

Handout 2: What is Narcissistic Abuse

Narcissistic abuse is the slow and systematic erosion of a person's sense of self — through manipulation, control, and the distortion of reality.
It happens behind closed doors — invisible to the outside world.

1. HOW NARCISSISTIC ABUSE WORKS

Isolation	Gradually cutting off from friends, family, and support networks. A wedge driven quietly, over time. Creating a loyalty conflict. The more isolated, the more dependent, and the easier to manipulate.
Praise & devaluation	Rapid change between praise and devaluation. Name calling is often normalized.
Gaslighting	Systematically distorting reality. Denying what was said. Seeding doubts. Rewriting what happened. Until the other person no longer trusts their own perception, gut feeling or judgment.
Triangulation	Introducing a third party to create insecurity. A colleague who is more competent. An ex who was less difficult. Message: You are not enough.
Emotional abuse	Sudden aggressive outbursts or cold shoulder treatment. Intense jealousy. Conflict can go on for a long time.
Moves fast	Pressure to get their way fast. Speed is a strategy: genuine intimacy requires time, big plans need time, and time would allow to see clearly.
Blame shifting	It is your fault. Twisting responsibility.
Coercive control	Financial control: controlling the money means holding the power. It can make leaving the relationship feel impossible. Control whereabouts, who you talk to, social media activity etc.
Blackmailing	Overt or subtle. „I have intimate pictures of you. You don't want them online, do you?“
Post-separation abuse	Often abuse does not end with the relationship — it morphs. Legal battles, withheld child support, manipulation through the children, smear campaigns.

At its core, for a narcissistic person a relationship is about power and control — not love, not connection. It follows a recognizable pattern. Once we see it, it is entirely predictable.

2. THE TRAUMA BOND — WHY LEAVING IS SO HARD

The trauma bond is built not on consistent cruelty, but on **intermittent reward** — always just enough to keep hope alive. Woven through the chaos are good days. The unpredictable alternation between pain and warmth makes narcissistic abuse so extraordinarily difficult to leave. If it were all bad, it would be so much easier to walk away.

The body experiences a rollercoaster of stress hormones during conflict (cortisol and adrenalin), followed by a rush of feel-good chemicals (dopamine and oxytocin) during reconciliation. That constant alternation creates a pattern similar to substance dependency. Also, long-term narcissistic abuse physically alters brain structure.

This is the depth of what we are sitting with when working with these clients.

3. HOW CLIENTS PRESENT IN YOUR PRACTICE

Hypervigilance	Constant scanning of the other's mood. Every thought organized around one question: how is he/she, and what do I need to do — to stay safe? Fully outward focused: narcissistic hypnosis. Neuroception dysregulated.
Cognitive dissonance	Can't understand what is going on. "He hurt me and I love him." "This is wrong — and maybe it's my fault." The mind loops intensely trying to resolve the split.
"Maybe I am too difficult."	Hear this as a possible signal of how thoroughly the other person's narrative has become their own inner voice. Projective identification.
Urgency / Intensity	Show up with a lot of urgency, intense emotions, sense of threat.
Loops	You'll hear variations of the same story again and again.
Disconnection from self & body	Difficulty identifying preferences, needs, or feelings — to the degree of self-alienation. Often disguised as calm, selflessness, spirituality.
Need for language	Naming the dynamic is frequently the first moment of real clarity in years.
Bone-deep exhaustion	Highly functional on the outside. When the structure holding them together falls away, there is often nothing left.

When you see these presentations, let them make you curious, let them prompt the question: Could there be narcissistic abuse in this person's history?

4. A NOTE ON THE SPECTRUM

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is a formal diagnosis. But those affected by someone with narcissistic traits cannot wait for a label before we take their experience seriously. What we can identify is the pattern. And the pattern has one defining characteristic: it does not change. Not longterm. No matter how many conversations are had, how many chances are given. Think of narcissistic abuse not as isolated incidents — but as a dripping tap: constant, without a break.

Rule of thumb: With a narcissistic person, you cannot get it right. Ever. That's the point.