?

As noted above, it often makes more sense to focus on specific narcissistic traits rather than the blanket NPD label when considering the impact of narcissism on divorce. However, NPD remains a valuable framework for understanding how a party’s narcissism can impact a divorce in broad strokes. Narcissism is commonly associated with selfish, self-centered individuals who project extreme confidence. Behind the facade, however, narcissistic individuals often have a fragile self-esteem that is likely to crack under any pressure. The narcissist’s need to defend his or her fragile sense of self can be especially acute during the divorce process, where each spouse’s conduct is likely to be scrutinized and questioned.

Perhaps the most common narcissistic dynamic we see in the divorce process involves a combination of narcissistic rage – often triggered by narcissist’s outsized perception that he or she is under attack – combined with a manipulative outward façade that masks the rage. Although uncontrolled rage (like [strong emotions](#) in general) is often a disadvantage in the divorce process, the narcissist has a leg up. He or she is likely to have spent decades modulating their mannerisms, speech, and outward behavior to curry favor and trigger admiration in their audiences. Narcissists are often adept at concealing their deeper insecurities and projecting an aura of superficial charm. Rather than yelling, screaming, or getting in fist fights, narcissists frequently channel their rage into manipulation, gaslighting, and subterfuge. The rage might be driving the narcissist’s behavior, but the outside world often fails to recognize the subtle outlets the narcissist finds for venting his or her anger.

A second common dynamic we see in divorce cases is the narcissist’s abuse of the litigation process through provocative behavior. In many ways, the divorce process can be understood as a kind of performance made for the benefit of a judge. Whether the case involves [child custody](#) or [complex finances](#), lawyers tell their clients that judges expect the parties to engage in certain behaviors. Most narcissists are natural born performers and social manipulators. Many are skilled at engaging in targeted provocative behavior that triggers a response from another individual. The narcissist then exploits that response for his or her own gain.

In the divorce context, narcissists often engage in tactics of delay or obstruction that frustrate the opposing party without ever quite crossing the line into true misconduct. Many narcissists skillfully recognize procedural or behavioral rules that can be violated with major consequences and will approach or even cross the line of breaking rules in order to trigger frustration, impatience, or overreaction by the other party. Narcissists are often used to a constant cycle of alienating and reconnecting with friends and loved ones. They will skillfully deploy sentiment, grand gestures, and feigned sincerity to penetrate the emotional defenses of an opponent, only to turn on the opponent in a critical moment, maximizing the sense of outrage. In the end, narcissists can rely on their endless appetite for drama to power through the litigation process, as their opponent grows exhausted with the narcissist’s constant gaslighting and exploitation of loopholes, which trigger a torrent of stress and legal fees.

A third common characteristic of narcissism in divorce involves children. Simply put, the narcissistic rage that is triggered by the [divorce process](#) often triggers especially toxic behavior by narcissists with children. Narcissistic rage often justifies setting aside all norms and morality in favor of an “anything goes” attitude. The narcissist’s insecurity and inflated sense of self allows the narcissist to believe that his or her role in the children’s lives is *so important* that even behavior that directly harms the children is justifiable. The narcissist’s lack of empathy allows them to ignore the harm their behavior has on the children.

Finally, the narcissist relies on his or her “toolbox” of interpersonal tricks – the lying, manipulation and gaslighting normally reserved for other adults – to fully assault the children with the full power of narcissistic gaslighting. Children are often no match for a narcissistic parent’s predations. In the most problematic cases, the narcissist obsesses about bringing the children over to his or her side, directing far more attention and manipulation towards the children than he or she would outside of the litigation context. Narcissistic [parental alienation](#) is

often far harder to detect than “brute force” alienation that centers around simply badmouthing the other parent. Narcissists tend to target victims with subtle manipulation and cover their tracks, including in the alienation context.

What is Narcissistic Behavior? Exploring Beyond DSM-5.

While [DSM-5](#) provides a clinical definition of NPD, the manual focuses more on traits than specific behavior. The following behaviors are widely acknowledged as narcissistic:

- Displaying a sense of entitlement;
- Requiring constant and excessive appreciation;
- Expecting to be recognized as superior in most every situation, even if the person’s achievements do not warrant that recognition;
- Lying and exaggerating one’s own achievements and talents;
- Obsessive preoccupation with success, power, brilliance, beauty, or the ideal mate (the last point is especially important in narcissistic divorce cases);
- Believing they are superior and therefore they can only associate with equally superior individuals;
- Monopolizing conversations;
- Engaging in performative social behavior, such as “oversharing” details about their life in the hope that others will respond by sharing secrets;
- Engaging in insincere flattery or compliments to trigger a false sense of loyalty;
- Belittling people they perceive as inferior or those they believe their listeners perceive as inferior;
- Becoming enraged or annoyed at any perceived criticism;
- Holding unjustified grudges against perceived doubters or critics;
- Expecting special favors and unquestioning compliance with their expectations;
- Taking advantage of others to get what they want;
- Offering “help” to gain credit or power vulnerable individuals;
- Being unable and/or unwilling to recognize the needs and feelings of others;
- Envy other people;
- Believing others envy them;
- Quickly forming intense relationships with strangers and sexual partners;
- Making inappropriate or extreme requests/demands to friends and family;
- Engaging in highly transactional behavior with friends and family (I did you a favor, now you must return it);

- Abandoning friends or relatives when they outlive their usefulness;
- Relying on grand gestures and promises to reconcile with abandoned friends or relatives;
- Deflecting blame and refusing to take responsibility for their actions;
- Denying, misrepresenting and lying about their past misdeeds;
- Constant sensation/attention seeking, easily bored;
- Sexual promiscuity, extramarital affairs, and the need for “new” sources of attention;
- Gossiping, forming social alliances, and triggering social conflict between others;
- Repeatedly feuding with individuals and groups;
- [Spying on spouses and partners](#) and other forms of bullying;
- Lacking the ability to engage in introspection or honest self-evaluation;
- Behaving arrogantly and pretentiously;
- Demanding unjustified sympathy, pity, or charity;
- Insisting on having the best of everything, such as the best car, wife, family, etc.;

Ian Fleming, the author of the James Bond novels, [wrote that](#) “once is happenstance, twice is coincidence, and thrice is enemy action.” Everyone knows at least one person who occasionally exhibits many of the qualities on the above list. These people are normally only prone to bouts of selfishness. In the stressful divorce context, individuals already prone to the above behaviors may see their narcissistic traits go into overdrive.

DO Narcissists Ever File for Divorce?

This question is an interesting one. Many people believe narcissistic individuals are so self-centered that their spouses’ traits are almost irrelevant. For the most part, that assessment is accurate. However, the above list of narcissistic qualities includes the insistence on the best of everything not only with material possessions, but also with personal relationships. Because of their disorder, individuals with NPD have a distorted sense of what’s “best.” If their spouse falls short in their eyes, which is almost a given considering the pedestal upon which they stand, divorce is practically inevitable.

The oldest definition of narcissism is “self-love.” Because narcissists often have a fragile sense of self, however, they are generally driven to seek affirmation and adulation from others. The narcissist’s core neediness often makes him or her particularly prone to extramarital affairs. It is easy to see why. What is more intoxicating than the initial attraction of a new sexual partner? In addition to sexual gratification, a new partner is impressed by the narcissist’s stories and presentation, having not yet seen the narcissist’s dark side.

Many narcissists who engage in extramarital affairs believe they should “have it all” – i.e. the love and support of their existing spouse *and* the affection of a new lover. To that end, a narcissist may engage in multiple affairs without ever thinking, *I need a divorce*. A more typical

scenario involves the narcissist's behavior triggering the need for a divorce when his or her spouse eventually has enough of the antics. Because narcissists refuse to take responsibility for their own conduct, they often struggle to accept a spouse's decision to seek a divorce, no matter how justified the decision.



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How Hard is it to Divorce a Narcissist?

Ending a marriage is often hard. Most divorces involve emotional and financial issues which are often complex. Divorcing a narcissist can make the process infinitely harder. Here are some of the ways:

Narcissists are Motivated by Rage and Fragility – In the divorce mediation context, we talk about how a party's [positions are driven by their needs](#). Thus, understanding a party's needs is often the key to unlocking a compromise position. This formula breaks down when a narcissist is involved. A narcissist's "needs" in the divorce process are defined by rage, insecurity and entitlement. A narcissist might express his or her needs by seeking maximally aggressive financial and child custody positions, but on deeper examination, it often becomes clear that the narcissist is less concerned with achieving a substantive outcome than in feeding their need to feel superior. Negotiating with a narcissist can be particularly tricky because the narcissist may arbitrarily change positions – i.e. "move the goalposts" – because they are motivated by feelings rather than substantive outcomes.

Narcissists Often Enjoy Litigation – In ordinary life, narcissists are often at the center of feuds, fights, and interpersonal drama. Many narcissists feed off of negative energy and the sense of being in the spotlight. Meanwhile, narcissists are often attracted to the litigation process because they recognize that discovery, court hearings and other stressful processes present opportunities to one-up and frustrate their opponents. In short, narcissists *enjoy* many of the attributes of the litigation process that normal individuals dread.

Narcissists are Repelled by Humility and Compromise – In many divorce and custody cases involving narcissists, the only way to reach a settlement is to either (a.) make the narcissist feel like he or she is winning through the settlement or (b.) pin the narcissist into a difficult legal position, so they feel no choice but to settle. Because the narcissist is motivated by a mix of anger, insecurity, and entitlement – and may find the drama and conflict of litigation intoxicating – most narcissists do not value compromise and/or resolution as a goal into itself. Most individuals are desperate to resolve a highly contested divorce, but for a narcissist, the notion of surrender and compromise may be repellant.

Narcissists Routinely Target Children in Custody Cases – As noted above, many narcissists are disinterested parents while a marriage or relationship is intact. While the narcissist probably strives for a reputation as a great parent, the tedious day-to-day tasks of raising a child are either boring or beneath the narcissist’s status. Once a divorce or contested custody case begins, however, the narcissist is likely to perceive the children as a trophy that he or she must pursue. Most narcissists have a lifetime of experience manipulating and controlling others. Meanwhile, children make easy targets for the narcissist to target. Most [family law attorneys](#) can name several cases in which a narcissist has pulled out all the stops to turn his or her child against the other parents; however, once the case is over and the narcissist has one, he or she quickly loses interest in the child. Needless to say, the damage suffered by the children of narcissists is often profound.

Narcissistic Entitlement Impacts Financial Issues – One reason that narcissists enjoy the divorce process is the many labels that appeal to the narcissist’s sense of entitlement. A narcissist likely feels he or she should receive [more than 50% of the assets](#), more [alimony](#) or more [child support](#) than would be typically allotted for their case. The narcissistic need for attention, credit and re-directing blame can drive the narcissist’s desire for financial rewards beyond ordinary economic factors. The bottom line is that narcissists are always “keeping score” in every situation, and the financial terms of a divorce case offer multiple ways for the narcissist to seek fulfillment through the system.

What Strategies do Family Law Attorneys Use for Dealing with Narcissists in Divorce and Custody Cases?

Dealing with narcissists in divorce and custody cases is challenging for everyone involved in the divorce process, including the opposing party, his or her attorney, and the attorney representing the narcissist. For attorneys representing the opposing party, much of the focus centers on counseling the client to avoid falling into the [narcissists](#) many traps. Most narcissists engage in provocative behavior that is intended to trigger reaction in their spouse. Narcissists generally have years of experience studying the vulnerabilities of their spouse, and often seek the spouse’s frustration with the narcissist’s problematic behavior to bait the spouse into actions that can be held against them.

Here are some of the many strategies employed by divorce and family law attorneys faced with an opposing narcissist:

Strive to Understand the Narcissist’s Motives. In many ways, narcissists are purpose built for the divorce process. However, at the core of most narcissists is an overwhelming sense of fear and insecurity. Many narcissists are only vaguely aware of exactly what is driving their behavior; they act by instinct and rely heavily on dishonest justifications for their actions. (An inability to engage in honest self-reflection is often a core attribute of narcissists.) Understanding the fear and insecurities that are truly driving the narcissist’s behavior is often the first step in disarming the narcissist.

Identify the Narcissist's Weaknesses. As noted at the outset, [DSM-5](#) only requires that five of the nine criteria be present for a diagnosis of NPD. In fact, very few narcissists will possess all nine criteria, particularly because some of the criteria can be contradictory. For example, some narcissists are extremely focused on outward recognition and reputational accolades. The need for such individuals to protect their reputation can create a weakness ripe for exploitation in the litigation contest. Other narcissists seem to exist in a permanent state of interpersonal drama, constantly making and discarding friends, forming and breaking alliances, and engaging in manipulative and provocative behavior that makes them the “ringmaster” and/or center of attention. Such individuals are often reckless, restless, and prone to attention and sensation seeking behavior that create vulnerabilities in the litigation context. Other narcissists are covert operators who work through subtle means of seeking sympathy and credit from others. These individuals are often less energetic and dynamic than their more overt or malignant counterparts.

Indeed, experts tell us that their [five types of narcissists](#) that fit within the NPD label: overt, covert, antagonistic, communal, or malignant. Each form of narcissism tends to involve adaptive or maladaptive aspects; that is elements of narcissism that help the narcissist, such as high “self-confidence, self-reliance, and the ability to celebrate” oneself, or those that harm the narcissist, such as “entitlement, aggression, and the tendency to take advantage of others.” Every narcissist has weaknesses. Successful litigation requires a laser focus on identifying and taking advantage of the particular weaknesses your narcissist shows.

Help the Client to Cope with the Narcissist. A big part of the attorney’s job in cases involving narcissists centers on helping the client avoid reacting to the narcissist’s provocations while maintaining the client’s morale and focusing on long-term goals and strategies. It can be exhausting and discouraging to litigate with a narcissist. Simply ignoring the narcissist’s antics is hardly a solution, given their destructive tendencies, but overreacting to the narcissist’s antics is often worse than doing nothing. Clients who are engaged with litigation with narcissists have often been the victim of years of manipulation, lies and coercive control. Building a client’s resiliency and mental toughness must be balanced with the client’s need to heal and process the narcissist’s behavior. It is essential for parties engaged in litigation with a narcissist to identify an attorney who understands narcissistic personality traits while demonstrating a “bedside manner” that works with the client, who has likely experienced significant trauma over the course of their relationship with the narcissist.

Exploring Narcissism Through the Framework of Coercive Control

One of the most exciting new developments in family law in recent years centers on the emerging field of coercive control. While coercive control is relatively new in the family courts of the United States, it has been widely recognized as the most common and most devastating context for partner abuse in the medical, psychological, social science and legal literature on domestic violence at least since the publication of Evan Stark’s 2007 book, [Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life](#). Over 1,000 articles and dozens of professional books have since been published on the problem.

Coercive Control is a multipronged strategy that some people use to dominate their intimate partners, restrict their partners' freedom, and maintain their own privileges. Coercive control is best understood as a type of interpersonal cruelty that is especially intense when it occurs in the context of the all-encompassing framework of marriage. The goal is to dominate the partner, rather than simply to injure them physically. Abusers achieve domination by making victims afraid and denying them freedom and resources.

The Coercive Control model offers a new way to explore intimate partner abuse, beyond the somewhat blinkered framework of domestic violence, which tends to focus exclusively on physical violence. Although physical violence is often a component of Coercive Control, it is only one part. Other elements include manipulation, gaslighting, sexual exploitation, financial control and emotional neglect and abuse. Unlike a domestic violence assessment, the challenge of a coercive control assessment is not to the significance or veracity of any single incident, but to determine the probability that instances of control reported in the relationship are part of a single strategy to establish dominance through abuse that can occur in multiple forms.

Many intimate partner relationships involving narcissists includes elements of coercive control. Indeed, narcissists are notorious for engaging in a broad range of manipulative tactics – rather than physical violence alone – to reward themselves and make their partners feel entrapped. Intimate partners of narcissists often find themselves organizing their lives around pleading and avoiding the wrath of their partners. Where a child is involved, victim-partners also tend to organize their time around protecting the child from exposure to the abusive actions so the child will not be victimized directly or indirectly. Finally, coercive control recognizes that the abuse often extends far beyond the end of the relationship, particularly if the parties share a child.

In the context of addressing narcissistic behavior in divorce, retaining an [expert in coercive control](#) to prepare a coercive control report enables parties to address the multifaceted ways in which narcissists tend to control and manipulate their partners. These tactics can include the use of fear, intimidation, physical abuse, financial abuse, sexual abuse, isolation, verbal abuse and humiliation, manipulation, micromanagement, and post-separation abuse of the legal process. For victims of narcissists who feel that their partner's behaviors are constantly overlooked or ignored by the system, the coercive control approach can be an invaluable tool.

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Schedule a free consultation with [Carmela M. Miraglia](#) today at (781) 253-2049 or send [her an email](#).

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